All that we see or seem. Is but a dream within a dream.
by annebenedicte

Summary

Major Wolfe is brought to Holby after the IED accident ... but then canon diverges

(title borrowed from Edgar Allan Poe)
Chapter 1

“If I may interfere…This is, after all, kind of my bread and butter.”

“Of course, Major – here’s what we’re going to…”

It was so hard not to be in command, especially when your life depended on it. And yet she had no choice. Guy Self was supposed to be one of the best in his field, and she trusted Oliver Valentine – a bit cocky, but she preferred that to a yes-man. Of course Marcus would come in at the most inconvenient time…She wouldn’t have told him, but her commanding officer must have contacted him. At least the children didn’t know. She would have to decide, but not now…

“Relax, Major – please count to ten…”

She hadn’t been aware she was fighting the anaesthesia, but it made sense – it was the ultimate loss of control. She began to count, wondering why it took so long, until she fell into oblivion.

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“You can’t! Don’t do this to me – please…”

As she kept the phone to her ear after she had hung up, she tried desperately not to cry – she still wasn’t mobile enough to reach for a tissue quickly. When Jac Naylor came in, she just had time to make up a lie – she didn’t care, really, what the woman thought about her, but …Actually, that was a lie – she did care – Major Berenice Wolfe couldn’t show weakness – it wasn’t in her nature. As she mumbled: “T’was my commanding officer”, she just hoped the woman hadn’t heard the rest of the conversation. The conversation that had just shattered her hopes.

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She craved some time alone, but she hadn’t planned on being isolated for suspected TB. She hadn’t planned for any of this, of course. When their vehicle had hit the IED, she hadn’t even had time to think or to be afraid. It was only afterwards that she had experienced pure and utter terror. First because she didn’t know what had happened to Alex, and then because she couldn’t move. And if she was going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life …she didn’t want to live. And now she knew Alex was alive and well, but she had lost her. And she may have lost her career too. Who would want an army surgeon with TB? She didn’t know what hurt the most. When Marcus came by, she feigned sleep. She couldn’t talk to him – she had told him she was going back to Kabul. She was so proud of having been offered that full commission – ten more years… The first eight years had brought her so much – she couldn’t give it up, not now. Although she might – for Alex. She felt bruised, battered and defeated. Her head hurt, and her eyes burned. Of course she didn’t have TB – that was ludicrous. And when Jac Naylor realised her mistake, she would be out and on her way. Only …Alex wouldn’t be there anymore.

“I’m leaving the army, Bern. I’ve given my notice. I don’t want to do it anymore. I can’t live hidden any longer. Each time I’m in your arms, I think about it. I don’t need to remind you what happened…”

No, Alex didn’t need to remind her about the most humiliating time in her entire life. Just thinking about it made her head ache more. She rubbed her eyes with her fingers – the blurry vision was beginning to annoy her. She didn’t want to tell Self or Naylor, though – they would use it as an excuse to keep her at Holby, and she didn’t need that. She closed her eyes and tried to get some rest.
but was interrupted a few minutes later by Zozia March giving her a note from Marcus. Oh God! It was so juvenile of him…Pen Island… And yet, it did bring back good memories – schoolboy humour, really, but some classes in med school had been so boring…That’s how he’d won her over, actually – an intense courtship, a boyish enthusiasm and a very particular sense of humour. If only she had known then… But she had no real regrets – the marriage had brought her Charlotte and Cameron, after all.

The next time Dr March came in her room, she brought good news, and her signed exeat sheet. She was a good kid – why couldn’t Charlotte be… She stopped herself before she began to get angry about her own kid all over again. There was no time for that. She had to go home, recuperate and get herself back to Kabul. She was needed there.

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The family home in Cheltenham really didn’t feel like home anymore, if it had ever. Marcus wanted to stay with her, but she insisted he went back to St James’. She would manage perfectly well on her own. Actually, once he had helped her have a quick shower and get into bed, she couldn’t wait for him to go away. She had had nearly a week of broken sleep, and all she wanted to do was close her eyes and make up for it. She woke up several hours later, drenched in sweat, heart pounding. She looked around the room, unwilling to believe she wasn’t back there, in the jeep, being blow sky-high. The furniture appeared grey and blurry, but she was too tired to care. She turned towards the wall and tried to fall back asleep.

The second time, she was woken by Marcus’ footsteps up the stairs. When she heard him open the bedroom door, she opened her eyes. Her head was killing her, and her resolve to stop taking painkillers once out of hospital had considerably weakened. She groped on the bedside table for the tablets and the glass.

“Marcus? Can you switch the lights on? I’m awake, and I really need that paracetamol.”

“Bernie, love – are you all right?”

“Of course I’m not all right, Marcus!” she snapped. I’ve just told you I needed paracetamol.”

“It’s not that…The light are on, darling.”

A pang of terror coursed through her veins and she reached out to touch her eyes, as if to check if her eyelids were open. When her fingers showed her the evidence, she almost screamed. Then, as calmly as possible, she said: “Marcus – you need to take me back to the hospital. I can’t see.”

“Your injury to the C5-C6 vertebrae could possibly explain your symptoms, Major, although they are more consistent with an instability of the C1 vertebra leading to compression of the vertebral artery within the transverse foramen of the neck. Can you describe exactly what you can see again, please?”

“Nothing”, Bernie snapped at Guy Self and the ophthalmologist surgeon who he had paged. Then she took a deep breath and tried to master her fear. “I’m sorry. When I came in, I still had scintillating scotoma in the right visual field and a little peripheral vision, but this is darkening too.”

“All right. We’ll do an optical coherence tomography and a fluorescein angiography (FA). After those, an electoretinography. Then we’ll have a better picture of the situation. Oh – Nurse – we need a complete blood count, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, and C-reactive protein dosage for Ms Wolfe please.”
“The blood count and dosages are completely unnecessary, Mr Self – I had all those done yesterday, for God’s sake!”

“Just let me do my job, please, Major…”

Bernie let her head fall back on the pillow. Showing anger was better than showing fear, and she had only that left to her. She tried to keep her mind from running over all the possible diagnoses, but the list was endless and despairing. This just couldn’t be happening.

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She would have given a lot to be able to look at the results of her OCT, FA and ERG…but of course, that was exactly what she couldn’t do. She tried to imprint in her brain each word Guy Self was saying, but she found her mind was wandering off. What if it was forever? It couldn’t – surely it couldn’t – he would tell her it was temporary. He would …

“The Multi-focal ERG shows a depression in both A-waves and B-waves in the retinas, more important in your left eye than in your right one. The FA shows slight masking of choroidal fluorescence in the affected area with subsequent arteriolar leakage. Your left eye also shows veinous dilatation and cotton wool spots, and there is retinal haemorrhage in both your eyes.”

Another voice – the ophthalmology consultant must be younger, his voice sounded less mature, but nonetheless reassuring: “All these tend to a diagnosis of Purtscher retinopathy, Ms Wolfe. Are you familiar with that pathology?”

Bernie searched her brain for what she had learnt about trauma, and she could remember hearing about it, but the outcomes of the disease eluded her, and she said so in a small voice: “Can you please give me the bare bones? I’m not … I’m not sure.”

“Of course, Major – don’t worry.”

He explained, and Bernie’s heart sank – he couldn’t tell her if she would ever see again.
“Yes – yes, of course, I understand…. No, Edward, I don’t know what to do about it anymore than you do… Yes, I may be a psychiatrist, but I don’t have all the answers, especially not with my own daughter! Maybe for once you could deal with her? …. Well, I’m sorry Liberty isn’t happy about Elinor living with you for the rest of the semester, but it’s not my fault. Goodbye, Edward.”

Serena put down the phone and groaned. Hearing that her daughter had just been rusticated from St Hilda’s for possession of cannabis was just the cherry on top of a really bad day. She had been so proud of Elinor for getting into Oxford, and now that! She didn’t need her ex-husband’s recriminations as well. She sighed and went to the espresso machine to make herself her fourth cup of the day. She still had several patients to see, and she couldn’t afford to get distracted. The patients usually waited for her to come and get them in the waiting room, so she was surprised when someone knocked at her door.

“Come in! Oh, Zosia – hello, what can I do for you?”

“Can I come in for a minute, Serena?”

Serena checked her watch – “Yes, of course – would you like coffee?”

Zosia grimaced: “I’ve just had one – if I have anymore, I won’t sleep tonight, and for once I’m not on call. So no thanks.”

Serena gestured towards the empty chair and waited for the younger woman to speak. Zosia was biting her lips and seemed nervous.

“Anything special on your mind?”

Serena wasn’t the young doctor’s therapist, since technically she was a colleague, and she knew her father Guy Self too well, but she had helped Zosia through her diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and they had had several talks.

Zosia sighed and began: “What can you do when someone refuses your help?”

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Bernie was back home at last. The rehab centre had wanted her to stay longer, but she had refused. All she wanted was to be alone – after two months in that facility, she just couldn’t bear it anymore. Home…Technically, not her home anymore, but still the place where she could function the most easily. The only fly in the ointment was Marcus, but he wasn’t home a lot, and they didn’t share a bedroom anymore. He had transformed the study downstairs so she didn’t have to climb the stairs, and arranged a meal delivery for lunches. She had broached the idea of a divorce, but he had treated her suggestion as ridiculous, especially since she couldn’t give him a good motive. He probably thought it was a case of temporary insanity due to her blindness.

She was one of the lucky ones, the consultant had said – her vision had improved. “Significantly”, in his words. For her, it just meant that she had gone from total darkness to tunnel charcoal vision. She could see just enough now to walk with a cane though a deep fog. She could take a shower, but she didn’t trust herself with a gas hob. She couldn’t read, she couldn’t watch television. And there was no way she would set foot outside.

When the delivery man came with the meals – which she left mostly uneaten - she almost didn’t
fumble with the door lock anymore. She had learnt. However, she couldn’t use her computer to look up a divorce lawyer yet, and she felt trapped. The ophthalmic consultant had suggested several gadgets which could help with everyday life, but she had refused everything. If she began to adapt her life, it would mean she gave up hope, and she didn’t have a lot of that in the beginning.

When the postman rang, she almost didn’t answer. She didn’t want unplanned visits. She forced herself to go to the door, very slowly, and he left a large parcel with her. She would have given anything to wipe the look of pity on his face out by throwing the parcel at him, but she clenched her fists and smiled instead. When he left, she ran her fingers through the wrapping paper and opened the parcel. She didn’t need to see to know what it was. The Army had sent back her kit. There would be no full commission. She was finished. Her one regret was that Alex had left the army too, because her sacrifice had been for nothing. Alex had said that if she left, and if she managed to divorce Marcus, they could be together. But it wouldn’t have worked, because if she could see, she would be back in Afghanistan. She would have chosen the army over Alex.

She took the items out of the box one by one. She didn’t need to see them – she knew them by heart. Her spare uniform – she’d often had to put it on in a hurry in the dark. The contents of her room. Not that there was a lot – a spare pair of boots and a uniform vest took most of the box. Her e-reader and a few odds and ends, no doubt packed for her by one of the nurses, who would never know how much they really meant to her. A small and rather frayed teddy-bear Cameron had given her from her own collection the first time she’d gone away. A pack of cigarettes and a lighter. A cinema ticket – no one could guess it was the first movie she’d seen with Alex. A bar of Cadbury’s Fruit and Nuts. A small piece of geode they had found during one of their missions – she had the geode and Alex had a small ammonite. An empty mini bottle of whisky they had shared after a particularly gruesome day… Alex was everywhere in that box, but she would have to remain a memory. Because she had nothing to offer to anyone anymore. She took the last item out of the box and cradled it in her hands – her service weapon. She remembered how she had objected to it at first – she was a doctor first, a soldier second, and she had no use for a gun. Harrowing situations in the field had convinced her otherwise. And now, the Sig Sauer in her hands might prove to be her way out. Only one thing held her back – she was afraid to miss. She didn’t see well enough to aim. And there was no way she would live as a vegetable for the rest of her life if she did, and she couldn’t do that to her children. Burden them with a cripple.

Lost in her darkness, days became nights and nights became days. Without contact with the outside world, she had too much time for her own thoughts, and no interest in living. Marcus was busy, and when he came back for dinner and tried to make conversation, she answered with monosyllables. Anyway, they had nothing in common anymore – except the children and work. When they tried to talk about the children, they soon began to argue, and as for work, Marcus quickly understood that it caused Bernie physical pain to hear about his surgeries. Each time, she tried to imagine herself in theatre, and each time, she saw instead a crime scene, with yellow tape forbidding her to enter. Cameron had visited once or twice, but each time she had grilled him about medical school, and it had ended up with her giving him unwanted advice and him living in a huff.

At night her dreams usually took her back to Kabul, with Alex, and the mornings after were unbearably painful. Alex had loved Major Wolfe, talented trauma surgeon. She wouldn’t want to be with Bernie Wolfe, blind and unemployed. And there was no way she would reach out to her. Once she managed to divorce Marcus, she would live alone. Alex didn’t deserve a life playing nurse to a blind woman.

When she heard the bell, she went automatically to open the door, expecting her lunch, but the silhouette waiting on the doorstep appeared empty handed.

“Ms Wolfe?”
Bernie almost slammed the door in her visitor’s face, but the remains of a good education prevented her from doing so. Instead, she let the young woman in.

“I think we agreed on Bernie. What are you doing here, Dr Marsh?”

Zosia looked at the blond woman standing in front of her. She had lost several pounds since she had last seen her in the hospital, and the khaki sweatpants and sweater she wore hung loosely on her thin frame. The lightly-tinted glasses with large frames hid her eyes and part of her face, and the hair looked tired and limp. Bernie sat on the sofa and motioned Zosia to sit.

“Well?”

Zosia cleared her throat: “I thought you might need help?”

“I don’t – thank you, though.”

“Or maybe company? Someone to talk to?”

“You’ve wasted your time, Doctor – and I know you don’t have a lot to spare. It was a kind thought, but I’m doing well.”

Bernie stood up again and Zosia had no choice but to follow.

“May I come again? I can call beforehand next time.”

Bernie’s voice remained steady as she replied: “No, thank you, Dr Marsh. Please don’t come again. Take care.”

She waited until she was sure her visitor had left the building to break into tears.
“So, you see, Serena,” Zosia concluded, “I don’t know what to do. I really want to help her, but I don’t know how. Could you try?”

Serena considered for a moment before answering. She had heard through the hospital graveyard that an army surgeon had been brought to Holby a few months before and operated on by Guy Self and Oliver Valentine, but she had been busy that day and as they were one of the centres in England linked with Camp Bastion, it hadn’t registered as a particularly special occurrence. The name Major Berenice Wolfe had rung a bell, and she’d remembered she had read an article with her name on it about a thoracic aortic dissection repair, but she hadn’t given it anymore thoughts. Poor woman – ophthalmology wasn’t her specialty, and she didn’t really know what the prognosis was, but she could put herself in her place. If she couldn’t practice anymore …

Serena said gently: “Zosia – you know I can’t just barge in. Does Major Wolfe want my help?”

Zosia bit her lips: “Well … No, not really, but…”

“Then – if you can convince her to come and see me, I’ll give it a go, but otherwise I can’t do anything – I’m sorry.”

With a small smile, Zosia stood up and thanked Serena for her time. She had to find a way to get Bernie to agree.

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« I don’t need you to read my emails, Cameron. They won’t be that important…”

“Mom – you need to open them. You can’t just turn a blind eye to…” Realising what he had just said, he stopped abruptly.

“Don’t worry, Cam”, sighed Bernie, her lips closing in a thin line.

Cameron tried to find a way to make his mother cheer up – for once, she hadn’t given him any grief about his studies, but she seemed completely dispirited. She hadn’t said three words to him – he’d much rather she was mad at him than that complete disinterest.

“I promise I won’t pry, Mom – I’ll tell you who the emails are from, that’s all. Come on – otherwise I’ll begin to think you’ve got guilty secrets.”

Bernie blushed – if he only knew. But if she went on vetoing his suggestion, her son would really begin to think something was going on. And there was no way Alex would have written a compromising email. Until she completely left the forces, she wouldn’t. She had deleted several messages from Alex on her phone without answering them. So she nodded: “Go on, then, knock yourself out with offers for two pizzas for the price of one or money demands from Arab sheikhs…”

“Mom – this one is from the hospital – shall I open it?”

Bernie nodded again – she knew what it would say.

“You’ve missed your last check-up! Mom!”

“Don’t scold, Cam. I know what they would have said. There is no treatment – they can only
monitor my condition.”

Cam pouted but said nothing – he knew it would be no use nagging. He scanned the rest of the emails. “There’s one from thrombojack@ramc.co.uk, one from janesupergirl@ramc.co.uk, one from …”

As she heard the familiar nicknames, Bernie felt a painful pang of nostalgia. So her old team was worried about her. She felt guilty about severing the links with people who’d been more her family than her husband and children for several years, but she couldn’t bear the thought of them learning about her disability. So she had chosen silence.

“This one is from johnmctarmish. Isn’t that the name of your old CO?”

Bernie wanted to ignore that one too, but ingrained discipline and years of service made it impossible, so she steeled herself for the humiliation of needing someone to read aloud her own emails and asked Cameron to open it and tell her the contents.

Major Wolfe

Please find enclosed an invitation for the award ceremony of the George Medal to Lieutenant Alexandra Dawson. I recommended her myself for pulling you out of the burning vehicle before it exploded and thus saving your life at the risk of losing hers. I hope you are giving more thoughts to accepting the full commission offer and wish you a speedy recovery.

Best regards,

Col. John Mc Tarmish.

“Mom! You didn’t tell the army? About your eyes?”

Bernie’s face told him all he needed to know. He tried again:

Do you want me to open the invitation, Mom?”

“No – no thank you, Cam.”

“There’s the date in the email, thought – it’s in two weeks…”

“Thanks, Cam – will you …Could you leave me now? I need to be alone.”

Cameron looked at his mother worriedly. She always looked pale, but it was as if all the blood had drained from her face.

“Please, Cam!”

“I’ll come again soon, Mom – and you know you just have to phone.”

He hugged her briefly and left the room. When she heard the front door close, Bernie unclenched her teeth. She tasted blood on her lips and her eyes watered. She hadn’t wanted to cry in front of Cameron, but she couldn’t hold the tears anymore. No one had bothered to tell her exactly what had happened after she had swerved to avoid the IED, and maybe she hadn’t wanted to know. But subconsciously she had known that Alex must have saved her life, and in a weird way she resented her for it. Because it made her indebted to her. She already felt guilty because she had been the driver, but this feeling went much further. She felt guilty about not wanting to live if she couldn’t regain her sight, and angry at Alex because she couldn’t possibly contemplate the idea of killing
herself when the other woman had risked her own life to save her. There was no way she would go
to the ceremony. No way on earth.

She reached for her phone – she had deleted all of Alex’s messages, but she had kept one from Zosia
Marsh. The one where she’d told her she knew a therapist who could help her. She would give it a
go, but on her own terms. She memorised the number Zosia had given her and punched in the digits.
She had expected an answering machine, but the voice at the other end was definitely human:

“Serena Campbell speaking – how can I help you?”

“I’m – I’m not sure, actually. But – do you ever do sessions by skype or phone?”

Serena briefly considered the request. She had done it before a few times, with patients who had
moved abroad. It usually worked pretty well, although it didn’t give her as much information on the
patient as when he or she was in front of her. But something in the woman voice betrayed
desperation.

“I sometimes do – I am willing to try, at least.”

“Oh – well – that would be good. Could we – could I make an appointment?”

“Yes, of course, Ms….?”

“Reynart – Grizelda Reynart” Her mother’s maiden name would do.

“Reynart – all right – do you work?”

“No, not at the moment – is that a problem?”

The melodious voice at the end of the line sounded bitter and a little defensive.

“No- of course not – in fact, it’s much better – I can fit you in at …How does 4 pm on Friday
sounds? My Skype id is serenacampbellnhs”

“Fine …Fine. Thank you, Ms Campbell. Goodbye.”

Bernie hung up and took a deep breath. Either under a pseudonym, that first step had cost her a lot.
But that way, she could talk to someone without leaving the house. And she could remain
anonymous. They would almost be on equal terms – if she couldn’t see the person she was talking
to, the woman wouldn’t see her either.
Serena had a patient waiting and her mind got stuck on other things before she could think about her phone call. From the voice, she judged the woman to be about her own age, but voices could be deceiving. Strange that she didn’t work. Maybe she was a housewife with a troop of kids and a rich husband. She should have asked more questions, but she hadn’t had a lot of time, although she regretted it now. She would be going in blind…

Bernie had two days to think about what she would and would not say to the psychiatrist. Of course, their ethics code demanded they keep the sessions confidential, but she didn’t want the woman to know too much about her, or to recognise her. Luckily she could use Skype on her phone with vocal command, so she wouldn’t need to tell anybody about it. She hoped the woman would give her a reason to live. Because now she knew she had to, she still couldn’t see why.

She still hadn’t answered her commanding officer – as long as she didn’t, she could ignore the situation. She could delude herself that everything was all right, that she would be able to go back. But the rules of civility dictated that she sent a reply. Which she probably wouldn’t be able to type by herself. She also had to find herself a lawyer and a place to live. Being cooped up in this house was becoming unbearable. She heard a key turn in the door and automatically reached for her dark glasses. She didn’t wear them to protect her eyes but to camouflage her bloodshot eyes. It was too early to be Marcus, and Cameron had just been the previous day, so there was just one more person who had the keys.

“Mother! What are you doing home?”

“I do occasionally come home, darling – do I get a kiss?”

Charlotte came closer and obliged with a quick peck on Bernie’s cheek.

“What’s with the glasses? The English sun too much for you?”

Bernie flinched – her daughter’s lack of tact was legendary in the family, but as she hadn’t talked to her since the accident and had forbidden Marcus to tell Charlotte, it was her own fault.

“No, it’s not the sun. What are you doing home?”

“It’s my home, Mother.”

She hated to be called Mother – Charlotte had started it when she was about sixteen, and she still hadn’t got used to it.

“Of course it’s your home – but it’s the middle of the term. And I thought we were paying for a room on campus?”

Bernie didn’t need to see her daughter’s face to know she was going to hear bad news. After a first turbulent year of Media Studies at Bristol University, Charlotte had given, declaring it wasn’t what she wanted to do. She managed to find a place at the University of Gloucestershire, to study English and Creative Writing. For her parents, the only good thing about her change of plans was that the classes were held in Cheltenham and she could live at home. However, Charlotte had convinced Marcus that she just had to live on campus – Bernie had been in Kabul when this had been decided,
and she had been informed afterwards. She already thought Charlotte should have chosen another
degree – one with which she might just find a job after – and the idea of paying for a room as well as
for Charlotte’s tuition sounded ludicrous to her, but Marcus had insisted Charlotte didn’t get a student
loan. So she had gone along with it to keep the peace.

“Well – about that…”

“Go on, Charlie,” said Bernie sharply. “spit it out!”

“I’m not going back, actually – I’ve decided it’s not for me.”

“What?!”

“Yes – I’m going to go to drama school instead – Dad didn’t tell you?”

“No, he certainly didn’t”, seethed Bernie. “And there’s no way you’re dropping out like that.”

“Sorry, Mother – I already did!”

Even thought she knew she sounded ridiculous, Bernie couldn’t help it: “Have you have any idea of
how much we spent on your fees? When I was your age …”

“I know, Mother, I know – when you were my age, you didn’t have enough to eat, and Grandma
had to take in lodgers and you couldn’t pay for university…”

“Well, yes, actually. I’m so glad you think my life is such a sob story!” Bernie hated herself for
sounding so bitter, but Charlotte’s biting riposte had struck a nerve, and Bernie cursed her eyes – she
couldn’t stride out of the room, and yet she didn’t want her daughter to see her cry. She swallowed
hard and hoped the glasses would conceal the first tears. Steadying her voice as much as she could,
she went on: “Have you spoken to your father about that?”

“Course I have – he’s okay with it. I’m on my way to London, actually – I’ve got an interview for
the course.”

“Come on, Charlotte – this is absurd! I can’t believe your father agreed to let you do that.”

“He did, Mother dear – it’s all agreed – my friend Sarah has agreed to share her room with me until I
can find one, and I’ll get a part-time job to pay the rent. Dad will pay for the course.”

“And I don’t have any say in the matter?”

“Not really, no, Mother. Ta-ta!”

Charlotte walked to the living-room door and slammed it behind her for good measure. Bernie heard
her go upstairs and clenched her teeth – she couldn’t fall apart just yet… About fifteen minutes
afterwards, she heard another door slam and the house was quiet again. Bernie fell back in the sofa
and wept silently in her hands. The memories of her childhood and adolescence she usually tried to
keep buried had crept back uninvited, and she wept for all the what might have been. Her father had
divorced her mother when she’d been fourteen, and he hadn’t waited very long to marry again and to
have another child. In the first year after the divorce, she had seen him a few times, but by the time
he died, he had long severed all contact. A solicitor, he had managed to get quite a good deal out of
the divorce and had left her and her mother in dire financial straits. Her mother, a secretary who’d
stopped working when she’d married, had had to go back to work, but the job she managed to get
was poorly paid, and they had had to take in lodgers in the spare room. This hadn’t been so bad – as
they lived near a school, most of them had been young teachers. By the time she was sixteen, she
had learnt not to go to the bathroom without being fully clothed and how to fight unwanted advances. Her mother’s salary and the lodger’s rent had not, however, given them a lot to spare and as her mother had taken to drowning her sorrow in whisky, they had eaten a lot of potatoes and pasta. As a growing teenager, she satisfied her hunger by large amounts of rice pudding she ate straight from the pan, comfort-eating before the expression became fashionable. At seventeen, she caught a virus which had put her in hospital for two months, interrupting her studies during her A-Level year. The excess weight she had put on with her carbs regime dropped off, and when she got out, she was almost gaunt and too exhausted to be able to go back to school. However, she had a new life plan – she would become a doctor. Meanwhile, she stayed at home with her deeply depressive mother whose life plan seemed to be drinking herself to death.

She repeated her A-Level year, which wasn’t too bad as she had been younger than most of her classmates and applied for medical school, supported by her teachers and against her mother’s will. She had no contact with her father anymore, but her mother wanted her to get a job, announcing she couldn’t support her anymore. Even with student loans, Bernie had to get a job, or rather jobs – not babysitting, as she wasn’t very good with kids, never having had any in her family, but she tutored students in maths and sciences and helped in the university library. Not very surprisingly, living at home with a nagging and complaining mother and working two jobs, plus the lingering consequences of her illness left her so exhausted that she had to repeat her first year. This time, she left home and found a very small bedsit, where she could at least study in peace, even though she had to wear several sweaters in winter and ear plugs. Medical school was everything she had expected and more – after that second first year, she excelled. Her results were in fact so brilliant that the consultants she trained under encouraged her to specialise in surgery. One of them suggested she looked into scholarships, and particularly army ones. The idea had never crossed her mind, but as she sat through the Selection Board, she knew it might be her chance to really make something of her life. She had begun dating Marcus, another medical student two years older than her, a few months before, and he hadn’t been best pleased when he’d learnt she would be away for ten weeks for the Professionally Qualified Officer Course at Sandhurst, but he hadn’t stood in her way.

When she had stood with the other newly-trained officers in the passing-out parade, in full uniform, she had felt a mixture of relief, pride and anxiety. Marcus had been there to cheer her on, but by then her mother had begun to suffer from what was probably early-onset Alzheimer, probably fuelled by her alcohol consumption, and she more often than not didn’t recognize her daughter. Somewhere, sometime during those years, she became hard. Hard enough to whether her mother’s dementia-induced remarks about her being just like her ne’er do well father, about her being an ungrateful daughter, about her being a failure.

During medical school, she reinvented herself – she had been mostly invisible during her school years – a good student who existed in the classroom as an almost transparent entity. Berenice, Miss Invisible, became Bernie, still aloof, but who if provoked gave as good as she got. She developed an incisive sense of humour and a talent for repartee. Bernie wiped her burning eyes – she knew that each time she cried, her vision was a little more blurry for a time – and stood up gingerly. Her adolescence had certainly been different from Charlotte’s. It wasn’t that she wanted Charlotte to have had to go through the same hardships, but she wished Marcus wouldn’t yield to her every passing fancy. She would have to have a discussion with him when he came home. She tried to ignore the uneasy feeling at the bottom of her stomach. That feeling of dread which made nausea rise in her throat when she thought that she might never work again. How would she support herself? Money wasn’t everything, but having had to do with very little, the idea of having to do so again was terrifying. But more than that, the idea of being alone again made her revert to the lonely and frightened teenager she’d been. However, it was the only way, because she didn’t want to get hurt anymore.
if you want to know more about Bernie's time at Sandhurst, you may want to read about it in my other story From the Eurostar to back in England :) Bernie's background was different, but I imagine the time at Sandhurst was the same
Chapter 5

When Serena’s phone rang, she was in the middle of a session. Apologising to her patient, she swiftly switched it off. After four hours of back-to-back consultations, she was long overdue for a bathroom break. She turned towards the young doctor sitting in a corner of her office, taking notes. Nearly all her patients had agreed to the presence of her mentee during their sessions, and Serena couldn’t help thinking the F1’s presence was more stressful for her than for them. It was all right during assessments or tests sessions, but as a senior consultant, she didn’t do many of those. When you had to listen and react under surveillance, it became much harder.

“Would you like a coffee, Dr Faulkner? I think we’ve earned one…”

“I’d love one, Ms Campbell – shall I get them? You can listen to your voicemail in peace.”

“Right – I’d almost forgotten. Thank you, Doctor.”

Left alone in the office, Serena felt herself breathe a little more freely. She usually didn’t mentor anyone, but Henrik Hanssen had been very insistent, and she hadn’t wanted to say no. The F1 was about ten years older than the usual foundation doctors, and her curriculum vitae said she had worked for Médecins Sans Frontières for three years. She had only been with Serena for two days, and Serena tried to fight her tendency to make hasty judgements about people, but she couldn’t help thinking there was something odd about Leah Faulkner. Or maybe it was just her big baby blue eyes and her intense quietness. Serena switched her phone back on. Listening to the message, she blanched and then reddened, cursing under her breath. Dr Faulkner came back just as Serena slammed the phone on the desk.

“Anything wrong, Ms. Campbell?” asked the F1 as she deposited a latte near the phone.

Serena usually didn’t air her dirty laundry in public, unwilling to provide fuel to the hospital’s rumour mill, but she was tired and angry. She sighed: “No – not really – nothing lethal, anyway. My darling daughter has just gone and get herself arrested, and she needs me to bail her out, apparently.”

“Oh, I’m sorry – if that’s any comfort, I got arrested when I was at university – we were protesting against animal testing. We were released the next day, and although I can’t say a prison cell is the heights of luxury…I’ve seen worse since in Somalia…Prisons in the UK are quite civilised. They even give you a cup of tea.”

“Well – Elinor appears to have been protesting the new climate laws. Unfortunately, according to the sergeant who called me, she was also high, in possession of cannabis and she resisted arrest… But I quite agree with you, Dr. Faulkner. A few hours in police custody won’t kill her. I can’t be at her beck and call.”

Serena took a sip of latte and counted slowly to fifty in her mind to calm herself down before her next patient. When she arrived at the police station, it was nearly 9pm. Elinor seemed none the worse for having spent the day in jail, except for feeling sleepy, cross and having red-rimmed eyes. Serena paid the hefty fine necessary to her release and they left without a word. Only when they were in the car did Serena enquire why she had been called instead of Elinor’s father.

“Well, he’s on a cruise with Liberty. It’s not like I had any choice. Can you drop me off at Dad’s?”

“Oh no, Ellie – I’m not playing chauffeur as well. You can bloody come home with me and make
your own way to your dad’s in the morning. And maybe after a night’s sleep you can say thank you…”

Serena had almost fallen asleep when she heard the bathroom pipes vibrate and the shower running. She groaned and checked her watch – 3am. She almost got up to rant at Elinor but the idea of getting out of her warm bed was daunting. She turned in her bed and tried to nod off again without success. At 4.30, she finally admitted defeat, went to the kitchen to make coffee and decided she might as well catch up on paperwork. And when she left the house at 7.30, she felt as if she had already done a day’s work. As she parked in her designated spot at the hospital, she spotted two women arguing in the car park. One of them was leaning on a motorbike and the other one was arguing with big hand gestures. Her curiosity aroused, Serena noted that the two of them appeared very close – sisters, maybe, or partners. She seized her laptop and files and got out of the car. As she got a little nearer the couple, she recognised her mentee. Feeling a little like a voyeur, she opened her eyes wider when she saw the other woman, a short redhead, seize Leah Faulkner by the arm and kiss her aggressively on the lips. Mesmerised, Serena kept on watching from a distance as Leah disengaged herself from the kiss and pushed the other woman away. The redhead promptly retaliated by slapping Leah Faulkner before jumping on the motorbike and driving away. Leah started towards the hospital, almost walking straight into Serena. The younger woman blushed bright red and brought her hand to her cheek, where a red imprint was clearly visible. “Oh – Ms Campbell – hello. How …how are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. You might want to do something about that” she gestured towards Leah’s cheek, “Before you see the patients – they might think we beat the F1s…”

Leah looked down and stared at her feet: “You saw…”

“Yes,” replied Serena gently. “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to pry or anything – but you were right in the middle of the parking lot…”

“That was Joey – my girlfriend. I should say my ex-girlfriend. She cheated on me last week, and I said I didn’t want to have anything more to do with her, but she doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

Serena listened silently, unwilling to meddle. The F1’s private life was none of her business, as long as it didn’t impact her ability to work. What surprised her was her own reaction to the scene. Her mouth had dried up and her stomach fluttered…That angry kiss… She shook her head to dispel the thought: “Come on, Dr Faulkner – we’re going to be late. And …Maybe try to be a little more discreet next time, okay?”

Serena fought tiredness and thoughts with large doses of caffeine and chocolate during the day. She knew most of the patients wouldn’t like her yawning in the middle of their session. She found herself staring at her F1 something, wondering about her and her story. At 3.45, she opened the Skype window on her computer and looked over the notes she had taken for her next patient. Those were short and vague – “Grizelda Reynart, possibly middle-age. Sounded defensive/ reluctant to consult. Doesn’t work.” She turned towards Leah: “Dr Faulkner – I’ll take this patient alone, if you don’t mind. Go and make yourself useful on the ward.”

Serena nibbled her third chocolate bar of the day and waited.
Chapter 6

Bernie fumbled with her phone to find the Skype application. Luckily she knew the interface well, having used it in deployment, and she could manage even without seeing only part of her phone screen. She hadn’t been that nervous since the first time she had operated alone. And even then, she’d known what to do. At 3.58, she pressed the button asking for contact and deactivated the camera.

“Serena Campbell, hello, Ms Reynart. I can’t see you.

- Yes – I know – sorry, problem with my phone – is it – do you mind?
- No – we’ll manage, don’t worry. It’s usually more comfortable for the patient if he can see me, but this will be fine. So … What would you like to talk about, Ms. Reynart.
- Call me B- Call me Grizel, please.
- Of course – Grizel.
- Well … I’m not sure where to begin – do I – do I go back to my childhood, or?”

Serena smiled even if the woman couldn’t see her: “No – you don’t have to. You can start by whatever you wish. I’m not a psychoanalyst. You can dive straight in. Why don’t you just tell me about yourself?”

She heard the woman take a deep breath, as if indeed she was really going to throw herself from a diving board.

“Okay – thank you. Well …”

Where to begin when she wanted to say as little as possible?

Serena listened to the woman breathe – it was one of the reasons she found Skype consultations more difficult than normal ones – silences became quickly uncomfortable.

“Right – so … I’m 52 and … I was in an accident – a car accident – several months ago. Since that – I – I haven’t been able to go back to work.”

“I see.”

Serena couldn’t see at all, but the woman sounded so tense that she didn’t want to stress her anymore.

“So that’s one thing. Then – I’m getting a divorce, and my daughter is acting up, and – I don’t know – I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

“Okay, so – let me recapitulate – you’ve lost your job, your marriage is dissolving and your daughter is being bratty – and you wonder why you’re feeling overwhelmed…”

Bernie laughed a little: “When you put it like that … Actually – I haven’t lost my job, not really – I just can’t do it at the moment and I’m not sure I’ll be able to ever again. As for my marriage… Truth to be told, it’d been on the rocks for a long time, but … I was never home – I travelled a lot for work, so – it was bearable. But now … Well, I just want out.”

Serena nodded mechanically and then, realising the woman couldn’t see her, murmured: “I understand.” And she did – when she’d left Edward, it had felt liberating. She didn’t regret it for one moment. She waited for her patient to add something and when she didn’t, she prodded gently: “So –
what bothers you the most right now? I guess it may not be your divorce. Is it your job? Why do you 
think you can’t go back?”

Bernie sighed: “Yes – I think it is. Because when I was working, I felt in control. And now …I don’t 
have that control anymore. Over anything. As for why …The accident left me with a – disability. 
“She stumbled slightly over the word, so reluctant to admit to her current weakness. “The specialists 
don’t know whether it will be permanent or not. If it is …my career is over.”

“Hmm – okay. What would you say was the most important thing in your life? The thing you love 
the most?”

Bernie hesitated – she knew it was awful of her – she should say her children, of course. But 
sometimes her job had been so much more rewarding than her family… When she had discovered 
for the first time the feeling of the endorphins rush which came after saving a life, she had never 
forgotten it. It was almost better than sex – better than sex with her husband anyway. And then …not 
so long ago, she would have put Alex near the top of her list too – maybe at the top. She bit her lips: 
“Well – my children, of course.”

Serena heard the hesitation and wondered whether to comment on it, but she decided to let it pass. A 
lot of questions were rushing through her brain, but she sensed that her patient might take fright and 
rin if she insisted. But she was curious – what kind of job did that woman do? What was her 
disability? And more to the point – why was she being so cagey?

“Your children – yes – even if they make us tear our hair out, we love them, right?”

That small laugh again: “Right – but …” The next words came in a rush: “I feel like – I can’t make 
anyone happy – certainly not myself and – you know, my life is just going down the drain, and 
there’s nothing I can do about it, and sometimes …well, often – I just want to let go – let everything 
go. I’m so, so tired…It would be so simple…”

Alarm bells sounded in Serena’s head: “Ms Reynart – Grizel – have you thought about suicide?”

Another sigh: “Yes – yes, I have. But I can’t. I can’t do it, because …After that accident, someone 
saved my life – she – she put herself in danger for me and …and I don’t – I just can’t do it.”

“All right. Are you taking any medications ? Antidepressants, or anxiolytics or …”

“Are you offering to write me a prescription, Ms Campbell, or are you worried I’ll take a whole box 
at once and wash the pills down in whisky? Because, trust me, I wouldn’t do that – if I wanted to 
end it, I know much better ways.”

Serena really wished she had the woman in front of her in her office. The voice sounded humorous, 
and yet serious. She also wondered again what exactly the woman’s job was. “No – I wasn’t worried 
about the pills and whisky. Having someone who loves you enough to endanger her life for you is 
probably enough to keep you alive. And I wasn’t offering a prescription either – there’s no way I 
would do that without seeing you first.”

The woman remained silent for a while after that, and Serena was afraid she’d hung up, even though 
the communication seemed to be still on. She was just going to say something when the melodious 
voice at the other end went on wistfully: “Yes – I think she did love me – maybe she still does. And I 
love her. But – it wouldn’t work. Can we – can we stop now, please?”

“Yes – yes, of course we can – it’s nearly time anyway. Do you want to make another 
appointment?”
“Yes.” Small laugh. “I mean – no, of course not, one was hard enough. But I have to.”

“All right – same time next week?”

“Yes – yes, that would work – thank you, Ms Campbell. Goodbye.”

Serena remained staring at the screen for a few minutes – she had taken notes, but the silences and the hesitations had contained as much information, as much anguish too as the words, and she needed a little time to think those over. As for the last bit of conversation…Had the woman said she loved and was loved by another woman? No – probably not – it was just that kiss on the parking lot wreaking havoc in her brain. Her patient had probably said she for “someone” – she had been married, and she had two kids. And what did it matter anyway? She could be whatever she wanted – straight, gay, bi, a unicorn… Her sexuality wasn’t the problem. For the umpteenth time in the last hour, Serena wished she had asked the woman to come in – it would have been easier to evaluate her state of mind and to help her.
Chapter 7

It had been much, much harder than she’d thought. Bernie wasn’t used to confiding in someone and hated lying – doing both at the same time, even if it was more avoidance than outright lying, had exhausted her. Even more than the talk she had had with Marcus about Charlotte. He had more or less told her that what he had arranged with his daughter was none of her business. As far as he was concerned, Bernie had been an absent mother when the kids were young and that precluded her from having any say now. She had tried to argue that as far as finances were concerned, she had brought her shares over the years, her salary as trauma surgeon in the Forces not quite equal to Marcus’ but not negligible. She hadn’t braced herself enough for his cutting riposte: “Right now, you’re living in my house, and not earning anything. So you can just shut the f**k up!” She had refused to let herself be drawn into cheap point-scoring and had walked away from the argument, but the barb had hit its target. She just had to get out and find herself a flat. As the weeks went by and she rejected Marcus’ advances again and again, he became less and less understanding. As far as he was concerned, she was lucky to be alive and in one piece. At first, it had been easy to use her cervical and pulmonary injuries to avoid sleeping with him, but when her refusal went on, Marcus took it out on her by behaving like a bear with a sore paw. He had tried to make her forget about the divorce, but he was now holding it as a Damocles’ sword over her head, arguing that he would leave her without a penny if they separated, and that he would ensure Cameron and Charlotte knew it had all been her fault.

With her phone and vocal commands, she managed to find the numbers for serviced flats residences in Cheltenham and nearby. The two residences in Cheltenham were fully booked, but the one in Holby had a flat to let. Actually, there was nothing to keep her in the area, except that it would be easier to arrange to move her things locally. She didn’t hesitate any longer – she told the residence she would move in at the weekend and began to pack. Luckily, the army had taught her the art to travel light. The flat was fully furnished – she only needed her clothes and toiletries. Being physically active, even if it was only packing a suitcase, helped her not to think about her second therapy appointment.

Like the previous week, Bernie sat down in the sofa and phoned the therapist at the appointed time.

“Serena Campbell speaking.”

The therapist’s voice sounded a little flustered.

“Is it – I’m sorry, did I call at the wrong time?”

“No, no, not at all, Ms. Reynart – I’m all yours!”

Serena cringed – there was something about her “mystery patient” which made her say the wrong things. Then again, she had spent the last half hour trying to console Leah Faulkner whom she’d found in tears in the ladies’ room. Apparently the young woman’s ex was now sending her abusive messages…

“I mean, I’m listening, Ms. Reynart.”

The use of a fake name didn’t make things any easier, but for now, Bernie couldn’t see any other way.

“What would you like to talk about today, Ms Reynart?”
“I don’t know… Well, I’m moving out tomorrow, so that will be a relief. My husband is getting more and more …difficult.”

“Good for you for moving out, then. Have you got any friends who can help you with it? That woman maybe, the one you said had saved your life?”

“Alex?”

Bernie bit her lips – she hadn’t meant to mention Alex’s name, even though it would be rather paranoid to think the therapist could make anything out of a first name.

“Well, probably – you didn’t tell me her name.”

“No! She’s not in England – and anyway, we’re not in touch anymore.”

Serena frowned – had she misunderstood the previous time? From Grizel’s words, she had thought the two women were close – very close. She decided to probe a little further: “Not in touch? Please forgive me, Ms. Reynart, but I thought you’d implied that you two were close – maybe even in a relationship.”

Silence. Serena made a face. She should have been more careful.

Bernie took a deep breath – why not make a clean breast of it? After all, she wasn’t ashamed of that – or she shouldn’t be. She reminded herself that Serena Campbell had no idea who she was.

“Yes – yes, you’re right. Alex and I were lovers. But – it’s complicated. If people had … And – it’s over. We can’t be together. We just can’t.”

“But why? I’m sorry, Ms. Reynart, I don’t understand. If you’re getting a divorce, surely it means that you’re free? Is she married? Is that the problem?”

“No – no – it’s worse than that. I’m sorry – this is … This is difficult for me – brings back a lot – a lot of memories.”

Serena could hear her patient’s voice breaking. If she had been in her office, this would have been the moment she would have pushed the box of tissues towards her and tactfully stuck her nose in her notes, but … She could almost hear the other woman’s heartbeat, frantically beating the tattoo of remembrance.

Bernie gulped: “I’m so sorry – since the accident – I …I’m sorry, I’m not usually such a cry-baby but…”

“This is absolutely okay, Ms. Reynart – don’t worry – take your time. Don’t worry.”

Bernie took a deep breath and for a minute allowed the memories to come flooding back. When Alex had arrived in Camp Bastion, Bernie had already been there for two years, one of the only women in the surgery team apart from the nurses. In a way, she preferred that. Men tended to have the no-nonsense approach to medicine she favoured. Women, in her experience, were more likely to talk things through, and it wasted time. In trauma surgery, time was of the essence. No need for chit-chat. Therefore, she had looked at the new anaesthetist with suspicion. Their first operations together had proved her right – Lieutenant Dawson had plenty to say for herself and wasn’t above discussing her decisions. However, Bernie had had to admit that what the brunette said usually made sense. To admit to herself only, of course, because there was no way she would say that aloud. They had little time for socialising and Camp Bastion offered little in the way of nightlife, but once or twice they met accidentally outside the hospital. When Bernie could get one hour of free time, she usually went
to let out steam at one of the camps’ gyms, and Alex had apparently chosen the same one. The army had not completely cured Bernie of any shyness concerning getting naked in changing rooms, but it seemed Alex had no such qualms, and Bernie caught herself admiring the younger woman’s sinewy body. This was probably why in theatre, she snapped at the brunette and her behaviour towards Alex bordering on rudeness.

After a particularly difficult day, Bernie decided to buy a round of drinks for the team – they had all worked like Trojans on the occupants of a jeep who’d exploded on an IED – they’d managed to save the lives of two of the soldiers out of four, and the whole team had hoped for a better outcome. One of the fours had been DOA and when Bernie had called the time of death on the one who’d died on the operating table, her voice had sounded as broken as her hopes – he’d been as young as her son. That was when she’d decided they had had enough for the day. No one would risk getting drunk, anyway – the base’s bar, Heroes, served only non-alcoholic beverages, and they didn’t have the time to go off base. At one point during the evening, Alex had manoeuvred herself near Bernie and the rest of the team had gone in search of a free pool table.

“What have I ever done to you, Major?”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I’ve had enough of dealing with your hostility – I’m good at my job, and you seem to do yours rather well too.”

“Well, thanks” replied Bernie wryly.

Alex put her hand out and laid it on Bernie’s arm, and although Bernie hated to be touched, she allowed the hand to rest on her. She felt ashamed of herself – she couldn’t think of any good reason to explain why she had been so rude to the lieutenant. Or maybe just one, and she wasn’t sure she could say it aloud – or rather, she was sure she couldn’t. She had worked hard to arrive at her current position, and to get accepted by the male-dominated team – maybe she was afraid Alex would steal her thunder. And she despised herself for thinking that.

Bernie bit her lips and looked straight into the younger woman’s eyes: “I’m sorry, Lieutenant – I owe you an apology. I’m not proud of the way I behaved. Will you forgive me?”

“Hmm – I’m not sure …”

Seeing Bernie anxious face, Alex relented: “I’ve got conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Yes – you can buy me dinner. Then I’ll see if I forgive you.”

“Deal.”

And that’s how it had all begun. They’d gone to dinner at the base’s Pizza Hut, the only non-canteen restaurant, and they had sat outside on pub-style benches, eating ham-and-pineapple pizza and watching the stars. Alex had taken her hand, and she had not shied away. A lot of words and a few stolen kisses later, Bernie had known what she had suspected from early on – her marriage to Marcus had been a mistake. At Camp Bastion, their affair had developed slowly but surely, and they had managed to stay under the radar. And then the camp had closed, and Bernie had been sent to Kabul, to train the new medics. Alex had asked for a transfer too, and they had both arrived on a much smaller base near Kabul. They had been extra careful at first, and they would probably have got away with it, until that day…
“Ms Reynart? Grizel? Are you still with me?”

Bernie gulped – her mouth had dried up and her throat ached. Her head ached too – since the accident, she had had several migraines, usually brought on by stress. Other things too – nightmares…

“Yes – I’m still here – I’m sorry.”

“No worries. Take your time. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

Bernie tried to focus on the soothing voice at the end of the line, but thinking about Alex had made her feel physically sick – the pangs of loneliness stabbed her in the abdomen and she began hyperventilating. Her heart started to thump erratically, and the room spun around. All she could think of was “Please, not now”. Her body remained deaf to her plea, and she felt nausea rising. She sank to the floor and put her head on her knees, curling up in a ball. Her ears buzzed, her throat closed and a terrible sensation of imminent death engulfed her.

Serena felt utterly helpless – she knew her patient was having a panic attack but she couldn’t do anything. She just hoped the woman had kept her phone with her and she went on talking to her, telling her to take deep breaths, to count, telling her she would be fine, everything would be all right.

Bernie was no stranger to panic attacks – after all, you couldn’t be an army medic and not learn about them. But knowing about them empirically and dealing with your own were two different things. She tried to focus on her breathing – slow and steady – and on her body, tensing and relaxing each muscle. It took her several minutes to be able to speak again and to apologise to the therapist.

“I am really sorry, Ms Campbell. This – it – it doesn’t happen often, but …”

Actually, Bernie was furious against herself – how dare her body betray her like that – it had spoken louder than anything she could have said.

“Are you all right to go on or shall we reschedule?”

Serena didn’t want to break contact, but she thought her patient needed to rest – whatever had gone through her mind before the panic attack had obviously been still raw and painful.

“I can go on!”

Hmm… Stubborn, then, but: “I’ll tell you what – why don’t you call me back later – at …let me check my schedule – 9pm? Would that be okay for you?”

Usually, at 9pm, Serena was relaxing in front of her television with a large glass of Shiraz, after a twenty minutes phone conversation with her lovely but slightly challenging newly-discovered nephew Jason. But she couldn’t abandon her patient in that state.

“Are you sure?” the woman’s voice was hesitant. “I don’t want to …”

“I’m sure – I’ll talk to you later then, Ms. Reynart. Goodbye for now.”

“Goodbye.”

The second conversation that day had gone more slowly, but Bernie had clammed up and they hadn’t had a whole session. The fact that Marcus had been upstairs hadn’t helped. But when they had hung up, both Serena and Bernie had felt frustrated – Serena, because she didn’t know how to reach her mystery patient, and Bernie, because the web of lies and unsaid she had spun was keeping
her from getting the help she needed.
Chapter 8

“Oww”. Bernie yelped and rubbed her elbow – it was the third time she had banged it on the bookshelf since she had moved in her new digs. The small flat was functional, with no unnecessary furniture, but not much spare floor space either. After less than a week, Bernie had not yet taken her mark. At least she was alone. Alone with her thoughts and her fears.

She had found a way to read her emails by herself – she could manage if she enlarged the print. It took her a long time to decipher a few lines, but it was better than asking for help. The email she had found in her inbox that morning, however, had almost trigger a new panic attack. It had come from the army medical board, asking her to come in in two weeks’ time for an evaluation. Once she was officially discharged, her career would be definitely over.

Serena was fuming – Henrik Hanssen had asked her to prepare a report for a board meeting two days previously, and now he was telling her she would have to do it all over again. He’d done it with his usual tact, of course, but she was fed up with being deputy CEO. She had promised Jason she would take him out for fish and chips that evening, and instead, she would have to spend several hours rewriting the report. Jason didn’t like changes of plans, and he would be disappointed in her.

“How – you look tense – anything I can do for you, Ms Campbell?”

Serena looked up at Leah Faulkner: “Well, if you could write that bloody report for me, and take my nephew to dinner, and …oh, and, while we’re at it – maybe take my next five sessions for me? And the group therapy hour?”

“Well …I could…”

“Just joking, Dr Faulkner. Or …actually – maybe you could see Miss Poole and Mr. Jones for me? You were there for their last sessions and I think you established quite a good rapport with them – the advantages of being younger, probably.”

Indeed, the younger doctor got on well with the teenage patients.

“You can also lead the group therapy session – take Nurse Fletcher with you.”

“All right – I’ll do that. Anything else I can do for you? You know, I once did a massage course in Thailand – does wonder for your neck and back.”

Serena looked away from her screen again and back at the F1 – was she serious? She seemed to be. And the offer was tempting …but she had no time for that.

“I’ll say no to the massage, but if you could run to Albie’s and get me a venti extra-shot latte, I’d be forever in your debt, Doctor Faulkner.”

“Done!”

As the younger woman went out of the room, Serena’s eyes followed her. The F1 had taken to Holby quite well. Serena still couldn’t figure her out, though, and it unsettled her. Leah hadn’t talked about her ex anymore. Actually, she didn’t talk much about herself. But sometimes she would brush Serena’s shoulder with her fingers or put a hand on her arm. They had had a drink at Albie’s too, to welcome Leah to the ward, and Serena had had the distinct impression that the younger woman was flirting with her. An impression she’d dismissed immediately – it was ridiculous.
She sighed and looked at the time – nearly four o’clock – time for her mystery patient. She tried to empty her mind of administrative details and family commitments and to focus on the imminent session.

Bernie noticed her hands were shaking as she set up her phone for her Skype session. Not a good start – she reminded herself that the therapist had no idea who she was. She could talk to her – it was safe. At four, she rang and heard the now familiar voice at the other end. Bernie noted that Serena Campbell sounded a little more tense than usual. Immediately, she wondered if she was the cause – if the therapist had had enough of her detours. She began to sweat and she heard her heart beat louder.

Come on, Wolfe – get a grip – you’ve been in war zones!

“Ms Reynart – how are you today?”

“I’m fine thank you – and you?”

Serena was taken aback for a second - it was actually quite rare for the patients to return the question. “Fine. Thank you. So …What would you like to talk about today?”

“Well – I’ve moved. It’s …The flat is …”

Bernie looked for a qualificative and finally settled on “all right.”

“That’s good!”

Serena hesitated, but decided to go for broke: “So – last week – you were telling me about your friend – Alex. But we never finished the conversation. Would you like to tell me more about her? Or – would you like to tell me more about your work?”

Bernie took a deep breath – she had to try – maybe it would set her free. After all – there were plenty of army bases near Holby – Imjin Barracks, and RAF Little Rissington and the Army Reserve Centre. She could be any servicewoman. As long as she didn’t give too many details. Her relationship with Alex was so deeply intertwined with their life in the forces that she would have to reveal that much.

“I’ll … I’ll talk about Alex.”

“Last week, you told me it could never have worked. Could you explain why?”

“I told you Alex had saved my life, risking her own in the process. I was the one who caused the accident. That day – I was preoccupied – I’d had bad news from home. My mother – my mother is in a care home, and she had had a fall, but I was hundreds of miles away, and there was nothing I could do. I was feeling powerless, and frustrated and…”

“I understand – are you and your mother close?”

“No – she doesn’t recognise me anymore. But…”

Bernie remembered how she’d phoned the home, to make sure her mother would be well-cared for, but it had brought back memories of her mothers’ first months at the home. When she had asked repeatedly to be taken home. When she had accused Bernie of keeping her husband away from her. When she had tried to escape in her nightgown and slippers and refused to eat for more than a week.

“But she’s my mother. Anyway – so that day, I was driving the vehicle when we had the accident. And I must have passed out, because I can’t remember anything. Someone told me afterwards that Alex had saved me. But I’ll never forget myself for putting her in danger. Never! And now I’m
disabled – I don’t have anything to offer her. I…”

Bernie’s voice dropped: “I have nightmares – almost every night – I see the vehicle exploding – I see blood, and flesh, and …And I hear the noises again.”

“So you think you don’t deserve her – is that it?”

“Yes – I don’t want her to love me – what we had – it’s over – it must be.”

She didn’t tell Serena that sometimes, her nightmares took her back to the barracks near Kabul, and she saw Alex naked, in bed with her. In her sleep they made love – they’d made love hungrily, mindful of their limited time. And then Alex vanished from her arms, and she was left alone in the dark. Even when they’d managed to be on leave together in England, their relationship had had to remain stifled, hidden under the appearances of friendship. She had invited Alex for dinner and afterwards, she had lain in bed with Marcus, almost paralysed by guilt. She had wanted Alex to meet her children – the secrecy had almost killed her. On the base, of course, there was no question of spending the night together – so they managed with a few hours at night, always afraid someone would find out about them. And when it had finally happened…

They had just finished a difficult operation – but then, there weren’t many easy cases in Kandahar. The wounded soldiers who made it to theatre arrived mangled, like broken pieces of a jigsaw with missing pieces. Each time an operation succeeded was a little miracle. They had saved the private’s arm and repaired his spleen and kidney. He would live. Dazed with exhaustion, they had collapsed in Bernie’s room, forgetting to push down the latch. There were no locks, but at least the latch gave the occupants the feeling of privacy. When one of Bernie’s colleague burst in on them, they weren’t in bed, and they weren’t naked. But their intimacy was as obvious as if they’d been making love. After a few startled seconds, Bernie took in what Major Stephens was saying – there had been complications, and their patient had a raging fever. She also knew it was all over. If anybody else had seen them in each other’s arms, Alex on her lap, her head buried in her neck, maybe they would have got away with it. If Alex had been a man, maybe they would have had a slight fighting chance. But Major Stevens belonged to the old guard, and not in a good way – he stated overtly that the army was no place for “f**g faggots”, and never shied from a homophobic or racist joke. He also went to mass regularly and defended the Pope’s views on abortion and divorce. In his eyes, Bernie was now a double abomination – a lesbian and an adulterer. Let alone the fact that relationships between an officer and someone from an inferior rank were strictly forbidden.

Once they had recovered from the shock, they’d jumped up and followed Major Stephens to the hospital barracks. Both of them had done what had to be done mechanically, their minds on what was to come. The next morning, they’d been summoned by the Commanding Officer, Colonel Williams. Alex had been ordered to go in first. She had told Bernie she would take the blame – she had less to lose. She would tell the Colonel there was nothing between them, only a very close friendship. She would say that Bernie had tried to reject her advances, but that she had blackmailed her. In the few hours before the summons, she had tried to persuade Bernie to go along with her story. As she stepped into the CO’s office, she looked at Bernie, but the latter refused to hold her glance. Bernie just sat there, unseenly, in a trance. When her turn came, she marched into the colonel’s office, saluted, and stood at attention before his deck. She and Colonel Williams were good friends – she had served under him before, and she knew he liked and respected her. Another time, she would have sat in the empty chair and they would have had a good chat. This time, he didn’t offer her a seat, although he did bark “At ease”. She shifted her pose slightly and stared at the ground.

The colonel looked at the woman before him, a woman he considered a friend, and one of the best trauma surgeon he’d ever worked with. He couldn’t quite believe she’d put herself in that position.
However, he had no choice but to act on Major Stephens’ report. He just hoped Major Wolfe would go along the cock-and-bull story Lieutenant Dawson had told him. He could dismiss the whole thing then – not enough proof.

“Wolfe – do you know why you’re here?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What have you got to say for yourself, then?”

Bernie tried to answer but the words remained stuck in her throat.

“Well? I received a report telling me you were in a relationship with Lieutenant Dawson. Who, by the way, denied everything, or rather said you had no choice in the matter.”

Bernie knew he had thrown her a lifeline, but she had never been a good liar, and anyway, she would never go along with that story. There was no way she would throw Alex to the wolves to save herself. She raised her eyes and looked straight at the colonel:

“It’s true, Sir – the report, I mean. Lieutenant Dawson was just trying to help me. We are in a relationship, and we’re both equally to blame. Or rather – as I’m the lieutenant’s superior, it is my fault. I will accept any disciplinary action you deem fit.”

The colonel sighed – he should have known Bernie Wolfe would be too honourable to try and save her skin.

“Major Wolfe, you are guilty of two offenses against the code of military conduct – adultery and inappropriate relations with an officer of a lower rank – do you recognise the charges?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Bernie stood ramrod straight but her heart was breaking inside – if she was dishonourably discharged, she risked never being able to find another position in her field again.

The colonel sighed again: “In my position as Commanding Officer, I am sentencing you to a severe reprimand. You can appeal my decision and appear before the Army Board. There will be no change to your current position here, nor to Lieutenant Dawson. Dismissed.”

Bernie snapped back to attention, saluted, and turned towards the door. Before she could get out of the office, the colonel called her back: “Major – please ensure this doesn’t happen again – I won’t be able to be so lenient again.”

“Understood, Sir. Thank you.”

Alex was waiting for her outside. They both knew they’d been very lucky. Although it meant a three years promotion ban, with an endorsement on their career records. the sentence could have been much, much worse. Two months afterwards, their jeep hit the IED.

Bernie didn’t go into details with Serena – just the bare bones of the story and already it tore at her stomach.

“So, you see,” she concluded. “Alex was always there for me, and I let her down. She deserves better.”

That night the nightmares hit harder than ever.
Chapter 9

After a week cooped up in her new apartment, Bernie began to have cabin fever. When she was still at the house, she could at least move from room to room, but the small flat didn't offer much space to walk. She would have to brave the outside world. Anyway, she was fed up with the sterilised food she got at the flat. She washed her hair but didn't bother with make-up – she didn't plan on meeting anyone she knew. She wished she didn't have to take her cane – she would have gladly left it at the hospital when she had her last eye consultation, but she knew she had to be sensible. Of course, it could have been much, much worse – she could be totally blind. Her vision had improved since the first diagnosis, but not much for a few weeks, and she dreaded to think it might remain as it was. She had a small clear spot in the middle of each eye, and if she moved her eyes, she could get an idea of the big picture. But the rest of her field of vision was blurry or dark. Her brain had got used to the exercise and she didn't bump into things as much as in the beginning. She could also read on a screen if the characters were big enough and she had bought herself an e-reader, so at least she could do something other than stare at the floor all day. It was already dark when she decided to go out – the streets were busy, full of shoppers. Little bright spots assaulted her eyes, each street having decorated with Christmas lights and electric garlands. She had forgotten it would be Christmas in a week – when you had no schedule and didn’t see anyone, it was easy to get lost in time.

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Not for the first time, Serena wished she had booked to go away for Christmas – preferably in a lovely five-stars hotel with a cocktail bar in a warm climate, thousands of miles away from Holby. In a way, she knew she was lucky – the other wards saw an influx of patients for the festive season, while the psychiatric ward remained much the same. Of course, some people did try to get their elderly relative hospitalised during the festivities, but they were used to it. Her patients mostly complained about feelings of anxiety and she wasn’t the only one wishing for a quiet time on a beach… Instead, she would probably spend Christmas lunch with Eleanor and Jason. She couldn’t be bothered to cook, so she would take her to the Snooty Fox hotel, where they did the traditional turkey with all the trimmings, which would please Jason, and a vegetarian option for her darling daughter.

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Wishing she had put on another jumper, Bernie decided to go for a coffee in the nearest coffee shop. She was frozen to the bone. She pushed the door of the first non-chain one she saw, hoping for a little peace and quiet. She ground her teeth at the blaring Christmas music, but she felt a little unsteady – the cold air and the crowds had been more overwhelming than she’d thought. When the barista saw her cane and her dark glasses, he immediately offered to carry her beverage to her table. She swallowed hard but nodded her thanks – better than risking a hot chocolate spill in the middle of the café. She settled in a corner between two empty tables and pulled out her e-reader, pretending to be absorbed in her book. Actually, as someone who’d been used to speed-reading, having to read slowly bored her to tears, but it was better than staring into space. She didn’t even raise her head when she heard the chair at the next table being drawn back. She hadn’t really been in the habit of striking conversations with strangers before, she wasn’t about to now.

“I like your glasses.”

It took Bernie a few seconds to realise the remark had been addressed to her.

“I’m sorry?”
“I said – I like your glasses. They look like secret agents’ glasses – or spies. And I like spies. Are you a spy?”

Bernie looked at the stranger – from the little she could distinguish of him, he looked quite young – either a teenager or in his early twenties. She could hear from his voice that he wasn’t mocking her – just stating a fact. She grinned: “Sorry – I’m not.”

“Oh – that’s a pity. Do you wish you could be a spy?”

“Not really, no.”

“Why are you wearing dark glasses? There’s no sun here.”

The young man’s voice reminded Bernie of Enzo, one of Cameron’s friend from school – the little boy had been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, and her usually boisterous son had taken him under his wing after saving him from a playground bully. She would have to answer: “I hurt my eyes. I wear the glasses to protect them from light.”

“I understand.”

The young man remained silent for a moment and Bernie returned thankfully to her book.

“What job do you do?”

She sighed – she could always get up and leave, but she wasn’t ready to go back to the flat just yet. She reminded herself that he didn’t mean any harm. She considered her answer – he couldn’t know just how hard for her it was to answer. She suspected that if she said she was in the army, more questions would ensue. She went for: “I’m between jobs right now.”

“Me too – I finished university, and I need to find a job. My auntie doesn’t want me to, but I want to be independent. What did you do before?”

“I was a doctor.”

“That’s a good job. My auntie is a doctor.”

“Yes – a really good job.”

This time, she pointedly stared back at her screen, and the young man left her alone.

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Bernie decided to reach out to Cameron and Charlotte for Christmas. She had no intention on braving the crowds and actually going into a store to buy them presents, but the internet was a great help. She realised she actually had no idea what they would like. No idea if Charlotte would come or accept her present either. But she chose a leather jacket for her daughter and a cashmere sweater for her son. She had to try. Then she phoned Cameron and left a message asking if they would agree to come and have Christmas lunch with her. She would take them out. Holby had a few big hotels, and they all served Christmas lunch. It would be all right – if they agreed to come.
Chapter 10

Serena had agreed to be on duty on Christmas Eve. As senior consultant, she didn’t have to, but she had nothing special planned. The night was uneventful – only one of their regular patients, either off his meds or having mixed them with too much alcohol, who thought he was Admiral Nelson, and two teenagers admitted for overdoses. At midnight, she told Dr. Faulkner to go and catch a few hours of sleep in one of the on-call rooms and went home to do the same, promising she would look in on Christmas morning before going to lunch.

Eleanor and Jason joined her at the hospital around noon. When Jason had gone in for an extremely formal three-pieces dark suit, her daughter wore a sequined top and a mini-skirt that didn’t leave much to imagination, with a lot of make-up. Serena frowned but decided to keep the peace and say nothing. Her daughter’s outfit would clash with the ultra-traditional décor of the hotel, but Elinor was an adult – if she wanted to look like a hooker, it was her choice. Moreover, Serena strongly suspected her daughter had dressed like that on purpose, to get a rise out of her, and she wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. Two more people joined the party. Serena had learnt that Leah Faulkner’s family lived in the North of England, and as she wasn’t on call, Serena decided to ask her to lunch. The second addition to their table was a colleague – Fleur Fanshawe and Serena had gone to the same medical school and had done their residency together, before their respective specialisations in psychiatry for Serena and obstetrics for Fleur. Fleur had joined the Holby staff recently and she had Serena had managed to catch up a little, but their schedules didn’t leave them much time for socialising. However, Serena knew that Fleur had lost her parents when they were in med school and had suggested Fleur joined them for lunch.

Lunch proceeded not too badly at first, although Elinor proceeded to tease Jason about his suit. Then, when the turkey arrived, she launched into a speech on how eating meat put humanity in danger. Fleur quizzed the younger doctor about her time with MSF, trying to restore the peace, but Leah talking about her experiences in Africa only added fuel to Elinor’s passionate defence of the planet. Finally, Serena snapped: “That’s enough – would you just let us enjoy our Christmas lunch, Ellie?” and Elinor lapsed into a sulky silence. Serena sighed and looked around the room, at the other tables who seemed to be enjoying their food without arguments. Not too far from them, though, another family seemed engaged in a lively debate. She watched them discreetly – a young woman and a young man, with a blond woman – probably their mother. A white cane was propped up against the table near the woman, and Serena felt sorry for her. She must have been about her own age. As if she was feeling Serena’s eyes on her, the woman turned and looked straight into Serena’s direction. Immediately, Serena averted her gaze, hoping that the cane really belonged to the stranger and that she hadn’t seen her staring. She had had time to notice that all three were quite handsome – they could have modelled for a Ralph Lauren ad. The woman, especially, was beautiful, even though she looked a little too thin and drawn – maybe she’d been ill. Maybe …

Serena returned her attention to her own table where dessert had just been served. Surely even Elinor wouldn’t have anything to say about chocolate mousse. She was wrong – Elinor had plenty to say about how cacao producers used child labour to harvest the gourds. When the meal was over, the party split up – Leah had to go back to the hospital, Jason wanted to go and see Alan and Fleur pretexted another engagement. Serena was left alone with her daughter with empty cups of coffee scattered on the white tablecloth and a small plate of chocolates. She unwrapped one and popped it in her mouth. Elinor didn’t wait long before opening fire: “So, what with the dyke entourage, Mum?”

Serena almost spit the chocolate out: “I’m sorry?”
“Come on – don’t play the innocent. I’m your daughter, remember? And I have eyes. Although with the type of guys you dated since you split with Dad, I wouldn’t have thought you were into women. She’s too young for you, though – isn’t she about my age?”

“Elinor, I’ve absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

Elinor gave her a knowing look: “The blonde – Leah – she looked as if she wanted to eat you. She was almost licking her lips… And the other one – well, if eyes could kill, your F1 would have ended up a little heap of ashes on the floor. Good for you, though, Mum – didn’t think you still had it in you at your age…”

“Elinor Elisabeth Campbell! Stop that right now – you’re completely out of order!”

“Wouldn’t fuck an F1, though, Mum – you being deputy CEO and all that…”

“That’s enough! If you can’t talk sensibly, let’s just cut the chat short. And you can make your own way back to your father!”

On that, Serena got up and stalked out of the restaurant. Only in her car did she wonder why her daughter’s words had hit home.

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Bernie took off her dark glasses and put them on the table beside her plate. She had noticed Charlotte’s embarrassment when her daughter had taken in the glasses and the white cane, and she really wanted the meal to go smoothly. Cameron must have briefed his sister about her pathology, because the latter didn’t ask her any questions. Luckily, the dining room was mostly lit by candlelight and the flames in two huge fireplaces, the electrics lights having been dimmed for a more intimate and festive atmosphere, and her eyes could deal with that amount of lighting.

She took out the gifts and handed them over to her children. By Cameron’s voice, he seemed pleased with the sweater, and he put it on immediately. When Charlotte didn’t say anything, Bernie couldn’t help asking: “Do you like it, sweetheart?” From the little she could make out, her daughter’s appearance had changed radically since she’s last seen her. Her golden hair were now raven black, she had added two more holes in each ear and a nose ring. Bernie tried very hard to ignore the change.

“It’s okay, Mother. Only you forgot I don’t wear leather. Vegan, remember? But I guess I can always sell it to Fran – my housemate – she doesn’t care too much. Oh – and…”

Charlotte turned to the waiter who’d come to take her order: “Can you make me, like, a plate of vegetables? I can’t have the Vegetarian menu – I don’t eat goat cheese or eggs. Thanks.”

Bernie felt disappointed and angry – her daughter obviously couldn’t care less about the gift. And she had chosen that hotel especially because they had a vegetarian option, thinking it would please Charlotte. She sighed and as Cameron and Charlotte argued about the merits of a band they’d both heard in concert, her attention drifted off. She still couldn’t see details, but her eyes wandered round the room – she found it easier to focus in the dim environment. A big table not far from theirs caught her attention due to the sex ratio – four women and a man. Four very different women. As none of them seemed to pay any attention to her, she watched them for a few minutes – a young platinum blonde, a short middle-aged redhead, a tall young brunette and another brunette, probably about her own age. And the young man, who looked a little apart – no wonder – the women seemed engaged in a heated argument. Actually…She thought she recognised the young man as her café companion from the week before. So one of the older women was probably the auntie he’d mentioned – the
doctor. When the waiter brought their entrées, she focused back on her own table and especially on her plate. She could usually eat without too much trouble, but having to tackle mussels may prove her nemesis if she didn’t pay attention, and she had no intention of embarrassing herself by spilling something on her white shirt. Half-way through the meal, she had the odd impression she was being watched, and when she turned her head, she saw the brunette at the other table observing her. Immediately, she turned her eyes back to her plate and blushed – the woman must have noticed the white cane. Bernie felt the first signs of a panic attack come – her heart quickened and her breathing shortened. She closed her eyes, tried to relax her shoulders and back, and tried to breathe through her mouth. She couldn’t possibly yield to her body – she couldn’t possibly submit.... The nausea was rising. She rose as quickly as possible and grabbing the cane, she made her way to the ladies’ room, where she sat in one of the cubicles and waited for the symptoms to subside. When she felt back in control, she went back to her table. Just in time for the chocolate mousse which she forced down her throat in order to maintain a semblance of normality.
Chapter 11

Bernie didn’t know how to do nothing – she had never been the type to spend hours suntanning on a beach or in a deckchair, never liked holidays where one was supposed to “just relax and enjoy”. Even when she had taken time off during her career, she had always stayed in contact with the hospital or her unit. And now, she felt the absence of occupation like a physical loss. She was adrift. She missed the rules, the order. She missed having to get up in the mornings, she missed a sense of purpose. Rules had kept her safe – this was another reason why it couldn’t have worked with Alex – they had broken those rules. The time of the ceremony for Alex’s medal had come and gone, and she hadn’t attended – of course she hadn’t.

A few days before Christmas, she’d received a letter – no one knew her new address except for Marcus, and it had been his handwriting on the envelope. His enlarged handwriting, as if the postman had been the one partially blind. She had put it aside – it had to be either papers for the divorce, or from the army, and she didn’t want to deal with either of those. And now, in the twilight period between the birth of Jesus and the birth of the new year, she found it again, under a sweater she’d casually thrown on the couch. She fingered it, considered throwing it into the bin unopened, but reasoned with herself. It would be childish and cowardly, especially as her financial situation was far from resolved and the letter might contain some information about that. She ripped it opened and found another envelope inside, addressed to her at her old address. This time the writing was unfamiliar – tiny and round. Her eyes went immediately to the signature – Alex. She really wished she hadn’t opened it, but it was too late. She went to fetch her magnifying glass – another of those objects she had never possessed before the accident – and set to decipher the letter.

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If the period before Christmas had been relatively quiet in the psych ward, the aftermath of the festivities could be described as hectic. People had gone on holiday without their meds and had to be admitted after decompensating violently. Others had had bad reactions to Christmas with their families – or alone. Serena was kept busy assessing patients, receiving her usual ones for sessions and supervising the junior doctors, some of whom being on the verge of losing their heads too. Since Elinor’s remarks, she couldn’t help wondering if her daughter was right. She was obviously in no way interested in her F1, but was it possible that Leah Faulkner was? After all, she had thought the younger woman acted a little weird sometimes, but she had never been anything but professional. But she had caught her staring at her. And Leah often complimented her on the way she dressed. And laughed at her jokes. And had invited her for a drink to thank her for having been a shoulder to cry on when her ex-girlfriend had harassed her. That had been just before Christmas, and they had had no time to act on it, so Serena had asked for a rain check.

When Leah asked her again, after a frantic day, Serena almost refused, but she didn’t want to hurt the young doctor. Anyway, she needed a drink – or more than one – she’d never seen the point of having only one. She suggested to Fletch he came too, but he had to get back home to the kids. Donna was otherwise engaged, so she and Leah headed to Albie’s together. At first, they talked about the patients, but when Serena said firmly that she didn’t want to waste good Shiraz on shop talk, an awkward silence descended. Finally Leah spoke up: “Thank you again for inviting me for Christmas – it was really nice meeting your daughter and your nephew. She’s – quite passionate, isn’t she?”

Serena smiled: “Yes – Ellie has always been like that – when she believes in something, she wants to convince everybody else. Very effusive – I hope you didn’t mind?”
“No, of course not, Ms Campbell. She’s really nice – a lot like her mother.”

Leah curled up on the sofa and her hand wandered near Serena’s shoulder. Serena drained her glass and shot up: “I’ll get myself another – want a refill?”

“I’d love to, thanks, but better make it a virgin, otherwise my head won’t thank me in the morning.”

“Right, okay.”

As she came back with the drinks, Serena watched the young doctor. Really cute… Now – where did that come from? But – yes, she was cute – and also kind of …like a kitten – you wanted to take her into your arms and stroke it. Maybe it was the big blue eyes …and maybe she should have got orange juice too instead of Shiraz.

“So – how is it going with your ex – Joey – does she leave you alone now?”

“Yes – yes, and I think I’m ready to put her behind me and move on. I don’t know why I fell for her, really – she was so immature, so needy. Not my kind of woman at all, really. I need someone stronger – more …more adult…”

“Hmm.”

“Actually, I’m interested in someone else now.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes – but it’s early days yet, and I’m not sure – I’m not sure she’s interested.”

“I’m sure she is, Leah – you’re a very beautiful and clever young lady.”

“Thank you, Ms Campbell. I hope so.”

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“Dear Bernie

You don’t answer your phone, and you know why I can’t email, so paper is my only option. I had hoped to see you in person last week – I didn’t care for that bloody medal, I just wanted to see you there. I know the CO told you about it. But you haven’t come. I called your home too – I called Marcus – don’t worry, I didn’t tell him anything. He still thinks I’m your friend – your comrade in arms. He told me – about your eyes. I don’t understand why you hid it from me, Bern. I thought I meant something to you. I thought you loved me. Although you never actually said it, did you? So maybe I’m wrong – maybe you never did. Maybe you’re back in you cosy little life, with your dear husband, and I was just a mistake. But you risked your career for me, and I just can’t believe you would throw that away – throw us away. You broke the rules for me. That has to mean something. And yet you’re not with me. So I’m going away, Bern. You’ve heard of Project HAPTIC – for my last two deployments, I’m going to work with the assessment team. Martinique, and then Nepal. As far away from you as possible. Because I can’t take the pain anymore. I still love you, Bern, but I can’t live like that. This is goodbye. I wish you everything – happiness, and health, and success.

Alex.”

Just “Alex” – no kisses, nothing. So this was really the end, and it was her own fault. Her eyes burnt and blurred, as much from the strain of reading as for the tears…
Of course she’d heard of Project HAPTIC. She had been hoping to be part of it, actually – it would be a wonderful experience for Alex. A new, portable hospital, with a resuscitation unit, operating theatre, intensive care wards, advanced diagnostics, as well as the necessary infrastructure such as recovery wards, sterilisation, pharmacy and laboratory facilities. All equipment state-of-the-art, enabling diagnosis or essential surgery to take place as soon as possible. Also, an infrastructure for protection against chemical warfare agents and treating victims of chemical or biological attacks. All in all, a military surgeon’s dream, from which she had been forever exiled.

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“Ma’am? Your daughter’s been in an accident – she’s in the ICU at Holby Hospital. You should get there as quickly as you can.”

She was only half-dressed when her phone rang. Only half-awake when she drove herself to the hospital. Only half-running when she burst into the ICU. She hoped it was a mistake, and yet knew it must be true. Never a good sign when they told you to hurry. She remembered her rotations in intensive care – the agony of telling a parent his child was in a critical condition. But this was her Ellie – Ellie was a fighter. Ellie would survive.

“No corneal reflex, no respiratory effort despite a CO2 at seven, no gag reflex, no vestibulo-ocular reflex.”

To a layperson, these would be meaningless. To a doctor, the words meant the end of hope.

“Was she on the organ donor register?”

“I don’t know – I would have thought so.”

And then there were no halves anymore – just utter despair.
Bernie found herself once again in a café – she seemed to be spending most of her days there. She was due to appear before the Medical Board in two weeks, but she had no great expectations – she was out, it would be only a matter of deciding the compensation she was due. Her eyes strayed towards a newspaper on an empty table. She didn’t buy any – waste of time and money – but she decided to have a look, if only to confirm what she had been thinking – her right eye vision appeared to be a little bit better. She had no hope of regaining her full sight, but every little helped. Her attention was caught by a headline “M5 Crash - Local girl, 22, killed in head-on collision as car driven wrong way down dual carriageway.” Charlotte’s age – for a moment, her heart stopped – what if it was Charlotte? Would she have been notified? There was a small picture, not clear enough for Bernie. She forced herself to read the article, straining to make out the words without her magnifying glass. “Officers were called after a car was seen driving towards oncoming traffic on the M5. The crash happened shortly afterwards. Both drivers were found dead on the scene. The driver going the wrong way, John Simon, 85, is thought to have been confused when he entered the motorway at Junction 23. A number of motorists who witnessed the Ford Focus being driven in the wrong direction described their panic as they saw the car careering towards them. Sophia Jones, from Staffordshire, said the car was "going so fast it was almost past me in the blink of an eye. I called the police who said they'd had multiple calls by that time.” The other victim of the collision had been coming home from Cheltenham University, where she was studying French. Next of kin have been informed.” So it wasn’t Charlotte, but there was another mother somewhere who’d lost her daughter. Even after more than twenty years as a doctor, Bernie had never gotten used to that – the moment you had to tell the family it was over. She suddenly felt terribly sad. Since the accident, her mood had been fragile anyway, and she who never cried felt tears welling up almost daily.

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“Serena! Are you sure you should be here? I mean …Are you …?”

“I haven’t asked for your opinion, Nurse Fletcher. Where else should I be? Please send in my first patient in ten minutes – thank you.”

When she saw the flowers littering her office, she had a sudden urge to swipe through and throw everything on the floor – flowers, vases, papers – and if she would swipe away her grief as well, all the better. Instead, she sank on her chair and put her hands in her hands – maybe she had come back too soon. If she had been one of her patients, she would have signed herself off work for a few weeks. However, the few days she’d spent cooped up at home after the funeral had only exacerbated her grief. She hadn’t wanted a church funeral, but she’d got along with Edward’s wishes, and the service had been excruciating. She didn’t love Edward anymore, but seeing him with Liberty, she couldn’t help imagining his new wife with a round belly… Edward could have another child – she couldn’t and her only one had been stolen from her. She remembered when Elinor was born – she had murmured to her baby that one day, she would have children of her own… Why thank God for her life when He had cut it so short? It didn’t make sense – nothing made sense now.

Seeing the pictures of Elinor in the living-room, going past her bedroom door… It was better to be at work. At least she could get lost in her patients’ problems and not dwell on her own misery. She managed a day – with a lot of coffee, and two glasses of wine at a nearby pub – not Albie’s – instead of lunch. Then another day – the spare moments she had she spent either taking care of administration or phoning Jason, who had not reacted well to his cousin’s death. She had suggested he moved in with her, and although he drove her mad with a diet of quiz shows and nature documentaries, he was at least a presence. Although Elinor hadn’t lived with her since she’d gone to
university, the house had somehow retained her death more than her life, and the void more than the fullness. And another one, and another one – as long as she had enough time at lunchtime to go out and get a drink, she could cope. In the evening, she had a whole cellar to go through, so it was fine. And ten days after her return, she escorted her last patient out of her office, just stopped there in the corridor and began to shake uncontrollably. She felt cold and hot, she swayed and held on to the wall until someone came and put her hands on her arms, leading her gently to the office and closing the door behind them. Serena clung to Leah and wept on her shoulder. The younger woman held her tight, stroking her back in a soothing motion.

“She’s dead – she’s dead – my daughter is dead…”

“Shh – it’s all right – it’s all right.”

The first kiss was on her forehead, the second a bit lower, the third tentatively close to her mouth – the fourth found the answer it was looking for and pressed hungrily on lips that responded almost as fiercely. And then Serena wrenched away from the embrace and stalked away.

That evening, she didn’t go home immediately. She just couldn’t face the idea of sitting at the dinner table with Jason. Instead, she drove to a pub in the centre of the town and sat down with a glass of red wine – and another – and another – and then a G&T, because wine just didn’t do the trick…
Chapter 13

It had taken only a few minutes to strip her of her previous life and to leave her with nothing. Or maybe several few minutes – the IED, the moment she’d lost her sight, and now the medical board that had declared her unfit for duty. Just like that, she’d gone from army trauma surgeon to veteran. She had asked the cab driver to drop her off at a pub – she couldn’t face going back to the flat. She was afraid of what she might do. And although she normally didn’t drink – taking care of her mother after she’d passed out had muted the appeal of alcohol – this time she decided she might as well get drunk. She sat in a corner with a glass of whisky and stared into space. The dim lights allowed her to take her glasses off, and she pushed them back on her hair. Although she didn’t like alcohol, she liked the atmosphere – in the dark and rather grotty pub, nobody would bother her. A raucous crowd was cheering at the rugby match on television, and the other tables were mostly occupied by couples or groups of young people. Her attention was therefore caught by the only other table occupied by a lone woman, not far from her corner, and she watched her idly. She couldn’t see much, but she noticed the table was strewn with several glasses. The woman held one in her hands and stared fixedly at it. Suddenly, she put the glass down and buried her head in her hands. Bernie wasn’t sure, but she thought the woman’s shoulders were heaving, and as she listened carefully, she could hear the sobs. Of course, it was none of her business – she would hate it if someone came to her if she was crying in public… And yet… It wouldn’t be the first time she meddled in someone’s business.

First medical school and then the army had taught her that showing weakness or emotion would only result in humiliation. It was far easier to remain aloof, to be seen as “bossy Major Wolfe” than to reveal her extremely sensitive and fragile nature. Her made-up persona had served her well over the years, and only Alex had begun to crack her disguise. From that had come her brisk manner, and her dislike of being touch had only intensified. Especially after … No, she couldn’t think about that now. Being a surgeon had given her a sense of almightiness – because usually she succeeded, usually she was right. And she had been a good surgeon, because she’d been able to detach herself from the person and see only a broken body to be mended. But when she was wrong… everything crumpled and she blamed herself, as if she had control over life and death. Maybe all she was going through was a lesson in humility, reminding her of her humanity and helplessness. It was a harsh lesson.

Anyway, under a tough-as-nails exterior, she hid a soft heart, and she had often comforted a younger soldier homesick in deployment or a colleague who’d lost a patient. She had also kind of adopted the stray mother car who’d wandered on the base in Kandahar and fed her without anyone noticing, but she would have denied it if asked… Seeing the woman cry tugged at her heartstrings. She probably couldn’t help, but … She got up and looked for her cane before remembering she had left it at home that morning. She hadn’t wanted to appear before the medical board as an invalid, but now she missed it, missed the familiarity of it and the security it gave her. And she hated herself for needing it. She put her hand on the back of the chair to get her bearings and planned her way to the other table.

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Serena didn’t see the stranger approach, too busy crying her eyes out. She heard, however, a chair scraping the floor and when she lifted her head, a woman was standing in front of her. She wasn’t in the mood for company – despite several drinks, she was still way too sober and angry. Angry at the whole f*cking world for the death of her daughter. She realised she’d seen the stranger before – on Christmas Day – the last time she’d seen Elinor alive… The blonde women had been at the restaurant with two young people – probably her children – her beautiful, alive children! A ripple of rage coursed through her body and she snapped: “What do you want?”

The blonde woman bit her lips, looking supremely uncomfortable: “I’m so sorry – I just …I just
thought maybe I could help, somehow. I’m sorry – it was a stupid idea – I’ll leave you alone.”

“Yes, you do that! Just leave me the f**k alone!”

Bernie turned sharply and stumbled on Serena’s handbag strap on the floor. She would have fallen if Serena hadn’t reached out to steady her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes – Yes, I’m fine – I’m sorry – I’ll go.”

As she straightened her back, Bernie stifled a groan and made a face.

“You’re not fine – you’ve obviously hurt yourself. Sit down – let me take a look – I’m a doctor.”

It had been years since Serena had treated any physical ailment, but she had been through med school, after all. Bernie gritted her teeth – she didn’t want a stranger’s hands on her, but at least the brunette didn’t seem angry at her anymore. And she had stopped crying. So she sat gingerly on the chair and resigned herself to an impromptu doctor’s examination. Even through her thick jumper, the woman’s fingers sent little electric shocks down her spine and Bernie flinched.

“I’m sorry – have I hurt you?”

“No- no.”

“Everything seems intact.”

“Okay – good.”

Now that contact had been established, neither women knew what to say. Finally, Serena cleared her throat: “Thank you – for coming to talk to me, I mean. And I apologise for biting your head off. I’m not …I’m not in the best place right now.”

“I’d never have guessed,” replied Bernie drily. It made them both grin.

“And sorry for leaving my handbag laying about so it could have killed you.”

“Believe me, I’ve been attacked by worse!”

This got almost a full smile from Serena: “Hmm… Okay, if you say so. Listen – can I buy you a drink? I’m going to stick to softs, because apparently I can’t seem to get drunk tonight, but what’s your poison?”

Bernie hesitated for a second – did she really want to sit down and talk with the stranger? She was ready to give her help in a crisis, but it seemed like the crisis was over, and all she really wanted was to retreat into her shell. But there was something strangely compelling about the brunette – her voice, even stained with tears, felt familiar. Bernie wondered where she could have heard her before. From the little she could see, she wasn’t bad-looking either – about her own age, with short dark hair greying at the temples. She made up her mind: “All right, if you’re buying, I’ll have a diet coke, please.”

“Back in a jiffy.”

When Serena left to get the drinks, Bernie had a moment of panic – what on earth was she doing? She tried to comfort herself with the fact that normal people did that all the time – make acquaintances in the pub – but it just wasn’t her. Serena brought the drinks back and once again an
awkward silence settled. Bernie decided to bite the bullet: “So – do you want to tell me why you were …?”

“Why I was crying? I can tell you, but it’s not exactly like you can do anything about it. My daughter died – three weeks ago. A car accident – she was killed instantly, apparently.”

“Oh my God”, murmured Bernie. “I’m so – so sorry!”

“What have you got to be sorry about? It’s not as if it was your fault!”

Bernie caught her lower lip with her teeth – she’d always thought it was a rather stupid thing to say, actually, but …

Serena made a sheepish grin: “Gosh – I’m going to spend the evening apologising! I’m sorry – I shouldn’t have said that – it’s just that I hear that several times a day and….”

“And it doesn’t make things easier – yeah, I know – I understand. I can’t even imagine something happening to my kids. I mean – parents shouldn’t outlive their own children – it’s not right - it’s not how things are meant to be.”

Bernie gulped, realising what she had just said: “Oh – blimey! That’s not what I meant – I mean, I don’t …”

“It’s okay – I know what you were trying to say. And I agree – it’s not right.”

They drank in silence for a few minutes until Bernie decided to cut the evening short. She could sense something was happening, and she wasn’t sure what. And in those kinds of situations, she had only one answer – flight! She didn’t mind war zones, she didn’t mind ultra-complicated operations, but when it came to feelings, it was different. They were to be avoided at all costs. She thanked Serena for the drink and stood up slowly. She tried to make her way as surely as possible to her own table where she’d left her coat. She had no intention of revealing her infirmity to her drinking companion.

Serena watched the blonde woman walk away – something felt awkward in her gait – she wasn’t limping, her back was ramrod straight and yet she looked hesitant. As if … Suddenly she remembered the restaurant at Christmas and put two and two together – as if the woman couldn’t see. Why didn’t she have her cane with her this time? She was probably only partially blind, but it obviously caused her problems. She felt sorry for the stranger, but also somewhat relieved – she had confided her troubles to someone who’d probably be unable to recognise her in the street.
Chapter 14

When the time of her next therapy session came, Bernie felt as nervous as before the first one. With the Christmas period and a week where Ms Campbell’s secretary had cancelled all the therapist’s appointments for personal reasons, several weeks had passed. Bernie settled in a chair – even though the therapist couldn’t see her, she would have felt awkward sprawled on the couch and rang.

“Serena Campbell speaking. Good afternoon, Ms Reynart.”

“Good afternoon – and – happy new year – it’s still the season.”

Serena sighed – never before had the conventional words sounded inappropriate, and she heard them from her patients several times a day.

“Yes – it is – all my best wishes to you to, Ms Reynart. So – what’s new in your life?”

Bernie found herself wishing that the therapist would talk about her instead – maybe tell her why she had taken a week off. But of course … it didn’t work that way. So she took a deep breath and begun: “Well – last time, I told you I was in the army – I’m not anymore. I was discharged for medical reasons – at least the medical board sat last week, and I’ll be officially discharged in three months. And …Well, it still hurts.”

It did hurt – a lot. The board had recommended a discharge on a permanent basis, although they had added that if she ever recovered her sight in full, she could apply to join the Reserves. Which wasn’t very likely. At least she had managed not to be discharged for mental health reasons – she had known enough about the questionnaires to avoid revealing her nightmares, her panic attacks and her flashbacks. And her depression. And the moments where she had seriously considered ending it all.

“I see – I’m sorry. Have you got any other job prospects?”

Bernie laughed bitterly: “The army offers a few resettlement possibilities, yes – like IT consultant – I hate computers and if I could manage without a mobile phone I would, or lecturer – I’m terrible at public speaking – or Health and Safety management …nothing remotely comparable to my old job!”

“You still haven’t told me what your old job was, Ms Reynart.”

Bernie avoided the question: “Well, it’s something I certainly can’t do now!”

Serena understood her patient wouldn’t say anymore about her career – she wished she would. If the woman didn’t lower her guard, she wouldn’t be able to help. She decided to try another approach: “What about in your personal life then? Have you come to terms with the divorce? Any new love interest on the horizon?”

“I’m not looking for a new love interest, Ms Campbell. I’m perfectly fine on my own…”

Bernie knew she wasn’t completely honest – she wasn’t fine – she was desperately lonely. But it was true she wasn’t looking for a romance. She was still in love with Alex, even though Alex didn’t want her anymore. And she didn’t want a quick fuck, or a flimsy affair which would crumble at the first hurdle – if she ever gave her heart again, it would be for keeps.

“I couldn’t be with anyone – I’m …damaged.”

“Ms Reynart, please don’t talk like that – I’m sure you’re a wonderful person.”
Serena wondered what had happen to her patient to make her so totally devoid of self-confidence and self-esteem. Surely it wasn’t only her discharge from the army? The woman had hinted at an accident – had she been disfigured?

“Have you read The Little Prince, Ms Reynart?”

“Yes – a long time ago…”

“Well – maybe you remember this – The essential is invisible to the eyes. Whatever happened to you, Ms Reynart, you are a beautiful human being.”

Bernie swallowed hard – without knowing, the therapist had hit at her deepest fear. Without her job, she didn’t know who she was anymore – if she couldn’t define herself as Major Berenice Wolfe, trauma surgeon …what was her identity? Could she explain that to Ms Campbell? She decided to try – she felt horrible using a fake name – just another mask hiding her hollowness - but she had dug that hole for herself and she couldn’t see a way out.

“You see …my job – my career – it was me – it was my life. And now it’s over… I’m just empty – I’m no one. I met someone a few days ago – I mean – I didn’t meet her, but – I talked to her – in a pub. And I didn’t even introduce myself, because I didn’t know how to. Gosh – that sounds ridiculous – I’m sorry, Ms. Campbell.”

“No – not at all – I understand. This woman- you were interested in her?”

“No! Of course not – it was just someone I went to talk with – not that she wasn’t nice. She …she was actually quite beautiful.”

Bernie remembered the strange feeling she’d had that night – why she had suddenly left. It had scared her, because somehow the woman had awoken something in her, and that hadn’t happened for a long time.

“So maybe she could become a friend?”

“Or maybe not – I don’t even know her name. It’s better this way….”

The session went on a little longer, but Bernie had closed up again. They made another appointment and hung up.

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Shopping was a necessary evil, and one which Bernie would love to avoid indefinitely. However, even if she hadn’t much appetite, she had to eat, and the meals offered at her serviced residence were trite and bland. When she was in med school or in deployment, she’s sometimes wished she had the time to really learn to cook, and now that she had the time, she only had a tiny open kitchen. So she mostly bought cereal, biscuits and ready meals. Even for this, it meant walking to the supermarket. She usually left it until late at night, when most of the shoppers had gone home.

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Serena would have loved nothing more than to go home after a long workday, but she knew the cupboards at home were bare and if she didn’t go shopping, Jason would complain. She would have to stop at the supermarket on her way home. She would get more wine too – Tesco’s own brand Shiraz wasn’t too bad. She’d read that a famous French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, used to ask
his patients to come to his country house for the sessions, and to bring champagne …maybe she could try that? It would probably not fit with NHS regulations, though…

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When the first shot rang out, Bernie pressed herself against the wall behind a pillar, gripped her head with her hands and began to shake. Artillery fire, shrapnel flying round, the tac-tac of submachine guns. IEDs exploding, she was in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, always helpless, always unable to move while the bullets rained around her – and then blood, lots of bloods, and eyes looking at her, pleading – usually the eyes of the women and children she’d treated and sometimes lost. Wide awake and yet lost in a world of war, she shivered, screwed her eyes and fists tightly shut and slid to the floor in a ball.

“Breathe – just try to breathe – slowly…You’re safe – you’re safe.”

Flashbacks were worse than nightmares, because she was wide awake, worse than the panic attacks, because she could see the scenes, hear the noises, smell burning flesh… And when Bernie came back to reality and saw the woman crouched in front of her, her hands on hers, talking soothingly, she wished she had really been on the battlefield – because she wouldn’t feel so terribly stupid and ashamed of herself.

“It’s all right – it’s going to be all right – was it the car backfiring? It surprised me too.”

She had rushed to the blonde’s aid without even realising she had met her before. As the woman regained a little colour in her cheek, Serena exclaimed: “Really! We should stop meeting like that!”

Bernie managed a weak grin: “Well – now, we’re even – thank you for coming to my rescue.”

“That’s all right – I’m a doctor, remember, Ms …”

“Grizel, please, Grizel Reynart.”

If the brunette was a doctor, she might have heard of Berenice Wolfe – better remain incognito. Still shaken, she didn’t realise the brunette had blanched and not offered her own name in return.

“Grizel – can I walk you to your car? If you’ve finished here?”

“Finished? Oh – yes – yes, I’ve finished,” Bernie gestured to the two bags on the floor, “But I don’t have a car – I walked.”

“In this case, can I give you a lift? Mine is parked right there.”

“Thank you – it’s not necessary.”

Bernie couldn’t believe the one person seeing her like that would be the woman she had seen at the pub. True, she had been crying then, so not at her best either, but if they were to become better acquainted, these were hardly auspicious circumstances. Maybe the doctor hadn’t noticed she was blind, but who would want to have anything to do with a veteran with PTSD? She would never see her again. She scrambled to her feet and tried to walk but she was still shivering uncontrollably.

“I’m taking you home. I want to make sure my patient gets home safely. No arguments!”

“Aye, aye, Captain” replied Bernie wryly, secretly glad not to have to walk.

When they arrived in front of Bernie’s residence, the latter got out of the car and hesitated a moment.
“Would you like to come up for coffee?”

“No – no, thank you. I have to go. Goodnight!”

Serena drove away in the night. What in hell was happening? She tried to arrange the facts in some kind of order. Fact: the blonde stranger – Grizel – did something to her. Her body responded to her in a way it never had before – maybe not even when she’d met Edward for the first time. Fact: before her F1 had kissed her, she’d never thought she could be attracted to women. Corollary – if anything was to happen with Leah Faulkner, it would be totally unprofessional of her – Leah was her subordinate. Fact: she knew who Grizel was – the voice, the reaction so typical of PTSD, the name – Grizel was her mystery patient. Corollary – dating her was out of the question – even asking her out for a drink would be totally inappropriate. Conclusion – she was f***ed!
Chapter 15

The phone rang, dragging Bernie out of a painful nightmare. She had been back in Kandahar – she recognised the hospital barracks – and waiting for a casualty to arrive. Then she was in her surgical garb, over the operating table, and the patient she was going to cut open was the brunette who’d rescued her in the supermarket. She was just ordering her team to hand her the necessary instruments when everything went black, and she was left groping in the darkness, trying to operate without her sight. Then the steady beat of the heart monitor went flat, and a lugubrious voice announced “Time of death – 12.12”… And she just remained there, hands over the body, while her team booed.

“Bernie Wolfe.”

“Bernie – hi, it’s Zosia Marsh.”

“Dr Marsh – hello – how are you?”

“I’m very well, thank you. One day back from holidays, and it’s as if I’d never been away.”

“I know the feeling….Or at least, I used to.”

Zosia could hear the bitterness in the older woman’s voice.

“Could I come and see you? I’d like – I’d like your opinion on something.”

“Why don’t we meet in town? You don’t have a lot of spare time, and I could do with a change of scenery. Café Costa? What time is good for you?”

Zosia tried to hide the surprise in her voice – surely that was good news? The last time she’d seen Ms Wolfe, the woman had been a recluse. Maybe this meant her sight was coming back: “I was on call last night, so I’m actually free today – would 1.00 be all right for you?”

“Yes – fine – see you then.”

At least she would have to get out of bed. Since her flashback at the supermarket the previous week, she had once again retreated into her shell and hadn’t gone out. She knew she had to make more of an effort, but she was paralysed by apprehension. What if it happened again? What if she couldn’t snap out of it? What if someone recognised her? She wondered what the young doctor wanted from her – advice about her career, maybe? She got under the shower, rinsing the last dregs of her nightmare under the scorching-hot water. Just before she got out of the flat, she put on the dark glasses – the pale February sunshine scarcely peeked under the blanket of clouds, but she needed them as a protection against the outside world as much as against the light.

Zosia Marsh was waiting for her and the young doctor saw she had been wrong – the Major’s sight wasn’t back to normal. Bernie carefully placed her coffee on the table and sat down.

“So …What’s up with you, Doctor Marsh?”

Zosia sighed – she wasn’t sure she as doing the right thing, but she trusted Bernie Wolfe. The way the major had sized up both her father and her boyfriend in a matter of minutes had majorly impressed her.

“Ms Wolfe – Bernie. I – I need your input.”
Bernie nodded at her to go on.

“Do you think – do you think a doctor with mental health issues should be allowed to practice?”

Bernie jolted and gulped – she hadn’t been expecting that and it hit a little too close to home. Immediately, she stiffened: “Why do you ask, Dr Marsh?”

Zosia bit her lips and took a deep breath before launching into her explanation: “You know – well, you don’t but – I suffer from bipolar disorder. And …well, now it’s under control, I take the meds and – I’m okay – most of the time. But when I didn’t have my treatment, I …went off the rails for a while. Like – when I had tough stuff to deal with at work, I kind of – self-medicated with alcohol, and drugs and … I could have got myself kicked out – some people thought I shouldn’t practice. But – I’m fine now, and I love my job, and …”

Bernie was completely bewildered – she couldn’t see what the young woman was getting at. Of course, it echoed with what she was thinking about herself – if she ever got her sight back, which was most unlikely, she would still have to fight was she knew were PTSD symptoms. But surely there was no way Zosia had heard about her panic attacks … She refocused on what the young woman was telling her, adding: “From what I’ve seen, you’re a very competent professional.”

“Thank you, Bernie. This is – this is actually not about me. It’s about someone else – at the hospital – that’s why I didn’t know who to ask – I don’t want …”

“You don’t want any gossip about it – understood – go on.”

“There’s a consultant – she’s not in my ward, but I know her. And…well, she’s had – problems, recently, and … I think she’s drinking too much. I know she’s drinking too much. And – I’ve heard…things …the juniors, they talk and …. And I’ve seen it myself. She – she drinks in her office – I’m sure of it. I want to help her, but I don’t know what to do, and then – I sort of think I should tell the CEO, but I don’t want to get her into trouble.”

Bernie remained silent for a minute. She wondered idly if she knew the consultant, but she knew mostly Guy Self and Jac Naylor, and Jac didn’t seem the time to turn to drink. Maybe some of her old med school comrades worked at Holby, but she hadn’t kept in touch. If this had happened while she was in the forces, she would probably have reported the person to the CO, because …Because it would have been the right thing to do. And because a drunk medic was dangerous. But this was a horse of a different colour. However, she knew all too well the dangers of alcohol. And she could well imagine what would happen if a surgeon arrived drunk in theatre…

“This consultant – is she a surgeon?”

“No – no she isn’t.”

Bernie breathed a little easier. So at least lives were probably not at stake. Left the problem of doing the “right” thing.

“Do you think you could talk to her, Dr Marsh? Make her understand she has a problem?”

Zosia shook her head: “Not really – I’ve tried, but …She’s very – stubborn.”

“I see … Well – in that case… I think you should go to the CEO. She needs help, and if she doesn’t understand how dangerous her behaviour is, she won’t get it.”

Zosia nodded: “Yes – I don’t want to do that, but I think you’re right. Thank you.”
“You’re welcome – any time.”

“Thanks – I'll have to go back now. Take care, okay?”

“Will do!”

Once Zosia had left, Bernie sat for a while longer in the café. She tried to put herself in the consultant’s place – the woman must be really desperate to drink at work. But then, who was she to judge? She probably wasn’t qualified to give advice either – funny how other people’s problems usually seemed much easier to solve than one’s own… The idea of not ever recovering her sight terrified her, but she knew the psychological scars were only emerging now, and she they would take longer to heal. She had seen the damages of PTSD on other war veterans, and she knew she should begin to talk about the nightmares and the flashbacks to her therapist, but she didn’t want to show weakness, didn’t want to reveal the chink in her armour. She had already said too much … And she was afraid that if she opened up only a little more, she would break down altogether. Her next session was coming up soon, and she already felt stressed about it. Trying to hide things was exhausting, but she just knew that baring her soul would be excruciating, and she wasn’t ready for that kind of pain.
Chapter 16

“You did what? Cameron, please tell me you weren’t that stupid!”

“It’s okay, Mum – we are fine – or – nearly fine at least.”

“I don’t understand, Cam – what were you doing with Keeley in the first place?”

“I wasn’t exactly with Keeley, Mum – it’s just – we were at the same party, and she was drunk, so I said I’d drive her home. The roads were icy – total accident, Mum, geez! Lighten up, will you!”

Bernie was trying very hard to keep her hands from shaking, although she had no idea if it was from shock, retrospective fear or anger. Cameron showing up at her place with a huge bandage on his head, a bloody lip and a black eye hadn’t been part of her plan for the day.

“Lighten up?? You could have been killed, Cameron! Tell me the truth – were you – what’s the word in your language– were you off your face?”

“No, Mum – I wasn’t! But thanks for your confidence in me!”

“Well, it’s not exactly like you’ve a clean track record… Never mind! Did you get a head CT?”

Cameron rolled his eyes: “I told you I’m fine – they checked me over in AAU. Keeley was the one who took the brunt of it – avulsed kidney. Anyway – I’m going back to the hospital …I just wanted to …oh, never mind!”

“Stop right there, Cameron – avulsed kidney? Which side?”

“Hmm – right, why?”

Bernie shot him a black look: “Why are you lying, Cameron?”

“Lying?”

“Yes – lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

Cameron wondered why he had thought it would be a good idea to come and see his mother. He had been shaken by the accident, his girlfriend had sustained a serious injury, and…well, he’d wanted a little maternal comfort, but he should have known Major Wolfe wouldn’t oblige. She had never really been the kisses and cuddles kind, even when he and Charlotte had been little. She wasn’t very good with gestures of affection. He had no doubt she loved them, but…

“Cameron – you have the face you had when you denied stealing that gobstopper… Moreover…that kind of injury is a driver’s injury, not a passenger’s! Why are you covering for Keeley? This doesn’t make any sense!”

Cameron sighed – the game was up….

“Keeley was drunk, Mum – she could lose her medical licence! The most I’ll get is dangerous driving…”

“But that’s enough, Cam! That’s enough to get you sent down from med school! Why on earth
“Would you lie for Keeley?”

“Because we’re together, Mum! Like – in a relationship.”

Bernie gasped: “What?? You’re with Keeley Carson?? But – but she’s married!”

“Not happily! And anyway - that’s rich – coming from you!”

“I’m sorry, Cameron – what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I know, Mum – you and Alex – she phoned the house – Dad wasn’t there, but I answered. She didn’t really explain, but from she said …”

Bernie blanched and bit her lips – she could try to deny it, but she knew how terrible a liar she was – even worse than her son. She murmured: “I’m so sorry, Cam. Does your father know?”

Cameron shook his head: “No – I didn’t tell him Alex had called – and I won’t tell him.”

Bernie bowed her head: “Thank you, Cam.”

“You should have told us, Mum – I don’t mind who you’re with – I know things between you and Dad weren’t great …”

“Yes – maybe I should have – but anyway …It’s over – Alex and I…. So…But anyway – it doesn’t have anything to do with you and Keeley.”

Reeling from Cameron knowing about Alex, her anger mounted again: “I mean – this is ludicrous, Cam! She is old enough to …Well, to take the consequences of her own stupid behaviour, at least! You can’t do that – you can’t throw your life away like this …I can’t …I just can’t!…”

“I’m not asking you to do anything, Mum. Either about the accident, or Keeley and I. I wouldn’t have told you, actually! And I’m sorry I came. Bye, Mum…."

“Cam! Wait! It’s just …she’s a lot older than you and …”

And when she was living with us, several things disappeared, including several bottles from your father’s wine collection… When Keeley had been Bernie’s registrar, she had been between boyfriends and just out of an abusive relationship. She had also run into trouble with her housemates and had found herself without a home. Bernie had taken her in for a few months and regretted it almost instantly. Not that the young woman had been awful, but she had had a tendency to appropriate things that didn’t belong to her – small things, like books or pens, or wine – and to behave rather inconsiderately. Keeley Carson was definitely not the kind of woman she wanted as her son’s girlfriend – especially as she had been married to another doctor for more than five years.

The door slammed behind Cameron and Bernie sank into the couch. It was all her fault – it had to be. If she had been there when Cam and Charlie were growing up … If they had grown up – her two children tended to behave as toddlers throwing tantrums. Marcus and his mother had spoilt them… She didn’t really know how she felt about Cameron knowing about her and Alex, but part of her was relieved he hadn’t made a song and dance about it. Maybe she should have told them, but she didn’t want to hurt Marcus. And maybe she should have divorced earlier – maybe she’d just buried her head in the sand, telling herself she was doing the right thing. She checked her phone – almost time for her therapy session – maybe the psychiatrist could give her a few pointers on how to deal with her children? Obviously, she didn’t have a clue …
Serena was having a bad day – like all her other days recently, except this one had begun even worse than the others. When Henrik Hanssen’s secretary had phoned to summon her to his office, she had expected a dressing-down. After all, she was far from her best self these days, and she had been snappy and surly since Elinor’s death. Most of her colleagues and juniors had borne the brunt of her irritability, and any of them would have been justified in lodging a complaint against her. She hadn’t been able to see him at once, and the wait had only exacerbated her apprehension – not that she gave a damn, exactly, about what he would say, but …she only had her job now, and she probably should hold on to it.

When she finally managed to pop into his office, just after lunch which had been mostly liquid, she was ready to resign if Hanssen asked her to. She was quite surprised to hear that what he had to say wasn’t about her at all. The news were worrying, though. Confidential data about patients and members of staff had leaked to the media, and Henrik Hanssen needed help in locating the source. Not for the first time, Serena wished she had never agreed to be deputy CEO. Especially when it meant facing the press for damage control. After a brief interview during which she told the journalists it was an unprecedented occurrence and the hospital was doing its best to find the person responsible for the leak, she went back to her patients. The wine she had had at lunchtime hadn’t helped her calmed down as she had hoped and she felt very jittery. Thank goodness she had had the foresight to bring a bottle of orange juice with a little vodka added – just a little, just enough to take the edge of things. She took a quick sip before her first patient.

Mrs Wilson had been coming to see Serena for several months, with a recurrent complaint – her husband worked a lot and he never did anything at home. Moreover, he came home tired and bad-mouthed her at every opportunity. This was usually an easy session for Serena – she really just had to listen to Mrs Wilson’s litany, and nod or “hm hm” at appropriate moments. However, she just wasn’t in the mood for that…After about ten minutes, Serena spoke up: “Why don’t you just divorce the bloody git? I mean, even a moaning Minnie like you deserves better!” Her patient appeared dumbstruck and Leah Faulkner, who had been shadowing Serena and therefore been sitting in the office, looked at her with horrified eyes.

“What Ms Campbell was trying to say, Mrs Wilson, is that you shouldn’t let your husband treat you like that. Why don’t you try Non-Violent Communication techniques? Let him know how you feel,” interjected Dr Faulkner. Somehow this enabled the woman to go on talking for a little longer. Once she was out of the office, Leah faced Serena, biting her lower lip.

“Ms Campbell – are you sure you’re okay? Maybe you should leave early today?”

“And maybe you should mind your own business, Dr Faulkner!”

The sessions went from bad to worse – each sip of doctored orange juice loosened Serena’s tongue, and she blithely told a depressed patient that he should just snap out of it, an anorexic young woman that she should find another way of seeking attention because starving oneself was really stupid and a man who was hearing voices that he wasn’t Saint Bernadette of Lourdes… After her last face-to-face session for the day, Serena packed her things and told Leah she was going home: “No reason why I should stay here – this office is f***ing depressing! I can use Skype at home.”

“Do you want me to call you a cab, Ms Campbell?”

Serena almost replied she would drive herself, but even in her inebriated state she realised that would be stupid.

“I’ll do it, thank you.”

Once she got home, she went to the kitchen and found a nice bottle of Shiraz. The taste seemed bitter
after the orange juice, but she told herself it would be more reasonable to stick to wine, as she had another session to go through.

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Bernie checked her phone – after Cameron had gone, she had tried to occupy herself with a quiz show on television, but the fact that the questions appeared on screen and it took her too long to decipher them soon discouraged her. Moreover, she couldn’t stop herself thinking about their conversation … about whether she ought to have done things differently… about Alex … She should have guessed Alex would phone – what if Marcus had answered? And was it really fair to ask Cameron to keep their relationship a secret? Of course it wasn’t … It was nearly time for her therapy session…. She opened the Skype app and pressed on Serena Campbell’s id.

When the therapist answered and asked her how she was, Bernie thought Serena’s voice sounded a little strange – a little …slurred, maybe? But then Skype lines weren’t always very clear. She decided to tell her about Cameron and the accident.

“So your son is in med school? He didn’t follow in mother’s footsteps then?”

Once again Bernie thought it would be so much easier if she could just tell the truth – if she had told Ms Campbell who she was. But she just replied that Cameron had followed in his father’s footsteps.

“I couldn’t see Cameron in the army – nor Charlotte – neither of them knows the meaning of the word “discipline”…”

“I see – you seem very bitter about your children, Ms Reynart.”

“Not bitter – or maybe a little – I mean, I know I wasn’t there much when they were growing up, but…”

“You’ve got nothing to complain about, Ms. Reynart – you can still make it up to them!”

Bernie was a little surprised at the vehemence in the therapist voice and in the criticism, as Serena Campbell had never expressed any judgement before, but she decided she was probably still shaken from Cameron’s visit and still raw. She went on: “Yes – I know that. But I think it’s too late – I mean – my daughter – she doesn’t want to see me anymore – she… I really think she hates me …and my son – well, he probably hates me too now. I’m not good with words – I can’t …I can’t tell them I love them…”

“Well – you’d better learnt them! It isn’t that hard! Just three words – I- love – you! But if you don’t have the guts to do that – you’re a coward … not surprised, actually! I mean – you can’t even come to therapy! I thought you were a veteran, for goodness’ sake! Time to man up – your kids need to know you love them – and you can also apologise for not being there for them when they needed you! Because no bloody job means more than a child! And sometimes …sometimes it’s too late! Sometimes …sometimes it’s too late!”

And on that final outburst, Serena collapsed into huge sobs and hung up. Bernie remained in front of her computer, so flabbergasted that she was unable to peel herself from the blank screen. The woman’s voice had held so much venom and yet so much despair that her words echoed round Bernie’s brain. She hadn’t had that kind of nasty remarks hurled at her since Sandhurst and her first years in the army. Her reaction was to get under the shower, as if she could rinse out all the accusations and all the blame, but even after scorching hot water, her skin still seemed to smart from Ms Campbell’s barbs.
When Serena woke up the next day, she wished she was dead – her tongue tasted like a mouldy dishrag, she had Fantasia’s elephants dancing on pointes on her head and her whole body had gone through the wringer. She groaned and tentatively extended her leg from underneath her body, trying to get out of the pretzel position she had apparently collapsed in. She sort of sat up and moaned again, as every muscle and every nerve protested. Her full bladder, however, would not allow her any more procrastination, and she made gingerly her way to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth but even with copious amounts of minty paste the sour taste remained. In the mirror, a puffy face with red-rimmed eyes stared back at her.

Unable to wait standing up for the coffee to brew, she collapsed on one of the kitchen chairs and put her head in her hands, massaging her skull in the hope of getting her brain switched on again. After two huge glasses of water, two mugs of black coffee and another trip to the bathroom, she felt marginally more human and her memory began to come back. She tried to make sense of the moments of the previous day that flashed back in a muddled brain. Each memory brought a fresh groan… She just couldn’t believe what she had said – Henrik Hanssen would have her head on a silver platter… Never mind resigning, she would be fired instantly… She had no doubt that Leah Faulkner would have gone straight to him. Serena almost hoped she had - at least it would mean the F1 understood exactly what a therapist shouldn’t say to her patients…She remembered dimly that Dr Faulkner had tried to pick up the pieces afterwards with the patients, while she’d been busy having just another little sip…But there had been no one to do that for her Skype patient – for Grizel Reynart. She forced herself to think back to what she had said to Grizel…When her words came back to her, she retched and almost threw up. If she had been sober and in her right mind, she wouldn’t have said that to her worst enemy. She had vented her spleen at the poor woman, unleashed all the anger and all the pain she had stored since Elinor’s death in a few. Moreover, words were the tools of her trade, and she had no doubt each of her poisoned verbal dart had hit home.

Serena considered her options – she could show up at Grizel’s home, but that would mean revealing who she was and she wasn’t sure she was ready for that. Moreover, she had to go to work – assuming she still had a job. She was no further along to finding out who was responsible for the leak, and she would have to deal with the aftermath of her appalling behaviour, but she had no choice.

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Bernie spent the day in bed – there was no real reason for her to get up, after all. A day of utter blackness when she felt unable to do anything other than stay curled up in the dark. Those black dog days had never happened when she was at work or on the field – this was one of the reasons why she drove herself so hard – keeping busy kept her from blackness. The accident and its aftermath had only brought more of these, but she had had them before, consequences of her youth. Psychological malaise was compounded by physical pain as migraine had invaded. Her head pounded and a bar of steel enclosed her forehead, and she felt nausea rise each time she turned in her bed. The therapist’s words spun round and round in her brain, until only one of them surfaced from the pool of self-loathing – coward. Yes – she was a coward – not only in her words but in her feelings and in her behaviour. Avoidance was always an easy way out, but it was the coward’s way. Going to war zones, where one had a job to do – that was nothing compared to three little words “I love you”.

She slept a little, overcome by pain, and when she opened her eyes again it was early evening, and her head still throbbed. She tried to sit up and the nausea which had been threatening propelled her to
the bathroom where she emptied the contents of her stomach in the toilet. Nothing much came up, but the trickle of bile burnt her throat, adding another painful spot to her body. She opened the bathroom cabinet and sighed – she knew it would be empty – she hadn’t bought any painkillers since she had moved in the flat. She considered just going to bed again but she knew that if she did that and just ignored the migraine it was likely to last several days. She sighed again and slowly put on jeans and a sweater – she would have to walk to the supermarket to buy some pills. She considered calling a cab but the drivers usually frowned at short errands, and she didn’t feel up to dealing with a surly cabbie. She gritted her teeth and groaned when she saw that snowflakes were falling steadily. The walk took her much longer than usual as she had to take extra care to look for and avoid the slush puddles on the pavement. The harsh lights of the supermarket only exacerbated her headache and she grabbed the pills, not bothering to shop for food, even though she knew her cupboards were bare. Torn between getting herself back home as quickly as she could and taking the pills to alleviate the pain, she decided to stop at the pub, where she could get something to eat too – the painkillers worked better with food. The pub was busy but luckily not too noisy, and except for the television relaying the local news, the volume was bearable.

Bernie sat down at one of the empty tables and ordered vegetable soup and a plate of cheese and crackers – the only items on the menu she thought her upset stomach would tolerate. Then she popped two pills in and waited for relief.

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Serena had spent her day sober and apologetic. She had tried to make amends for her behaviour by bringing pastries for the ward staff, and even coffee for Leah Faulkner, towards which she had been a really bitch. The kiss hovered between them like an unsaid, both knowing it ought to be forgotten and yet it could not be erased. Nothing would come out of it, but resuming a normal mentor-F1 relationship was proving difficult. Out of concern for Serena, Leah hadn’t gone to Hanssen about Serena’s outlandish conduct. Serena forced herself to remain in the ward at lunchtime, so she wouldn’t be tempted to have a drink. She still felt the remains of a hangover and was decided to remain completely professional. She focused on each of her patient, emptying her head from any other concern during the sessions. Only when she was ready to leave at the end of the day did she allow her thoughts to go back to Grizel Reynart. She couldn’t believe how much chaos the woman had brought into her life. First time in her career she was attracted to a patient …and to another woman… And she had behaved abominably towards her – she had to do something. Even though she was longing to go home, she decided she would stop at her pub where she had met Grizel for the first time – it may be her local too, and she might be lucky and run into her. She hadn’t quite worked out how she would tell Grizel she was her therapist, but she could at least comfort her as a friend if she seemed upset.

When Serena went to the car park, however, she had a nasty surprise – her reserved spot was empty, a few shards of glass all that remained from the car she had had to leave the previous evening. Cursing herself once again for having drunk too much, she fished her mobile phone out of her pocket and phoned the police station to signal the theft. And then, for the second time in two days, she phoned a cab.

Once at the pub, she ordered herself a glass of shiraz, telling herself she had earned it by not drinking all day, and scanned the room. Her eyes alighted on the person she both wanted and dreaded to see. She took a few seconds to observe the blonde from afar – she wasn’t wearing her dark glasses, and even from a distance she could see Grizel’s eyes were shadowed and red-rimmed. Her whole posture also screamed weariness and defeat. Serena took a deep breath and fixed a smile on her face.

“Evening! Fancy meeting you here. May I sit down?”
Bernie looked up to see the brunette who had witnessed her meltdown at the supermarket – she recognised the perfume first – *Poison* by Dior. A consultant had worn it when she was an F1, and she had never forgotten the scent – nor the consultant. She recognised the voice, too, although for a second she was destabilised as she couldn’t associate the voice with the person, and her brain sent warnings signal. She managed a smile: “Of course. Do sit down.”

Her ingrained manners speaking… The brunette was probably the last person she wanted to see in her current state. Her hair could use a wash, she had no make-up on and was painfully aware that her face showed her age in every line. Moreover, her white cane was leaning on the table. Not that she intended to seduce the brunette or anything but…The tingle Bernie had felt the first time they’d met was back, insidiously telling her she very much wanted the other woman to like her. However, another part of her recoiled.

“Thanks – I thought…” Serena bit her lips, hesitating: “I thought you might like some company? You looked a little … lonely…”

Bernie gave a little bitter laugh: “If that’s your way of saying I look depressed and desperate, I guess you’re right. But I’m fine on my own – really – you can have your drink in peace.”

What are you doing?? Stop pushing people away from you! Especially rather attractive women your age… Bernie’s inner little voice tried her best, but sometimes her best wasn’t enough.

Serena faltered: “I …Well, if you want to be by yourself, I can leave, but I just thought - maybe you could use a – friend?”

She really didn’t know how to make the blonde open up to her without revealing who she was. She remembered something an old mentor had told her: “When a patient doesn’t want to talk about himself, try to talk a little about yourself- you may get a reaction.” She grinned at Grizel: “You know what? I’m probably projecting a little – I’ve had a sh**y day, and I guess I wanted to talk to someone about it. Just tell me to f**ck off if you’d rather not listen.”

You can do that, whispered Bernie’s little voice. You can listen to her – that way, you can spend a little more time with her without putting yourself in danger.

She nodded: “Hit me with it – maybe it will help take my mind off from my own problems.”

Serena took a deep breath: “Well … Actually, I’ve had a horrible beginning of the new year – you see, my daughter…” She didn’t finish the sentence – she didn’t want to talk about that – it was much too personal. She went on: Anyway, let me just tell you about the latest sh** things that happened to me. I told you I’m a doctor. So we work with pretty sensitive information and yesterday, I learnt that we had a leak – so I’m supposed to deal with that – beside doing my job, of course. Find the culprit. And today…well today, the reason I’m here is that my car was stolen. I discovered that tonight, as I finished work …So …Let’s just say I’m not in the best of moods.”

She lifted her glass and took a big gulp of wine. Bernie seemed lost in thought. Then she spoke up: “Was there anything in your car?”

“Define anything?”

“Files, laptop …”
Serena grimaced and stared at Bernie: “How did you do that? Are you a cop or a PI? And yes … I’d been working from home, and I had all of that in my car… In my stolen car."

“Not a cop nor a sleuth, no.” Bernie paused and added a little bitterly: “My eyes are defective – not my brain…”

“Well, I didn’t make the connection. Oh God … Henrik is going to love that…”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is. I shouldn’t have left sensitive info in my car and then the car all night in the car park. If I hadn’t …”

No – not a good idea to tell her you were as drunk as a skunk, Serena… Try to get her to talk about herself instead.

“So … Grizel – now that I’ve told you all about how stupid I am – want to tell me why you look so glum?”

Bernie sighed: “Oh … Nothing new. I mean … Someone took me to task yesterday for being – well, for not being… Open enough, I guess. She said I was a coward, and … Well, you know, only the truth hurts.”

“I’m sure you’re not, Grizel. Why did she say that? Maybe you misunderstood?”

Look at you, Wolfe – you are using a pseudonym to talk to someone you met in a pub! If that isn’t the epitome of cowardice! All because what? Because you’re afraid someone will realise that the great Bernie Wolfe isn’t up to scratch anymore.

“No – I understood perfectly well. She made her point quite clearly.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really, no…”

Don’t tell her you’re seeing a shrink – she’ll think you’re a nutcase. You probably are, but … Just don’t tell her. Just act normal. What do normal people talk about? It had been so long since she had had a conversation with didn’t involve aneurisms, broken bones, shrapnel wounds or IEDs. Or her own medical issues. Or shouting matches with her children.

“So … seen anything good at the movies recently?”

Serena made a face: “Not really, no – between work and … Not really been in the mood. But my nephew is living with me and sharing his diet of Doctor Who, quiz shows and World’s Strongest Man episodes.”

“None of those are really my thing I’m afraid.”

“So what is your thing?”

“Hmm – that’s a good question… I haven’t had a lot of time for fun recently.”

That was a stupid question, Serena – she was in the army, for goodness’ sake – she probably had more interesting things to do than watch tv or movies… And now she’s lost her sight, so her options are probably reduced. Stupid!
“Would you like something to drink, Grizel? I’m going to get another one.”

“Err …Coffee? But I can …”

“No no – I’ll go. Don’t worry.”

“Okay – thanks.”

Left to herself, Bernie put her head in her hands and groaned. Why couldn’t she have an intelligent conversation with the first attractive woman she’d met in ages. The first since …Alex. Not that she needed a romantic entanglement right now but… At least she could avoid making a complete fool of herself. The bartender must have upped the volume of the television because she could now hear the newreader clearly.

“Freezing temperatures are continuing to disrupt traffic and sports events, with icy roads creating accidents. The Met Office is predicting still lower temperatures for a fortnight. Two men have been shot in a suburb of Gloucester – the police suspects drug deals. The head of Chesterton College wants to forbid mobile phones in the school – parents protest the decision. And the leak of confidential data at Holby Hospital still hasn’t been resolved – our reporter Jennifer Colham talks to the vice-CEO of the hospital, Serena Campbell.”

Bernie’s attention was caught by the name and she turned slightly to peer at the screen, trying to adjust her vision so she could see the woman on tv. She was curious to see what the woman who’d given her a piece of her mind the previous evening looked like.

“So …Ms. Campbell – what can you tell us about the lapse in security procedures that allowed masses of confidential data to be released to the media? A particularly interesting story concerned a doctor with issues of mental illness?”

“I can assure you that the hospital is …”

Bernie didn’t hear the rest – she blinked several times but no – she wasn’t mistaken. The woman on television – her therapist – was the one getting her coffee at the bar. Even if her eyes could be mistaken, her ears couldn’t, and Serena Campbell’s voice was distinctive… This was not happening! No f**ing way!

Serena queued at the bar, hesitating between getting another glass of Shiraz and a coffee too. Coffee would be more reasonable – the wine had done nothing for her lingering headache and the traces of hangover. She glanced at the table and saw Grizel staring transfixed at the television screen. She wondered what she was looking at with such fascination but from where she stood, she couldn’t see or hear the television. Well … Maybe whatever was on would give them something to talk about.
Chapter 19

As Serena made her way back to the table, she noticed that Grizel had put her dark glasses back on. She was now staring at the table and didn’t even lift her eyes when Serena sat down and pushed one of the cups towards her.

“Grizel? Are you okay?”

After a few more seconds of silence, Bernie finally murmured something so quietly that Serena had to make her repeat.

“I said – how could you?”

“How could I what? I’m sorry, Grizel – I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either – understand. What’s your game, Campbell?”

“I’m sorry?”

Then Serena blanched, realising the cat was out of the bag.

“What were you trying to do here exactly? Care to explain?” Bernie’s tone suddenly went from harsh to broken, and she swallowed hard. “I… I was beginning to trust you as a therapist and… as a … potential friend… and you betrayed be in both instances. How could you?”

Bernie took off the glasses to mop off the tears that were falling steadily on her cheek. Serena just remained there, wringing her hands. She had no idea how to proceed from there – no idea how to apologise – all her years both training in and practising psychology hadn’t prepared her for this. She tentatively extended her hand to touch Bernie’s arm, but Bernie recoiled and Serena aborted her gesture. Then Bernie stood up, put her glasses firmly back on and seized her white cane. She waited a few more seconds for Serena to answer and when nothing was forthcoming, she sighed and looked straight at the brunette: “I hope you’re happy. I’ve really no idea why you apparently so enjoyed taking me for a ride – I can’t begin to imagine what you got from this. Goodbye.”

And she stalked out of the room. Serena remained at the table, dumbstruck. A few minutes later, she stood up too and left the pub, leaving the still steaming coffees on the table. She finally got home nearly half an hour later, having flagged down unsuccessfully several cabs in a row. Waiting in the pouring rain hadn’t improved either her temper or her sense of guilt, and she crashed on her sofa with a large brandy.

Several drivers honked to tell her she was walking too close to the road but she didn’t care. Her white cane beat the pavement furiously and she didn’t even try to avoid the puddles – how-could-she? How-could-she? The words pounded in Bernie’s brain and briefly, just briefly, she considered just stepping out in the traffic. She managed to check her impulse and to get herself home, drenched and miserable. She didn’t bother to get out of her wet clothes, nor to switch on the lights- she just sat on the floor in a corner of her living-room and shut the world out, putting her head in her arms. Why
had she ever thought she could have a normal life? When she finally unfolded her aching limbs, she shivered from cold and betrayal. She went wearily to the bedroom and took off her still damp clothes before slipping under the covers.

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Waking up once again with a tongue like sandpaper, nausea and a killing headache, Serena realised that her day was promising to be as bad as the previous one – maybe worse since she would have to face Hanssen and admit she was responsible for the leak. As for the situation with Grizel Reynart – well, obviously it had just gone from the frying pan into the fire. She was probably doubly f***ked – the blonde would certainly lodge a complaint about her. And she would be absolutely right to do so.

The interview with Henrik Hanssen had predictable consequences – immediate suspension pending inquiry – and unpredictable ones. Serena hadn’t been prepared for his compassion – she had gone ready to eat humble pie about the leak and possibly to ward off any concerns about her drinking, but she hadn’t expected him to talk about Elinor and how her death had affected her. Of course, he had lost his son, too, and in far more traumatising circumstances – if death could be evaluated that way. He assured her that the suspension was only an administrative issue and that he had every confidence in her. Which, of course, made her feel even worse than before.

At least the few days off would give her time to do something about Grizel. This time, there was no need for pussy-footing anymore. She had her address, and she would just go and see her – the need for secrecy was over. She would throw herself on her mercy, beg to be forgiven and … She had no idea why she was going to do that. She hadn’t known the woman for more than a few weeks, and even if she was known at the hospital for going the extra mile for her patients, this was rather more like a few hundred. But Serena just knew she had to – she couldn’t explain why the idea of never seeing Grizel again was unbearable, but it had suddenly become just that. She would give her a day or two, and then she would go.

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Bernie remained awake, of course. She hadn’t hoped for sleep. It only came upon her as the first rays of sunshine penetrated the blinds, and she fell into a restless slumber. When she woke up around noon, she very calmly took stock of her situation. She had nothing, and no-one. Well, no-one except a mother who didn’t recognise her anymore, and who each time she went to visit implored her to help her end it all. Her children didn’t want anything to do with her, she had no hope of getting her job back ever. Her life was populated by nightmares and traumatic flashbacks. Her former lover obviously didn’t give a damn, and she didn’t blame her. And Serena Campbell didn’t either. Why would she?

She got dressed and headed out, the dark glasses hiding her red-rimmed eyes. There would be no need for her old service weapon – now she could go out, she could buy what she needed. She may not be able to handle a scalpel anymore, but she still knew the doses of common tablets she needed to end her life. A trip to the supermarket would provide the necessary drugs and the alcohol to wash them down – after all, there was no risk of her becoming an alcoholic like her mother if she was going to die.

She came back an hour later and proceeded to array the pills on a saucer – white on white – pity it wasn’t more colourful, she thought. Then she wondered why she had thought that. The idea that she was having a psychotic breakdown briefly crossed her mind but she dismissed it. She was perfectly lucid. There was no other way out. Then she put out a glass and the bottle of scotch she had bought. She glanced at the flat – not immaculate, but it would do. She hesitated about leaving a note – would it make it better or worse? She had no idea. She found a piece of paper, and scribbled: “Charlie,
Cam. I’m so sorry. I love you. Mum.” Probably the wrong thing to say – the wrong thing to do – as usual. But she wouldn’t have to suffer the consequences.
Chapter 20

At a loose end, Serena hadn’t wanted to go home. Still unsettled after the conversation with Hanssen, worried about the aftermath of the previous night, and unnerved by the pitying glances thrown at her by Dr Faulkner and other members of the staff, she decided to go into town instead. Her first stop was at a car rental place not far from the hospital, where she got a small two-seater until either the police found her own vehicle or she could decide on another one to buy. She flitted distractedly in and out a few shops, browsed the latest bestsellers in WH Smith and ended up at a Café Nero with a decadent hot chocolate with marshmallows and whipped cream. This was why she hadn’t wanted to take time off after Elinor’s death – she didn’t do “spare time” – she had no idea what to do to occupy herself. Looking at the other customers, she saw she was far from the only one in her age range, something which surprised her – so everyone didn’t spend their life at work like she did … She spotted a woman doing crochet, another one busy with a toddler – Serena couldn’t decide if it was her son or her grandson, and a third one drawing or doodling in a notebook. Maybe she needed a hobby. She could take up yoga, or book-binding, or … or trainspotting… Who was she kidding? She didn’t need something in her life – she needed someone. It had been too long since that bastard Edward. Robbie had been a nice fling, but when he’d refused to accept Jason … Anyway, she couldn’t dismiss the feeling that she may have been barking up the wrong tree… Leah Faulkner’s kiss, however inappropriate, had ignited something in her – something she couldn’t dismiss. She allowed her imagination to take her further down that road, to picture the younger woman in night attire … or in undies … No – it didn’t work. The frame had been broken enough – it wouldn’t extend any more. Another woman snuck in her thoughts… More… Just … More… and angrier. She sighed. She had missed her chance there… Part of her still didn’t want to believe she would say that about a woman, but obviously her heart was clearer than her head on that matter.

Tired of sitting there staring at her empty mug, she decided to go home – maybe she would watch something boring with Jason on television. She could cook his favourite meal – mac and cheese wouldn’t tax her too much, and it would give her something to do. She stopped at the supermarket to get the necessary ingredients and was about to leave the car park when something made her turn right instead of the usual left towards her house. She couldn’t explain what – she almost blamed the rental car for making her go the wrong way – or the huge truck that would have made the left turn awkward. But she knew it wasn’t that. She hadn’t jotted down the address where she had left Grizel the time she’d taken her home but she counted on her visual memory. Sure enough, after a few twists and turns, she found the right road, thanking the gods for it not being one of these streets full of copy-and-paste houses. She parked near the building, recognising it by a topiary potted tree near the front door. When she walked closer, she saw that it wasn’t an ordinary building but a block of serviced flats, with a reception area. Good! It would help. She still had no idea why she had come – she hadn’t planned on a confrontation quite so soon, but now she was there, she had to see Grizel. People spoke of a sixth sense, of ESP, of premonitions, of intuition, and maybe some of it did make sense after all. Anyway, Serena had felt compelled to drive to Grizel’s. Maybe she had been guided by guilt…

She approached the front desk where a young woman was talking in her mobile phone while leafing through a magazine. When she saw Serena approaching, she glanced up and aborted her conversation.

“I’m here to visit Ms. Reynart, but I’m afraid I don’t know her flat number. Can you help me?”

The young woman opened a register and slid her finger down a list: “Sorry, but I’m afraid we’ve got no one of that name registered here. Are you sure your friend lives here?”
“Of course I’m sure. Listen – I’m sure you know her – tall blonde woman, about my age. She’s blind – usually wears dark glasses and has a cane.”

Serena could almost see the light bulb above the girl’s head: “Aah – yes – she came in a few hours ago. But she’s not Ms. Reynart …Don’t know her name, actually, but she’s in Flat 5, down the corridor to your right.”

On that, she went back to her magazine, and Serena had no doubt she was only waiting for her to leave before phoning whoever she’d been talking to back. If she had been in her normal state of mind, Serena would probably have berated her for giving away a resident’s address to a stranger, but she wasn’t. She knocked on Flat 5’s door, but no one answered. The young woman had been adamant that Grizel was in. Of course, she could have slipped out again, but somehow it didn’t seem likely. She knocked again, and when she still heard no answer, she almost called a locksmith before she remembered a trick she’d learnt when she was in med school. She’d lived in students’ halls, and as she’d been in a permanent state of stress and exhaustion, she’d kept locking herself out of her own room. One of her friends, tired of being disturbed to let Serena in, had shown her how if the door had just been slammed and wasn’t locked, you could open it with a stiff piece of cardboard or a credit card. She’d tried her AmEx on Grizel’s door, and it worked. The flat was in darkness, only a small lamp was apparently switched on in the living room.

When Bernie heard the footsteps, she started and dropped the saucer – the remaining pills scattered on the floor and she swore. She turned her head and dimly made out a silhouette in the doorway. The voice, though, was familiar: “Oh my God!!”

The scream echoed in her brain – the glass was snatched from her hand, and she found herself held by two strong arms. In a fog, she heard words: “What have you taken? How many? Tell me now! Tell me!”

“Not …enough …let me …go …I need to …”

Serena tried to assess the situation – the bottle on the table appeared mostly full, and the glass was only half-empty. The pills …she could identify some of them, not all, but the quantity on the floor seemed to indicate that Grizel hadn’t had time to overdose. However, she couldn’t be sure: “I’m calling an ambulance – just hang on!”

The word penetrated Bernie’s mind: “No – no ambulance – will be all right. Please – please don’t do that. I haven’t taken enough – I promise – trust me – I’m a doctor. Just …hold me?”

Serena halted her fingers on the phone. The other woman’s breathing seemed regular, and although she was pale, her skin didn’t look clammy or feel hot. She was conscious, after a fashion.

“Tell me what you took or I’m calling.”

“Just three …” Bernie gave the name of the drug, and Serena relaxed marginally. “The others …they fell. I just …I just need to sleep it off…. Just need to sleep. Please!”

Serena held the woman tighter and caressed her brow, brushing away a few strands of blonde hair. “All right. I trust you. Just go to sleep. But I’m staying right there.” She helped Grizel recline on the sofa and sat besides her, still embracing her. The even breathing of the sleeping woman reassured her, but Serena remained awake all night, This was all wrong. She should have phoned the emergency services. If something went wrong … But she thought Grizel had told her the truth – she had to believe it, and she had to make Grizel trust her too. So she watched over her until the morning came.
Chapter 21

Where was she? Her vision was blurry, her head ached, her throat felt raw and dry. She couldn’t focus and blinked several times. She realised someone was holding her hand – crushing it, more exactly. Someone who was talking, but she couldn’t make out the words. She tried to open her eyes properly but the light hurt. So she tried to move her fingers into the other person’s hand. This must have worked, because that other person burst into tears. And Bernie began to make out the words interspersed by sobs: “You’re okay…Thank God …You’re going to be okay…”

As she surfaced slowly, she remembered what she’d done. Or tried to do, because apparently, she’d failed. It would have been too easy otherwise.

When Serena saw Grizel’s eyelashes flutter and felt her fingers move, she just couldn’t hold it together anymore. She broke down in tears – the night had been horrendous – all the more since flashbacks from Elinor’s death kept inviting themselves in her brain. Sitting, waiting, not knowing whether the person would wake up. This had the bitter taste of déjà vu …Her mother …Fletcher… Elinor …She had spent the whole night thinking she should have phoned the hospital, anxiously listening to the other woman breathing. And now … Serena was both relieved and furiously angry – she wanted to take the blonde by the shoulders and shake her till her teeth rattled. Instead, she just about managed to hiss through her tears: “Don’t ever do that again! Ever! Swear it!” She knew Grizel wouldn’t answer but she had to say it.

Serena ached for her, and she knew it wasn’t the time for questions, but she couldn’t help herself: “Why did you do it? Why? Was it my fault? Was it because of me?” Bernie closed her eyes again. She couldn’t answer that. She didn’t know how to. She didn’t know anymore why she’d taken the pills. She remembered the evening – sort of, deciding to take the pills, preparing them …Serena arriving as she had just begun…. Her body didn’t really feel alive – the drugs made her feel weak and limp – she would have welcomed numbness, but this just felt uncomfortable, in limbo. Once again, she’d chosen the coward’s way – and now the universe was teaching her a lesson – giving her a life of eternal guilt. Because if she’d succeeded, what about Cameron? Charlotte? What would it have done to them? She’d wanted a way out, she’d wanted to stop hurting, but she hadn’t given a thought to her nearest and dearest. Suicide was selfish. What kind of person was she?

Bernie motioned towards the bathroom: “I need to …”

Serena helped her to get up and held her arm for the few steps – she wanted to ask the other woman not to lock the door, but she didn’t dare. So she just mumbled something about coffee and left her to her own devices.

Bernie wanted to take a shower, but she felt uncomfortable undressing with Serena in the other room. She splashed water on her face in an attempt to wake up properly from her drugged sleep. She brushed her teeth and smoothed her shirt with her hand. Who was she kidding? Who exactly did she try to impress? The woman she had probably drooled over during the night? Someone she had said she never wanted to see again? Sheepishly, she went back to the living-room where Serena was waiting for her with two mugs of coffee and a pack of Fig Rolls. Bernie accepted one of the mugs, ignored the biscuits and perched on the armchair. None of them spoke and Bernie gnawed at her bottom lip. Finally, Serena broke the silence: “How are you feeling?”

Bernie scowled: “I’ve been better.” Another silence. Then, she added grudgingly: “I guess I should thank you….”

“For saving your life? You’re very welcome…”
Bernie sighed: “No – not for that – I’m not sure I’m thankful to be alive. For not calling 999. It would have been … awkward. But you took a risk.”

Serena looked at her straight in the eyes: “I trusted you. If you had lied … well, you would be dead, and I’d probably be in prison.”

Bernie laughed a little: “That would have been a hell of a payback…”

Serena scowled: “It’s not funny.”

“No … I agree. And for all it’s worth – I’m sorry. I’ve no idea how you came to be here yesterday, but you shouldn’t have had to rescue me. It’s … my mess.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Hmm… You mean beside the fact that I have no life and no one who cares?”

“I’m sure that’s not true – you told me you had kids….”

Bernie shrugged: “They don’t care.”

Serena remained silent, thinking about Elinor. Now wasn’t the time to tell the other woman she had often suspected her daughter didn’t care either. She remembered what the blonde had told her the night before: “You told me you were a doctor – surely that counts that something? Or did you just say that to keep me from calling the ambulance?” No! Shouldn’t have said that – you’re trying to mend fences, not to antagonise her again …

Luckily, Bernie didn’t take offence. She sighed and pointed at the white cane hanging on a chair: “No – I really am a doctor. Fat lot of good it does me now…”

“Well, it’s no use feeling sorry for yourself – I’m sure you have transferable skills.”

Bernie frowned: “Oh, you’re sure, are you? And thanks for the compassion – for a shrink, your bedside manners leave a lot to be desired, Ms Campbell.”

“I’m sorry – that’s not what I meant. It’s just – sorry, it’s been a long night.”

“Well, no-one forced you to come!” bit Bernie back.

“Course! And if I hadn’t, you would be dead – do you really need me to remind you of that?”

Don’t push her away – you always do that… Bernie’s little voice was trying, but…

“I wish you hadn’t! You don’t understand – you don’t understand anything!”

Bernie’s little voice sighed…

“Maybe if you explained better, I would, Grizel! But you’ve kept me at arm’s length.”

“Oh stop calling me that! I’m not Grizel – I’m Bernie – Berenice Wolfe – Major Berenice Wolfe, RAMC. At least that’s who I was – now … I’m nothing.”

Serena’s eyes widened as she connected the dots. So this was the famous Major – Sosia’s friend.

“Happy now?”
The words slapped Serena in the face and she wanted to hit back but she managed to remain calm:
“Why would I be happy? I’m glad you’ve told me. And I’m not sure I understand why you thought
you needed to keep your identity secret, but…”

“Oh – you really don’t know why? Well, maybe I don’t want to be the laughingstock of the hospital.
Maybe I don’t want people to look at me like you’re doing now.”

“And how am I looking at you, exactly?”

“Like you’re pitying me. I don’t need your pity, Ms Campbell. And I don’t need you – I don’t need
anyone. Actually – I’d like to be alone. I want you to leave.”

Serena hesitated – was it safe to leave Griz- no, Bernie? After all, she might just try to resume what
she was doing the night before. Serena got up and went to the bathroom, where she inspected the
cabinet – no pills there. She did the same in the kitchen – the cupboards were mostly bare. When she
came back to the living-room, Bernie was scowling: “Did you through my underwear drawer too?”

“Come on! Surely you understand why I’m concerned…”

“Let’s say I don’t – I’m nothing to you, so why do you care if I want to off myself? Would be bad
for your resume?”

Serena sighed. She didn’t know why she cared so much! That was the whole point. Once again she
regretted not having called an ambulance – at least, if the blonde had been admitted, she would be
safe. And she wanted her to be safe – desperately. She needed her to be safe. But she’d had enough.
What she wanted was a nap…and a shower…and a drink…Maybe not in that order. She hadn’t
pulled all-nighters since med school, and she was tired. Somehow, she couldn’t find the right words
with Major Wolfe.

“Very well – if that’s how you want to take it, I’ll go.”

Serena grabbed her coat and made for the door. Bernie’s little voice told her to hold Serena back, to
plead with her to stay. She couldn’t be alone anymore – “alone” was this cold, dark and dank place
where she never wanted to be again. Instead, she looked pointedly at the wall until Serena had
slammed the door behind her. And then she broke down in tears.
Once back in her car, Serena put her hands on the wheel and exhaled deeply. She couldn’t believe how the woman got under her skin! Of course, since Elinor’s death, she was a nervous wreck, but she had never let someone get to her like that. She swallowed hard and drove off. After the much-desired shower and a cup of tea with half a pack of biscuits, she began a furious cleaning spree, dislodging odd socks under the armchairs, empty packets of chips between the sofa cushions and many dust balls. However, even mindless tasks such as vacuuming and cleaning the kitchen tiles didn’t help her calm down. All right – she should have told the blonde she was her shrink. And she should have apologised for her drunken rant. But Bernie shouldn’t have given her a fake name. And she should have been grateful for her intervention… After a few hours of cleaning and several glasses of Merlot, she managed to convince herself she was the injured party. She finally managed to cook Jason the promised supper and they spent the evening in front the television. If someone had asked her what they were watching, she would have been unable to.

When Serena left, Bernie wiped her eyes furiously – what exactly was she crying about? Herself? Her life? Her inability to communicate what she was feeling? She couldn’t say, and that made her even more angry with herself. And with Serena Campbell for having saved her. She couldn’t stay in the flat any longer. She grabbed her coat, the hated cane and she went out. The girl at the reception desk didn’t even bat an eyelid as Bernie stalked furiously across the foyer – applying her nail polish perfectly was much more interesting than the comings and goings of the residents. Bernie walked for miles, straight ahead. She ended up on the common, deserted at this time of day and with that weather. Fighting against the gale, she stumbled several times on the uneven ground and gritted her teeth – she just had to go on. That was something she’d learnt at Sandhurst – the power of exhaustion. When you thought you couldn’t take another step, you had to push further to get in the zone. To get to the point where nothing mattered anymore. Memories of her time at the academy came flooding back. The lectures were not that different from history and geography lessons, and some of them much more interesting. Learning how to use a rifle was too. The rest, however, was mostly hellish! She had been reasonably fit, and in med school, sleepless nights were not uncommon, and so she had learnt to function on little shut-eye time. But getting up at 5.15 am every morning took some getting used to. Especially since the next step was to align in the corridor, with a full bottle of water, in order to yell out the God Save the Queen… Drinking a litre of water with limited toilet facilities afterwards was definitely not something she’d done in med school…

What she hated the most was the cleaning and the orders. Each morning, they had to present themselves, and the room, to the inspection of the Staff Sergeant. The sheets had to be ironed every morning! She had never even thought of ironing a sheet before… For a full inspection, every belonging they had had to be displayed in a particular order in the room, every garment had to be ironed and hung up in a specific order in the wardrobe, the brass buckles and shoes had to be polished till you could see your reflection in it … The fork next to the spoon next to the knife…She just couldn’t see the point. The first time the Staff Sergeant – a formidable woman – pulled everything she’d just tidying on the floor, she couldn’t believe her eyes. The second and third time, she was furious – and then, she began to accept it would never be perfect enough.
Two days after her arrival, Bernie was called to the Staff Sergeant’s office – she did not yet know the full routine involved in the simple task of answering a summon, but she could still remember it. You had to march to the door, stop in the doorway, perform a “check, one, two” foot stamp and stand to attention. Then, if that was done correctly, you had to ask permission to answer the summon with a “Leave to enter, Staff Sergeant, please”. She would remember it till her last day, because on that day, she was sent back to the door not less than twelve time to “go back and try again, Miss Wolfe”. And when she’d at last had permission to enter, she had had to stand to attention while the Staff Sergeant chastised her for “only being a civvy in uniform and not being able to do your hair properly, you pathetic excuse for a soldier.” Her hair then was not nearly long enough to be tied up in the required strict bun, not even with the hairnets, hairpins, grips, slides, hair spray and hair wax she’d had to bring. Other later offences, like being caught leaning against the wall or with her hands in her pockets had brought other insults and innumerable hours of mark time drilling… Just marching on the spot…harder than it appeared. She could still hear the sergeant’s yelling in her head: “Heads up, Wolfe – no need to stare at the ground, it’s still here!”, “Get in step, Wolfe, you’re not a bloody duck, you’re a soldier.”, “I said left! They don’t teach you left from right at med school?”

Bernie had thought of quitting several times during the course – being constantly abused in spirit and body was not her idea of a training session. The worst thing was that it was like at school or with her mother – you could not answer back – that was obviously another punishable offence. She had wondered why on earth she’d chosen to submit herself to that ordeal.

Bernie had hated PE at school, and she did not like it any better at Sandhurst – getting muddy in the hockey field had never appealed to her and getting in full camouflage to ramp in boggy fields did not either. Especially when she had to carry a humongous and heavy rucksack – sixty kilos, nearly her body weight – for several miles, with a sergeant haranguing them. At least there had been a point in those marches – getting them used to a combat zone. And it actually felt good to attack a sandbag with a bayonet. She had drilled, and trained, and crawled in the mud, slept in a muddy field, withstood abuse hurled at her, all the wise keeping her end goal in mind – surviving the course. There had been tears of rage, of exhaustion, and of despair, but she had gone through it. The most important lesson of the course had been drilled into them early on – the cadets she had shared the ordeal with were her family. Everyone had to take responsibility for everyone else – they had no one to rely on but themselves and their comrades in arms. If you made a mistake or forgot to do something, it was up to the others to tell you – otherwise the whole platoon suffered the consequences – she had never and would never again do press-ups so often. Quite different from med school – during their first days at university, they had been told by one of the lecturers: “Look right, look left – only one out of three will finish med school.” When med school was all about competition, the army’s motto was cooperation and solidarity - quite a different kettle of fish – you had to rely on others, and paradoxically, you were cut off from your own family for several weeks – no phones allowed.

As Bernie walked on, oblivious to the rain and the wind, pushing her body to its limits, she realised that she had forgotten that particular lesson – the one which had been rammed into their head during the training course, and which she had implemented during her whole career: no man is an island. When you signed on for the human race – however unwillingly – you had to remember that you became part of something much bigger than yourself. In the army, you never left a man behind – she had causes to remember that…Even though in a way she had never felt freer than in the forces, freedom was somewhat relative, and although she’d graduated from the PQO course at Sandhurst a Captain, she still had a whole hierarchy to answer to, as she’d found out during her first Iraq tour. A few days after she and her team had arrived at the British Army Hospital in Basra, she’d gone out in a convoy to a field hospital with two other medics and an escort of soldiers. She was travelling with her direct superior, Lieutenant Colonel Pastor, and two other soldiers. The other medics were in the other jeep. The convoy was attacked in the middle of nowhere, and the other vehicle was especially targeted. While the soldiers counter-attacked, Bernie jumped down and ran towards the injured
members of the convoy – among the five travelling in the other jeep, two were still alive, barely. One of them died as she reached them, but she thought she could save the last one, one of the other medics. Lt Colonel Pastor shouted at her to come back, he’d called for a Casevac helicopter, but she ignored him. She managed to apply a tourniquet where the leg had been blown off, and started CPR. Although she could hear him perfectly well, she had no intention of leaving the wounded man until the arrival of the helicopter. It took fifteen agonizing minutes for the nearest one to arrive – luckily, the attack was not far from one of the base after all. During the fifteen minutes, she had been joined by the Lt Colonel, who hissed in her ears: “You can’t even believe what trouble you’re into, Wolfe! If we get out of this alive, I’m bloody going to kill you!”

He didn’t quite kill her, but the repercussions were severe enough. She hadn’t been back at the base for two hours when she was summoned by her Commanding Officer. She found him with Lt Colonel Pastor. Both of them looked at her with icy eyes:

“What happened today, Captain ?”

“Well, sir, I just did my job. You surely didn’t want me to let Jones bleed to death ?”

“You disobey a direct order from your superior. You risked your own life unnecessarily.”

“I couldn’t be sure the helicopter would arrive on time, or that he wouldn’t be DOA, sir.”

“Look, Wolfe, I know you were a bloody civilian not long ago, but I thought you’d been trained, and that a surgeon would at least be able to understand direct orders. Or did you leave your brain behind in Blighty?”

Bernie hung her head.

“Answer me, Captain!”

“No, sir.”

“You’re no bloody use to us if you’re dead! Can you at least keep that in that stubborn head of yours?”

“Yes, sir.” After the adrenaline rush of the attack and rescue, Bernie was feeling thoroughly deflated. She knew she should have obeyed, but if the orders went against what she thought was right …

“Do you know you could be court-martialled for this, Wolfe? And sent back to England, of course?”

“Yes, sir.” If she could have crossed her fingers, she would have done so, but as she was standing to attention, it was not a possibility. She tried her toes, but her boots were not quite large enough.

“I’m prepared to be lenient, Wolfe – you’ll be fined, but you’re going to avoid the court-martial this time. That’s only because you managed to save him and you came with an excellent record.”

Bernie heaved a discreet sigh of relief: “Thank you, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

She saluted and left the room. She wasn’t quite sure what had happened there, but she knew she’d had a near escape. And when some time later, she was made Major, she remembered that sometimes, it was all right to temper justice with mercy.

When finally she reached the point of exhaustion, several miles from her home and looking like a
drowned rate, she knew what she had to do. She would apologise to Serena Campbell for pushing her out. Thank her for having saved her life. Invite her to diner and tell her she would really like it if they could be friends. Hopefully the brunette would agree. And they would take it from there. Maybe she could learn how to live again.
Chapter 23

It took Bernie two days to muster up the courage to face Serena Campbell again. Two days during which she went to the hairdresser and tried to gather her thoughts. She went walking again, went shopping too for new black jeans since she had lost a lot of weight since she had come back to England. She saw a handbag she was sure Charlotte would like and considered buying it for her before reluctantly putting it back on the shelf. She would do anything to reconnect with her daughter – anything but resort to bribery.

And then, on the third day, she presented herself at the hospital. She was hoping to catch Serena between two sessions, apologise briefly, issue the invitation and leave. She explained to the nurse in charge that she had to see Ms Campbell on a professional matter, using her former title and rank. The ward was busy, and the nurse had neither time nor inclination to wonder about her purpose. She vaguely waved towards the few plastic chairs in the corridor leading to the consultant’s office and strode away. Bernie sat down gingerly on one of the chairs. During her shopping spree, she had also bought a new pair of glasses, still tinted but lighter, so she could be less conspicuous when she wore them indoors. She hoped they helped her conceal her identity too, although she didn’t think she would meet anyone she knew. After about forty minutes, the door to Serena’s office was still closed and she could hear murmurs inside. She put a hand on her back, groaning softly – since the IED, she had suffered from sciatica, and the plastic chairs were far from comfortable. Then she heard a commotion and a two police officers arrived with a man handcuffed between them. The prisoner seemed very agitated – drunk, maybe – he was talking to himself, muttering curses. One of the officers knocked on Serena’s door and after a few seconds, she let out her patient and admitted the prisoner. She obviously insisted on being alone with him as the police officers remained in the corridor, standing guard at the door. It soon became clear to Bernie what had happened – the man was talking so loudly that the soundproof walls were not enough to keep them from hearing. The man’s angry voice as he raged against his wife, who he’d apparently hit because she was cheating on him, made Bernie flinch. Not because she was scared, but because it brought uncomfortable memories… Marcus hadn’t been a bad man, nor a violent one. For all his faults, he had been devoted to his children, and she believed he was a good father – probably a better parent than she would ever be. However, he had also been possessive and jealous. Every social occasion they went together – whether med school galas or later alumni reunions, new year’s parties or dinner with friends – he would tell her what to wear and ask her to remain at his side. If they were separated, as was usually the case during seated suppers, she would feel the weight of his glance during the whole evening, and he would grill her afterwards about her dinner companions. Unfortunately, those were also the occasions where he tended to overindulge in drink, and when he had had too much, he could become verbally abusive. Usually only verbally, but there had been a few backhands, which would leave traces on her porcelain skin, and which she had to conceal under heavy make-up the next day. As she listened despite herself to the man’s litany of insults, she heard Marcus in her head, telling her she would never amount to anything, that she was much too soft-hearted to become a surgeon, that she was a sh** mother and a sh** wife, that she was only useful to make him look good….She shivered violently – her husband had known how to hurt her the most, had known all her weak points because at the beginning of their relationship, she had confided in him about her childhood and how belittling and unsupportive her mother had been. When he ranted and raved at her, she retreated into her shell, putting on her best blank face – the one she’d had to perfect in med school – and trying to shut out his insults…. The day after, he was at his most contrite and apologetic, but she needed several days to recover.

The sound of an upturned chair in the office made the police officers react and a few seconds later they escorted the angry man out. Bernie remained motionless, even though the door had stayed open. Her courage had deserted her, and she was on the verge of a panic attack. She put her face in her
hands and tried to calm herself.

Serena inhaled slowly, trying to stop the slight tremor in her hands. She couldn’t say whether the encounter with the violent husband had shaken her more badly than usual or if she was in need of a drink. She still had to finish her days, so she decided reluctantly that coffee would have to do. Closing the door behind her, she almost bumped into Bernie.

“Ms Wolfe – I – I wasn’t expecting you…”

Bernie looked up at the brunette, suddenly feeling tongue-tied. Serena noticed the other woman looked upset. This was an unexpected development – she had never envisaged that her former patient would want to speak to her again. Bernie felt slightly sick – apprehensive. She stood up and faced Serena: “I …I came to apologise. And to …to say thank you.”

Serena’s eyebrows rose: “Really?”

Bernie blushed: “Yes, really. I know I’m usually the one who’s right – well, in my own head anyway, but this time – I messed up.”

Serena nodded and gestured towards the corridor: “I’ve got five minutes to get a much-needed cup of coffee. Walk with me?”

Bernie fell into step behind her. In front of the coffee machine, she finally found the courage to ask Serena to dinner: “Nothing fancy – just my way of saying sorry for …for everything.”

Serena remained silent for a few seconds and then nodded again: “Okay – I accept. But we’ll go Dutch – I’ve some things I’d like to apologise for too.”

“So …when do you clock off tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“No time like the present, Ms Campbell.”

“Ah …those strong army types – always in a hurry…”

Bernie immediately blushed and backtracked: “I’m sorry – I mean, I’m just assuming you’re like me…no family obligations or …”

You’re a fool, said Bernie’s little voice – for all you know she may have a partner waiting at home. She may have other commitments – a life, even – not like you, you pathetic loser.

Serena shook her head: “You assume right – except for a slightly complicated nephew who won’t be very happy to know he’ll be on his own to watch University Challenge – I have no other pressing matters to attend to tonight.”

“Right – good …”

They arranged to meet at a restaurant in town and parted a little awkwardly, still not at the hugging stage but past the handshake. As Serena went back to her office, she wished she had had more time to prepare – and time to go home and change. But she already clocked off quite late, so going back home to her house a few miles from the town centre wasn’t an option. She would have to do her best with what make-up she had in her handbag. And then she wondered why on earth it mattered…This wasn’t a date!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

messed up a little with the timeline, sorry!

Should she change into something dressier, or would that be ridiculous? It had been a long time since she’d invited a woman – or anyone at all – to dinner. But this wasn’t a real invitation. Least of all a date. Just an apology with a good meal in tow. She finally decided to remain dressed as she was – it would be fairer to Serena, who would have to rush from the hospital. Or would the therapist be offended? Think she hadn’t even bothered to make an effort? Bernie chewed on her lower lips, pondering the dilemma. She had never wondered about that kind of thing with Marcus – he made the choice for her. And with Alex – well, not many occasions for dressing up in deployment. And there she went again – this was not a date!

When she arrived at the restaurant Serena had chosen, a French-style bistro, she was dismayed to see that the place appeared less than casual. Muted lightning, tiny candles swimming in bowls and red roses on every table, assorted to the velvet seats. She saw too that most of the diners seemed to be couples. Before she had time to dwell on it any longer, a breathless Serena appeared and slid in the seat opposite hers. “Sorry – have you been waiting long?”

“No – no – just got here.”

Serena looked around her and groaned: “Oh gosh – I’d forgotten! But I’m afraid it will be the same today in all the restaurants in town.”

Bernie didn’t even have to glance at the menu dotted with hearts to understand – the 14th of February …Of course! She had never been a big fan of Valentine’s Day, and she had paid no attention to the calendar. She blushed scarlet: “I’m so sorry! I never thought – I mean – I hope you don’t think …”

Serena almost smirked: “Relax! I don’t think anything – so …which menu do you think? Plaisir d’amour or Tendre baiser?”

Bernie glued her eyes to the menu in her hands, partly to try and decipher the contents and partly to avoid Serena’s glance. “Err … the lamb cutlets, maybe…”

Serena signalled to the waiter: “We’re ready to order.”

Once they had both given him their choices, he asked if they wanted anything to drink. Serena looked at Bernie who shook her head. Serena ordered a half-bottle of Pomerol, knowing very well that she could have drunk a whole bottle by herself, but she didn’t want Bernie to take her for a lush. When the waiter left the table, an awkward silence settled.

“So…”

“So…”

The two women had spoken at the same time. Bernie gestured to Serena to go ahead.
“Ms Wolfe – or should I call you Major?”

“Just call me Bernie.”

“Bernie, then – this afternoon – when you came to my office. You seemed upset…”

“You mean, more than the usual shattered state I’m in?”

“Well …Yes.”

Bernie sighed: “Let’s just say that your patient was talking a little loudly and it reminded me of
someone…”

Serena attempted a guess: “Your ex-husband?”

Bernie nodded: “You would think that having been in war zones, I’d be more resilient, but…”

“But it’s not the same – emotional abuse leaves long-lasting scars.”

“Yes …”

“I have one of those too, you know,” Serena went on, sensing that Bernie didn’t want to linger on
the subject, “Ex-husband, I mean. I asked Edward for a divorce after his third affair. He married her,
actually – he was a prick – and a conceited pig – still is, as far as I know – she’s welcome to him.”

“Would that be Edward Campbell, consultant anaesthetist, by any chance?”

Serena nodded: “You know him?”

“Not exactly know him- but I think I met him once – an alumni reunion – the name somehow rings a
bell.” And the way he had groped her too rang a bell, but she wouldn’t say that to Serena.

“Elinor loved him, though – he could do no wrong in her eyes.”

Serena got lost in her memories for a while – Elinor had idolised her father. As for her, the scales had
fallen from her eyes soon after their wedding, and the divorce fifteen years previously had been a
relief. She cringed as she remembered the time not so long ago when Edward had tried to get back
into favour – when she had realised he was an alcoholic. She had had a lucky escape.

“Elinor…Your daughter?”

“Yes…”

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m all right.”

Bernie could see the other woman didn’t want to talk about it. Of course Serena wasn’t all right– she
was going on with life, because there was no other way. She had seen that again and again with the
soldiers she had served with. When one of them died, the others grieved but they went on doing their
duty. Some of them fell apart, but the others just gritted their teeth and carried on. They didn’t forget
but being active was their way of mourning. She imagined Serena had thrown herself into her work
as a way of coping with her daughter’s death. She suspected the brunette had found another crutch, a
more worrying one. They had only eaten the starter – both of them had chosen the langoustines salad
– but Serena had already ordered another half-bottle of wine; She herself had only had half a glass.
Bernie hoped against hope she was wrong…


The main courses arrived and for a while the two women fell silent as they ate. A pianist had arrived, which only added to the romantic atmosphere. Seeing Bernie’s fingers moving on the table in rhythm, Serena asked her if she played. Bernie’s eyes suddenly became wistful: “No, I don’t – I wanted to learn, but we didn’t have enough money for lessons when I was a child. Nor for a piano… When I was in med school, there was one in the common room of the residence I lived in, and a friend taught me a little, but … I wish I did. I love music, though.”

“Me too. Although I got piano lessons as a kid and hated them. Also ballet classes, and tennis lessons and drawing classes… I think my dear mother thought we lived in the 19th century and that I had to become an accomplished and thus marriageable young lady.”

Bernie laughed: “I gather that was not to your liking?”

Serena grimaced: “I didn’t mind ballet and tennis so much – didn’t mind my tennis instructor, actually – twentyish, tanned and quite handsome…But I could have done without the rest. The irony is that I married exactly the kind of man she wanted for me – a well-off doctor. Well …we both know how it ended.”

Bernie smiled in understanding: “Seems you’re better off without him…anyone else in sight?”

It was Serena’s turn to redden and avoid Bernie’s glance. She nervously licked her lips and mumbled something unintelligible.

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing – I wish they would hurry with the desserts.”

Bernie was puzzled by Serena’s bashful behaviour – she’d thought the question innocuous enough– she had obviously touched a nerve, but she couldn’t understand why. The waiter interrupted them, sliding an heart-shaped chocolate moelleux in front of Serena and a heart-shaped apple tart in front of Bernie. He came back a few seconds later with two champagne flutes: “With the compliments of the house, for a lovely couple. Enjoy!”

“But we’re not …I mean…”

Serena put her hand on Bernie’s arm to keep her from finishing her sentence and smiled at the waiter: “Please thank the manager for us. It’s a lovely thought.”

With her other hand, she seized her flute and raised it: “Let’s make a toast – to new beginnings!”

Before replying to the toast, Bernie gently disengaged her arm and asked: “Serena …it doesn’t …I mean, you’re not bothered about …”

“About what, Major? About them thinking we’re a couple? No – I’m not – I guess ten or twenty years ago, I would probably have been mortified, but …I hope my sense of humour is better now. And it’s quite flattering…”

“For me too …” Bernie bit her lips – she’d talked without thinking and blurted out what she’d been thinking for the whole supper. She lowered her eyes.

“Bernie? It really is all right.”

Bernie looked up and her chestnut eyes locked with Serena’s: “Thank you! To new beginnings!”

They clinked their flutes and dove into their desserts, both savouring the first bite with relish. Then
Serena leant towards Bernie: “Give me your spoon.”

Bernie looked at her, puzzled: “Sorry?”

“Come on – just do it.”

Bernie handed over her spoon and Serena dipped it in her moelleux. Then she directed it towards Bernie’s mouth and the latter obediently opened… The intimate gesture felt as thrilling and soothing as the taste of warm chocolate on her tongue. She swallowed and looked at Serena with wonder. Serena’s eyes sparkled mischievously: “Did you enjoy that, darling? And can I have a taste of yours?”

Bernie blushed scarlet but she obediently took the fork Serena was holding, cut a piece of apple tart with it and held it towards Serena. Serena leant towards Bernie – closely - and seized her wrist, guiding the fork to her mouth. Instead of releasing Bernie’s wrist, she dropped a kiss on the soft inner skin and Bernie almost jumped out of her skin and wrenched her wrist away.

“Jesus, Serena!” she murmured, not wanting to make a scene.

“Just Serena – or Serena Wendy…”

“What on earth are you doing?”

Serena looked at Bernie and immediately felt contrite – the woman was obviously very ill at ease. “I’m so sorry – I just thought … It would be funny, you know, to play into their scenario… I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Bernie bit her lips and she was ashamed to realise tears were welling up her eyes. “No – I’m sorry”, she murmured. “That’s … It’s not you… It’s …”

Serena foraged in her handbag and handed her a tissue. Bernie buried her face in it. She was crying in earnest now – crying for all those intimate moments she hadn’t shared with Alex because of their circumstances, for the love she had lost. She hated herself for reacting this way to a joke, hated the way her skin reacted to a simple touch as if it had been branded with a red-hot iron… She was broken, shattered in a thousand pieces and she didn’t know how to put herself together again.

Serena wanted to hug the sobbing woman, but she didn’t dare – she didn’t know what to do – she should never have joked like that. She knew Bernie was fragile, she should have anticipated the consequences. Bernie put her glasses back on and stood up, gesturing in the direction of the loo. While she was gone, Serena asked for the bill and gave her credit card to the waiter. It was the least she could do, although she had no doubt the major wouldn’t be happy about it.

When she came back, Bernie had pulled herself together but she seemed more aloof than before – more detached. She apologised again for her behaviour and suggested they called it a night, not reacting when Serena said she had settled the bill. She accepted Serena’s offer to drop her home but both women remained silent on the drive. When Serena stopped in front of Bernie’s building, Bernie opened the car door, hesitated and leant brusquely towards Serena, pecked her on the cheek and fled from the car.

Stupid … Bloody stupid idiot … Bernie’s little voice wouldn’t let her sleep. Her mind was a shambles of emotions and feelings, and against her will, her body remembered each of Serena’s touches. She turned and tossed in her bed, trying to find a comfortable position for her back, which hurt more when her heart was in turmoil. What was she going to do?
Chapter 25

Maybe it was a good thing the evening had ended relatively early, because Serena could hardly keep her eyes open during her first meeting of the day. Thank goodness it was a financial meeting with the hospital board and not one she was leading – that would come later in the day, and hopefully after several shots of caffeine. Of course, her state of exhaustion had nothing much to do with the time she came back home from the restaurant …Much more with the reason why she’d stayed awake until the early morning hours…a very blond reason. She shouldn’t have been so forward, but she’d really intended it as a joke…Or had she? She had wanted to stroke the soft skin…To kiss the tears better…What was going on with her?

After the meeting, she hurried to Pulses and joined the queue of caffeine-starved addicts. A tap on her arm made her turn and almost bump into Ric Griffiths.

“Oh- Ric – hi – in need of a shot too?”

He studied her thoughtfully and when they both had their coffees, he accompanied her back to the lift.

“Come on, Serena – spill – you look like the cat who got the cream…”

“Eric Griffiths, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Do I?”

“Yes – you do – and I’m glad you do. You’re looking more than yourself. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me? Are you back with that policeman?”

“With Robbie? Are you joking? That ship sailed ages ago…”

“So …someone else?”

“No – no one …Or …well, maybe, but it’s early days and I don’t want to talk about it.”

The lift door opened and Serena escaped, leaving a slightly bemused Ric behind. Back in her office after two hours of boring meeting and with a triple-shot cappuccino, she stared vacantly at her computer screen, unaware that a small smile was playing on her face.

“Good morning, Ms Campbell! Hmm …I love your blouse!”

“Thank you, Dr Faulkner.”

She had dressed on autopilot that morning, and she had no idea what she was wearing. As the younger doctor sat down to run through the treatment plans for the day’s patients, Serena mechanically smoothed her sleeves with her hand, acutely aware of the Leah Faulkner’s cool blue gaze on her. She realised that the blouse she had unwittingly plucked from her wardrobe was a little too tight and stretched tight on her breasts, accentuating her cleavage. She busied herself with the patients’ files to hide her discomfort. Or maybe the blouse wasn’t responsible for her unease…Maybe the young woman in front of her was…The memory of her lips on hers flashed through her mind… It couldn’t happen again… She despised workplace relationships – and the woman was her F1! There was no way anything could …And yet her body reacted in a way she couldn’t control. When Leah reached across the desk for the stapler and her hand accidently brushed against Serena’s, it sent tingles all over her… Get a grip, for God’s sake – you’re at work! And probably twenty years
older than her – and your subordinate …and … She stood up abruptly and pushed back her chair. She felt hot, stifled… Leah stood up to and they did an awkward dance to pass each other in the narrow office. Only they didn’t. Pass each over. Because the younger woman put a hand on Serena’s arm. Serena turned to face her. The hand slid on the silken blouse towards her chest, and she did nothing to stop it. Nor did she stop it from unbuttoning the top buttons, accentuating the décolleté, giving access to her skin. She nearly mewled as she felt the fingers running on her breasts, and her own hands latched on Leah’s waist. With her spare hand, Leah forced them off her and imprisoned them behind her back, pushing Serena against the office wall. Her mouth sought hers and their lips locked in an urgent kiss, both of them now oblivious of their surroundings.

Serena came to her senses slowly, reaching out to lock the door and lowered herself on the couch, pulling Leah with her. Serena had often bemoaned the fact her office was windowless, but she had never been more grateful of it as their limbs tangled and Leah reached out for her trousers’ zipper. Leah’s fingers ran on her skin, lower, lower…She moaned and urged her to her goal… Serena’s breath shortened, ripples of pleasure went through her body and she came swiftly and brutally as Leah’s fingers plunged into her, stifling a scream. She tried to reciprocate but the younger woman stopped her gently, closing her mouth with her lips once more. Then Leah released her grip on her and stood up. Serena followed her with her eyes, unable to move, unable to understand what had happened. Leah checked her clothes and putting her finger on her lips in the universal “hush” sign, she unlocked the door and slipped out. Slowly, Serena sat up and then frantically sorted her clothes. She was insane …She must be… She had just had sex with an F1 in her own office. She put her head in her hands and groaned…And that wasn’t even the worst of it. Because during those brief instants between thrill and ecstasy, it wasn’t Leah she’d had in her arms and inside her – it was Bernie.

Serena went to the loo and splashed cold water over her face – she nearly put her whole head under the tap. Then she proceeded to repair her make-up, overdoing the lipstick slightly as she tended to do in times of stress – it was part of her armour. She took several deep breaths and went back to her office, greeting her first patient of the day who was waiting outside.

That night, she would have given a lot to have the house to herself – to have time and silence to think. She did ask Jason to watch television with headphones, but he told her he would prefer not to, as it gave him ear and head aches. Not wanting to get into a debate, she yielded and took her bottle of wine into her bedroom. However, even from there, she heard the muted tones of whatever he was watching and although it kept her from being lonely, it didn’t keep her from feeling alone, nor from regretting what had happened. She was fifty-two years old, a senior consultant, deputy CEO of the hospital and she had slept with an F1. She was already on dodgy ground after the data leak, and now she had opened herself up to a harassment suit. Congratulations, Serena – you’ve done it this time! Another nagging thought was that Bernie would despise her if she knew. As a consultant surgeon and an army medic, she would be no stranger to matters of hierarchy – the blonde would be horrified. She would never want anything to do with her …Serena didn’t want anything to do with herself at the moment either.

Theoretically speaking, she knew a lot about bereavement and loss – she knew burying her grief for Elinor under meetings and patients’ files wasn’t healthy – no more than drowning it in wine. But she had never thought wallowing in self-pity was a good solution either. “Physician, heal thyself” had never sounded so ironic - she knew full well she needed help but she didn’t want to see one of her colleagues…

She hadn’t experienced empty nest syndrome when Elinor had left for uni, mainly because she was already living half the time at her father’s and dropping in quite often at home, but what she was feeling was another kind of emptiness – a hole in her heart that would never heal. Her mother’s death had liberated her and her daughter’s death was shackling her. She finished the bottle, took two
sleeping pills and slipped under the covers, putting an end to a seemingly endless day.
Bernie’s night had been filled with nightmares – again. At least this time she had been spared the pain of familiar faces on the mutilated corpses lying of the ground. And strangely enough, Serena had appeared at her side… Her mind still felt crowded with pain and fear, but she told herself only she could make a difference in her own situation. The night before at dinner, she had watched Serena’s alcohol consumption with anxiety – it reminded her too much of her mother, on how she would drown her life in drink. And then she had realised that she was in danger of turning into her own mother too – a bitter, acrimonious termagant, never satisfied with anything and unable to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. She would have enjoyed the joke …Before… She couldn’t let that happen. She had realised something else too – however much she thought she wasn’t over Alex and not ready for a relationship – undeserving of one…Cupid’s arrows apparently didn’t take that into account. Not that she was smitten with Serena …but … Come on, her little voice whispered … Admit it – when she fed you that chocolate cake, she could have put anything in your mouth … And her fingers … Bernie almost shivered at the memory…

Armed with a steaming cup of coffee, she sat at the dining table and stared at her mobile. Finally, she started typing a text: “Dear Serena – it’s Bernie. Since you hijacked the bill yesterday ….”

“… It’s only fair that I get my turn. I will even buy us champagne. Are you free next Friday evening? Best, Bernie.”

Serena smiled when she read the text – mostly because Bernie was obviously not an adept of the “new” technologies, but also because the idea of seeing the major again sent a whole swarm of butterflies to her stomach. Friday seemed both very far away and very near suddenly. But since then, she had other problems to take care of – one of these problems was also blonde and had been trying to talk to her the whole morning. She wouldn’t be able to avoid Leah until the end of her rotation – she would have to confront her sooner or later. If she didn’t find herself without a job before that.

“I am. Bring on the champagne. Serena x”

Serena put her phone back in her handbag and took a deep breath before going in search of Leah Faulkner. She had to set things right – had to apologise, had to … The young doctor suddenly appeared in front of her.

“Oh – Dr Faulkner, good – I was looking for you. Can we …talk?”

“Oh course, Ms Campbell. I’m all yours.”

Serena cringed at the seductive smile accompanying the words. She cornered Leah in a deserted corridor: “Dr Faulkner …Leah…I wanted to …I mean – I should never have …taken advantage of you like that. It was totally unprofessional and it should never have happened. And it won’t happen again.”

“Are you sure?”

Leah’s hand crept towards Serena’s face and came to stroke her cheek. This time, Serena thought about the text she’d just received and seized the younger woman’s wrist, pulling it down gently.

“Yes – I’m sure.”
Serena bit her lips, looking worried – how did you tell someone you’d rather she didn’t sue you? Leah pre-empted her: “All right – I understand. Don’t worry – I won’t stick you with a complaint – I’m not that kind of person.”

“I see. Well – thank you – I can count on your discretion then.”

A fleeting look of guilt passed through the young doctor’s eyes but Serena missed it. All she felt was relief that she would get off scot-free. Leah nodded and Serena exhaled deeply: “Thank you – really – well, I have to go.”

Back in her office, she found a list on her email – a new batch of junior doctors was arriving in two days… As if she didn’t have enough on her plate already – but Holby was a teaching hospital, and as a senior consultant, she had supervising duties. The list gave her an idea, though - although they hadn’t talked about it much, the major needed a new job. Serena understood that nothing would compare with the thrill of being the mistress of her own theatre – with holding a man’s life in one’s hand. But if Bernie’s days as a surgeon were over, she could still teach her skills to others. She would try to pitch the idea to Hanssen.

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“… Serena x.” Did the brunette mean something by that x? Of course not – it was just friendly. Anyway, she had agreed to see her again – it must mean that she was forgiven – at least a little. The prospect of seeing Serena again in a few days felt both exhilarating and terrifying. Meanwhile, Bernie had to get on with her life. Marcus had finally arranged for her mail to be delivered straight to her new address, and although she didn’t usually get any, that morning a letter had been slipped under her door. She hadn’t bothered with it, intent on crafting the perfect text to Serena, but she might as well have a look. There was some kind of seal on the envelope, but she couldn’t see well enough to recognise it. She tore it open and stared at his content… The seal again, and the unmistakable monogram. The letter too was clear enough – she had been nominated for an OBE for gallantry in the field, and the missive detailed in black and white where and when the ceremony would take place. Another page detailed why she had been awarded the medal – as if she needed a reminder. Despite herself, she scanned the sentences and the images came flowing back… Two tours in Iraq… Two in Afghanistan… The conditions in Afghanistan had been more challenging… More dangerous. During her first tour there, she had been stationed on a base located in a Taliban stronghold in eastern Afghanistan. In addition to treating the casualties, she had created a medical training course, to teach Afghan National Army medics burn and mass-casualty treatment. Her own Forward Surgical Team triaged injured soldiers, taking care of life-threatening injuries before sending them for higher-level care at a military hospital. Every day, they would hear the siren and have to get down because they were under incoming rocket attacks and indirect fire. Nothing had prepared her for that – not even Iraq, because they had been relatively safe there. Once you got used to being constantly under threat, you had to deal with your feelings … Bernie sat down heavily and put her head in her hand, trying to get her breath under control, but her heartbeat quickened and she lost her battle against the memories that assaulted her… The casualties she had treated passed before her eyes… the soldiers, the ones she had had breakfast with, joked with, who came back with missing bloody limbs… Those who were DOA, and for whom she could do nothing… And the civilians… the innocent victims… The baby whose house had been bombed, an orphan with third-degree burns all over his body… The children torn apart by IEDs … and the others… Maybe the worst… the victims of bigotry and hatred… The young mother brought to them because the local hospital in Kandahar didn’t have the expertise – hit repeatedly on the head, so that each and every bone of her face and skull had been broken – stoned to death on her husband’s orders… Victims of rape, too, with violent tears and lacerations, not to mention the psychological damage.

It had never been a question of doing one’s duty – she had been trained for that – “In arduis fidelis –
“faithful in adversity”. She and her colleagues had been faithful to the Hippocratic oath indeed – always – even when their conscience tugged at them. Even when there was only one surgeon, one set of instruments for two casualties, one of them one of their own, the other a Taliban… Even when victim and perpetrator laid side by side in theatre. You just went on with it – if you began to think with your heart, you were lost. You had to treat everyone, even if they spat at you, even if they treated you as a nobody because you were a woman. Even if they would rather die as martyrs than be saved by you.

She had seen so much, so much she would never forget…the most horrible wounds…heard the screams of the wounded, the death rattle of the dying…So much worse when it was their own – sometimes they had to go directly into the battlefield, because there was no one else, and she had been the first surgeon to arrive to the charred remains of a jeep which had been occupied by four medics of her own team. Private O’Neil – her right leg barely attached, her bones poking through the uniform…Lieutenant Brooke, loosing blood so fast that she knew that she had to get a tourniquet on his arm there and then, still under enemy fire. The other two, dead – one of them not even a corpse, but a jumble of body parts…The hard choice…cutting off the leg because you had to move fast…No time to think. No time to wonder what to do when bullets ricocheted on the ground beside you – you just had to draw your own weapon and shoot, praying reinforcement would arrive before everyone succumbed.

What would an OBE do? What would she do with one? She would gladly refuse it, but it was also a recognition of all the work done by the RAMC in the field, and because of that she had to accept. She read the letter slowly again – at least she had a little time to prepare.
Chapter 27

Rumours made the world go round, and this was never truer than in a hospital. Serena wasn’t particularly paranoid, but when for the third time that day nurses stopped talking when she approached, she began to wonder what the matter was. She didn’t have time for chitchat, however, as the ward was particularly manic that day – in the literal sense. At least three new patients had been diagnosed as manic by her or one of her colleagues. When you added to that the redhead guy who thought everyone hated him “because I’m a nigger, like”, an elderly lady with Alzheimer who lashed out with her fists when anyone came near her and a young anorexic who refused a feeding tube, the mixture was explosive. Therefore, Serena wasn’t best pleased when she saw Hanssen’s lanky frame looming in the corridor.

“Hello, Henrik – anything I can do for you? As you can see, we’re rather busy…”

“A word, if I may? In your office?”

That sounded rather ominous. Serena followed him to the office and sank in her chair, lifting an interrogative gaze towards him. He cleared his throat: “Ms Campbell … It has come to my attention that …”

“Yes?”

“That something of an inappropriate nature may have occurred between you and another member of our staff.”

Serena usually found Hanssen’s circumlocutions funny, but this was too serious for humour. Suddenly she had difficulty breathing and she felt her cheeks burn. She fought to maintain her countenance.

“Well?” Hanssen’s dark eyes bore into her. The only thing she found to say was: “How do you know? Was there a complaint?”

“There was no formal complaint, but it was brought to my attention by one of our colleagues – not the young lady in question – and it is my duty to investigate.”

For a second, Serena closed her eyes and imagined denying the whole thing – she could say the malicious rumour came from a jealous colleague, that she had absolutely never ever … She sighed: “It’s all true, Henrik. I – I made a mistake. A terrible mistake. I fully understand the need to discipline me as you see fit.”

“Let’s monitor the situation closely, shall we? Dr Faulkner is finishing her psych rotation in a few days and will leave the hospital afterwards. I trust nothing more will happen.”

Serena looked up at him incredulously: “That’s it?”

Henrik nodded: “Yes – I think so.”

“Thank you, Henrik – more than I can say.”

He nodded once more and was opening the door when Serena called him back: “Oh – by the way – I meant to ask you – well, now may not be the best time but …”

She outlined the major’s situation in a few sentences and hinted at the possibility of a teaching
position. Henrik Hanssen looked thoughtful: “I have heard about Ms Wolfe – she is indeed well-known in her field. I will think about it. Please tell her I shall be glad to meet with her to discuss the possibilities. And – if you ever need to talk, Serena – off the record – my door is always opened…”

Serena pursed her lips: “Henrik – you’re the CEO – you don’t have an “off the record” setting.”

“Try me.”

When he left the office, Serena exhaled slowly, as if she’d been holding her breath. She understood now why Leah Faulkner had seemed a little uneasy – she hadn’t been able to hold her tongue, and whomever she had talked to had been all too eager to spread the gossip around… Now, everyone knew she had slept with a woman… She didn’t really know how it made her feel – ashamed, obviously, because the said woman was an F1 – she just hoped the young doctor had made it clear it had been consensual. Also … Odd? Awkward? She couldn’t find the word, but somehow, because other people knew about it, it made it more real. She had always thought of herself as dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual, and this was scary… Scary, too, because she had to recognise her growing attraction for the blonde major as real too. And if she was completely honest with herself, she was a tiny bit proud, too – after all, Leah Faulkner was young and cute …but she would deny that on her dying bed!

Two more days and Leah would be gone – if she was lucky, something else would soon happen to bring water to the rumour mill…

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At the end of the week, Serena was even more at her wits’ end than at the beginning. She was due to meet Bernie in town in one hour, it was bedlam in the ward and the new F1s were driving her mad – one, particularly. Or maybe two. The first one, a young woman named Jasmine Barrows, appeared rather scatter-brained and dizzy, and that was something Serena couldn’t deal with at the moment. Moreover, there was something in her that reminded her of Elinor, and that was even harder to bear – not in looks – Dr Barrows was as fair as Elinor had been dark-haired and much shorter too, but there was something … They had the same hangdog expression when they were getting scolded… As for the other one, Cameron Dunn, he was altogether too cocky and self-centred for his own good. She had already put him in his place several times but it was like water off a duck’s back – he didn’t seem fazed at all. Obviously very popular with the ladies, too – she had heard him make plans for a drink with Jasmine Barrows and another F1.

Speaking of the devil… Seeing a commotion near a bed where Dr Dunn was standing, she hurried towards it, even though she should have hurried to her car if she wanted to be on time for dinner. When the young doctor saw her approaching, he tried to compose his face, but it was obvious he’d been laughing.

“What’s going on here, Dr Dunn?”

“Oh – err, nothing, Ms Campbell – Mr. O’Neill here was just telling me he could, err … make any woman orgasm on command.”

The patient nodded and Cameron went on, oblivious of Serena glaring at him: “So I was just explaining how that was complete bollocks, because this was not how it worked, and probably his girlfriend was lying to him about it…”

“I see…” Serena could barely keep her temper in check: “A word in my office, please, Dr Dunn. If you’ll excuse us, please, Mr O’Neill – we’ll be back shortly.”
She slammed the door behind them and tore into him… By the time she had finished with the young doctor, she was late for her dinner. She sent an apologetic text to Bernie, promising to be at the restaurant as soon as possible and hurried to her car.
Chapter 28

In the end, Serena arrived at the restaurant more than twenty minutes late. She immediately spotted Bernie and zeroed in on the table. Bernie grinned: “Hi – I told them to keep the champagne on ice until you got here…”

“Good idea. Phew! I’m beat – I need food!”

They both perused the menu and once they’d ordered, they suddenly found themselves tongue-tied.

“I’m sorry!”

Both women had spoken at the same time. Bernie looked at Serena interrogatively: “What on earth are you sorry for?”

“Well – for being late, of course. But also for last time – I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just thought it would be a laugh and …”

Bernie lowered her eyes: “That’s exactly what I’m sorry for – for behaving like a prize idiot… I …I actually used to have a sense of humour, would you believe it? And I also didn’t use to cry about nothing. Since the accident, I seem to tear up every two second.”

“It’s all right, really. I don’t mind – if you knew how many patients cry during their session…”

“It’s not just the crying …It’s …” Could she tell her? Could she tell Serena how she had felt the other night? Could she explain how she had thought she would never love again, and yet the flutters in her stomach told her otherwise? Better not … She took a deep breath and looked up at Serena: “So …What about you? I mean how was your day?”

Serena sighed: “A bloody nightmare. We’ve got a whole batch of F1s in the ward, and… Let’s just say I’m not in a nurturing mood, and they really need hand-holding. Snowflakes indeed!”

Bernie grinned: “Yes – I remember – mentoring was never my favourite thing either. Even in the old days you felt like you spent twice as long on a case because you had to dissect it for the newbies. I know they have to learnt but I like – liked – efficiency.”

The food arrived and they tucked in. They reminisced for a while about their own days as juniors. Even decades afterwards, they could remember how it had felt to be put on the spot by a consultant after a sleepless night, before all the other junior doctors. Serena laughed: “I still remember some of the questions, you know – even thirty years afterwards!” Mimicking an old man’s gruff voice and myopic glance, she intoned: “Wolfe - what are the causes of pancreatitis?”

“Alcohol, gallstones, hypertriglycerideremia, hypercalcemia, drugs, trauma, idiopathic, ERCP, infection…”

“And scorpion sting,” they finished together.

“I remember that one too”, grinned Bernie. “And what about … What is the most common EKG finding in pulmonary embolism?”

“Hmm…Sinus tachycardia?”

“Close, but not quite, Campbell…”
“Remember – I’m not exactly in theatre anymore.”

“That’s no excuse – a good doctor …”

“Should know everything – yah, yah, I know – so … What about Alice in Wonderland Syndrome, Ms Wolfe?”

“Err … Don’t think I’ve ever encountered that one, but I can try and guess – something to do with size? Distortion?”

“Good guess – close enough!”

“That wasn’t the worst thing for me, though…” said Bernie, her face suddenly darkening. “The pimping… Can’t say I liked it, but…”

“Yes, I’m with you on that – the lack of sleep wasn’t great either – nor the blood and gore, actually – nearly didn’t get into medicine because of that.”

“Well – I don’t mind blood and gore – quite like it, luckily for me. Knowing you could save someone’s life – that’s why I got into trauma surgery. But … I nearly gave it all up once.”

Serena understood they weren’t bantering anymore. From the expression on Bernie’s face, she was going back to a dark place, and Serena didn’t want to push her into uncomfortable confidences. They were not in a therapy session – just enjoying a meal between friends – if Bernie didn’t want to tell her, she had every right not to, but the pain in her friend’s hazel eyes told her it must have been a distressing ordeal. Bernie stared at the tablecloth for a few minutes, reliving those days where she’d had no one to confide in and no idea what to do. As the only girl in the gastro-enterology ward when she had done her first rotation as a PRHO (pre-registration house officer) and a young twenty-four-years-old at the time, she’d been the butt of jokes and sexist remarks by peers, registrars and consultants alike. Even in med school, the courses had been less than woman-friendly. She still remembered the lecture on inguinal hernias, where the professor had explained they’d just had to palpate their own testicles at home to feel the inguinal ring… several of her classmates had proceeded to go for it on the spot… She had tried to take the comments as par for the course - the consultants telling her she would never make it as a surgeon and she should be at home taking care of her family were just old-school. As for the in-theatre crude banter “Spread them harder, Wolfe, like you do in bed!”, which had made her blush, she could take it – surely she could take it for a few years.

The remarks that had made her wonder about staying had seemed innocuous at first – or at least much less offensive than others. “You should wear shorter skirts – show off those legs.” “Slap on some make-up, would you?” But these had escalated until she’d become the scapegoat of that particular consultant… “Shape up, or you’ll never be more than a pretty face” “You’re a f**ing idiot Wolfe, even a pre-schooler knows that” … Every day something gave the consultant an occasion to humiliate her. And then there was the hand on her breast, to demonstrate how to examine the heart. And the constant demeaning remarks and behaviours – being sent out of the theatre for hesitating on a procedure, being asked to get coffee for the whole team. Then the groping became more frequent – at every occasion, there was touching - she had begun to dread the changing rooms, because of the way the consultant’s eyes would strip her naked. She couldn’t ask to change wards, because if she didn’t finish her rotation, it would be a black mark against her. And she couldn’t complain to the hospital authorities, because she could never dare explain what was happening, and if she did, no one would believe her. When the consultant called her into the office for her evaluation she didn’t want to go, but she couldn’t say no. She was expecting a dressing-down and a terrible appraisal. The consultant didn’t offer her a seat, just handed her the evaluation paper: “Somewhat shy, or maybe disinterested. Could probably have potential if she tried. Performances – mostly lack of.” Bernie closed her eyes, reeling from the blow – she had been expecting it, but it was a blow to have it
confirmed. When she opened them, the consultant’s body was pressing on hers, her arms winding around her back, her hands in her hair – when she kissed her, Bernie’s body stiffened but she felt frozen to the spot, unable to flee. When the consultant’s lips left hers, she stared at her, with wide eyes, unable to process what had just happened. The words floated in the room: “Not a great eval, uh, Wolfe? But there are ways to persuade me to change it… You’d just have to be very very nice to me…”

Bernie winced, remembering the utter bewilderment and despair she had felt then. Who would have believed that Ms Rosalie Deane, senior consultant in the gastro ward and famous in her field for her research on ulcerative colitis, had made a pass at her? She had had a few more days to spend in the rotation, and each day had been a nightmare. What had made it worse was that when she had learnt she was to be under Ms Deane, she had been overjoyed, because there were still few women in her field and in a top-level position. She had arrived ready to idolise her, and the disillusion had been a bitter pill to swallow. She had never told anyone - not even Marcus. Especially not Marcus, because he could have had doubts…At the time, she hadn’t been sure either. Maybe she should tell Serena – as a woman and a consultant, she would probably understand. And maybe it would help exorcise that horrible memory. She swallowed hard and looked at her dinner companion: “Could I tell you why I nearly gave up?”

Serena nodded and Bernie proceeded to tell her the story. “…I stayed because I had to – I had an army scholarship, and I couldn’t just give it up. But…for a few months, I almost stopped eating. I lost more than twenty pounds in a month…Not the best idea ever in med school. But the worst thing was …” Bernie almost murmured the last part, staring once again at her hands on the table: “…it must have been my fault, because I …I kind of fancied her.”

Serena forced herself to smile understandingly, although she felt sick inside. She reached for Bernie’s hands, imprisoning them into hers: “Oh Bernie - no! Of course it wasn’t your fault. The woman was a bully and a predator – you are in no way responsible for what happened.”

The brown eyes which stared back at Serena remained troubled, but a little light had crept in and the hands in hers relaxed slightly: “Thank you for saying this – I needed to hear it.”

Dessert helped to bring the discussion on lighter matters and gave Bernie the opportunity to gently disengage her hands from Serena’s. Unusually for her, Serena didn’t have much appetite for the toffee trifle she’d ordered – her stomach churned along with her thoughts – what if Leah had believed… What if Bernie learnt what had happened … She rallied enough to remember she had something to tell her friend: “Oh – by the way, Bernie – I had a talk with Henrik Hanssen – the CEO. I thought maybe you could go and have a chat with him – about a teaching position. It would be perfect.”

It was Bernie’s turn to feel slightly sick – teaching – she didn’t want to teach! She hated speaking in public and she couldn’t think of anything worse than a lecture hall filled with med students. Her track record with her own children was proof she wasn’t an educator. She swallowed hard and offered a sickly grin to Serena: “Thank you – I’ll – I’ll think about it.”

Finally, neither of them was in the mood for champagne, nor for a nightcap and they said goodbye outside the restaurant, making plans to see each other again at the weekend.

Their nights didn’t offer them much rest. Bernie fell into a fretful sleep, where memories of Iraq and Afghanistan blurred into her time in medical school. As for Serena, she remained awake most of the evening, nursing a glass of wine in her living-room, staring at photographs of her daughter while her mind rehashed her interactions with Leah Faulkner over and over.
When they met again the next Sunday, they decided to go for a walk – Bernie didn’t see well enough to enjoy a movie and the weather had suddenly turned almost summery. The city park offered several paths and for a while they walked in a companionable silence. The concept of having spare time still felt alien to Bernie. She hadn’t taken Serena on her offer to go and see the hospital’s CEO, but she knew she would have to find a job. Money was not the only issue – although she sometimes felt she was a hundred years old, she knew that realistically, she had probably only reached the middle of her life and she couldn’t just twiddle her thumbs for the next twenty years. As for Serena, she was enjoying just being with Bernie. When the latter, who’d decided she could do without her cane, stumbled and almost fell, Serena reached out to steady her and decided to keep hold of the blonde’s arm. Bernie discovered she didn’t really mind Serena’s touch – in fact, she rather liked it – it made her feel safe. When they arrived back to the centre of the town, most of the shops had closed and Serena suggested they went back to her house for a hot drink – the sunset had brought a definite slump in the temperature.

Teatime segued into dinner and Serena dug out a quiche from her freezer. Bernie offered her help but when it was refused, she perched on a stool, her back to the Aga, and observed her surroundings. The kitchen looked a lot like the one in the house where she’d lived with Marcus – only when she’d been in it, it had never looked as tidy as Serena’s… She could guess that neither of them tended to spend much time cooking, though – the freezer was full, but the fridge only contained the basics. After quiche, soup and a few glasses of wine, they decided to skip dessert in favour of a box of chocolates and strong coffee in the living room. Like the kitchen the room was shipshape. Only the couch bore traces of being used.

“I hate this house”, said Serena suddenly. Bernie didn’t answer, waiting for more.

“I hate it, because whenever I’m in it, I’m never alone… After the divorce, Edward left it to me for Elinor, so she didn’t have to move. And now …I see her everywhere – on the wall where I measured her, when I go past her bedroom door, here in this room, on the floor with her feet on the armchair… Everywhere! And it’s not even as if I could take comfort in that – because it only reminds me of the fact she’ll never be here anymore.”

“Oh, Serena,” murmured Bernie. “I’m so sorry – the house is lovely, but I understand. Or maybe I don’t – it’s a stupid thing to say, because I’ve never lost anyone – I’ve lost friends and colleagues when I was in the Army, but it’s not the same. I can’t imagine losing Cameron or Charlotte. I think …Telling parents their child is dead is probably the worst thing I’ve ever had to do as a doctor and…” Bernie’s eyes darkened as she remembered the too many times she’d had to do it – she hadn’t forgotten one – from the days she was a registrar to that last time near Kandahar, where her rudiments of pachto has done little to comfort the distraught mother.

Serena closed her eyes and blinked back her tears – she’d thought the worst thing was being alone with one’s grief, but talking about it proved almost as hard. Bernie’s hand around her shoulders surprised her but she accepted the embrace gratefully and let her head drop on the blonde’s arm. “I’m sorry – you shouldn’t have to watch me fall apart – that’s not how I wanted us to spend the evening.”

“Don’t worry, Serena – it’s all right – I’m here for you.”

When Serena felt a gentle kiss on her hair, she wondered if she had dreamt it – so many times she had believed she’d felt Elinor’s touch or heard her voice and been confronted to an empty room. She gently disengaged herself to look into Bernie’s eyes, and what she read in them gave her her answer – this wasn’t a dream. Her lips sought Bernie’s and she found another answer in their eager response.
Serena deepened the kiss, tasting chocolate and longing, and she took Bernie’s face in her hands, caressing her cheeks and brushing away the stray locks as she drew away. Her body pulsed with desire but although she knew what she wanted, she couldn’t be sure if Bernie wanted to take the next step. The kiss had left her with a well of emptiness she wanted to fill, but as she ran her fingers down Bernie’s back she felt only stiffness and …was it fear? Serena went on stroking the blonde hair and dropping light kisses on it until she felt her partner relax in her arms. She heard Bernie murmur something.

“I should go…”

As usual, fleeing felt safer than staying. If she stayed, their relation would change. She didn’t feel ready – and yet, as her brain told her to run away, her body disagreed – her heartbeat had quickened and her whole skin felt electrified, ultrasensitive. Bernie swallowed hard and tried to control herself.

“I’ll call a cab.”

“Stay here tonight?” asked Serena tentatively.

Bernie hesitated a few seconds. “I don’t have any pyjamas,” she blurted out, fully aware of the absurdity of her remark.

“Come on, Major – I’m sure you can make do. Besides…What makes you think you’ll need them?”

Bernie’s face turned scarlet and she cursed her fair complexion: “Serena!”

Serena took pity on her: “I’ll lend you something. And I have a spare room. So …Will you stay? Please?”

She wanted to – she so wanted to – and yet …

“All right – I’ll stay!”

When they went upstairs a little later, Serena pointed out the bathroom and the spare room: “I’ll bring you an electric heater – nobody has slept there for ages and it can be a bit chilly. And pyjamas.”

Bernie chewed on her upper lip: “All right – thanks!”

She accepted a pair of dark blue flannel pyjamas and at Serena’s suggestion used the bathroom first. When she came out, she sat on the spare room’s bed, waiting for Serena to finish with her own ablutions. She heard the shower stop and a wet-haired Serena appeared through her partially opened bedroom door: “So …Good night then …”

“Good night, Serena.”

“Sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite…”

“If I have any bite marks tomorrow, it’ll be your fault,” grinned Bernie. “You suggested I stay.”

“Well, yes, but …”

On that, Serena disappeared into her own room.

Bernie thought of trying to sleep, but it was still too early and anyway her brain was spinning. She went to the bookshelves and selected a detective story before slipping under the covers. She read for about twenty minutes before throwing the book on the eiderdown. The book wasn’t the problem – she was. Disgusted with herself, she took a deep breath and got out of bed, tiptoeing to Serena’s
bedroom. Seeing the light under the door, she knocked gently.

“Come in…”

Serena lifted her eyes from her tablet and grinned: “Problem with the room?”

Bernie bit her lips: “Hmm …no, but …I mean yes – it feels kind of empty. Could I …”

The spare room remained empty for the rest of the night. Serena’s fingers undoing her pyjamas top made Bernie flinch – she hated how the years and the scars had marked her body, and as the fingers touched her skin it almost burnt with both shame and longing. Even in the dim light of the bedside lamp, she knew Serena would see those mementoes of her past. The long slit at Charlotte’s birth… The burn she had incurred in Iraq…And the scar from her latest surgery, which she hadn’t been able to see herself, but which had to be still red and angry. When Serena’s lips joined her fingers, exploring her body with the tip of her tongue, Bernie had just enough self-control left to keep from moaning. Her nipples stood to attention under the avid touch and when Serena nibbled them, her heart raced and she could feel her arousal. When the curious fingers reached for her most intimate spot, already waiting, already wet, she couldn’t resist anymore and almost whimpered with desire, shuddering. She came in an ecstasy of feelings, not crying out but crying inside, ripples of pleasure coursing through her body.
Chapter 30

Bernie woke up disorientated in the strange bed. She glanced at the sleeping form beside her and drew the covers back gently, tucking them back around Serena. She went back to the spare room to retrieve her clothes and made her way downstairs, wincing as the stairs creaked. She couldn’t quite believe what had happened – she’d never been one to sleep on a first date – only it hadn’t exactly been a date, nor a first, but it still felt awfully quick to her. Or maybe awfully slow by modern standards. Did modern standards even apply to over-50s? Probably not. But she didn’t feel fiftyish – more like a bumbling schoolgirl. The kettle was just beginning to sing when Serena joined her in the kitchen. She took the coffee pot from Bernie, depositing a quick kiss on the blonde’s head in passing, and poured the hot water in. Bernie took two mugs from the cupboard and sat down at the table. The brunette broke the silence which threatened to become awkward: “So …did you sleep well?”

“Yes – thank you. I …I have to get home now.”


Bernie buried her face in her mug before looking back at Serena: “Yes – everything is okay. Just … I hadn’t planned on… I mean – you know …”

Serena gave her an impish smile: “I hadn’t either – or maybe I had… But – really, was it …I mean, I’d never been with a woman before, and…” What about Leah Faulkner? Screamed a voice in her head. But this was different… Very different. She cared.

Bernie gave her a little grin: “Come on, Serena – surely you know I wasn’t faking it?”

“I guess not…Oh …By the way – I can lend you a scarf for today…”

Bernie’s hand went instinctively to her neck – no bed bugs, but …


Serena’s cheeks heated up, remembering Bernie’s soft skin under her fingers, her responsiveness to her caresses: “Maybe not so much that…”

“I think …I think we should think about it – take some time to … I mean – we could be good friends…”

“Right – okay – can we at least make plans for dinner or something?”

Bernie’s brain was working furiously. Her inner little voice told her to hang on to Serena. To agree to another… Would it be a date? Yes, probably. To see where it would take them. And yet she was torn – she wasn’t ready. Also …Serena was straight and falling in love with a straight woman could only lead to grief. It would be less painful to remain alone. And she probably deserved it after how she’d ended it with Alex. She heard herself agree to meet Serena for dinner in two days.

“Shall I give you a lift? I’ve got to go to work. Or better still, I could take you to work with me, and you could try and see Hanssen for that teaching position.”

Bernie felt suddenly short of breath and her throat tightened. Recognising the first signs of a panic attack, she tried too take deep breaths and to focus on what was around her, counting the objects and
the noises. Serena recognised the symptoms, but she was powerless to help. She tried to put her arms around Bernie but the latter shrugged her away. Bernie put her face in her hands and curled up and Serena just stood there helplessly, watching her and wondering what had brought the attack on. She put a glass of water in front of her and tried to talk her through the crisis, reassuring her, telling her she would be all right, but Bernie had retreated in her own personal bubble of hell and Serena had no idea if she could even hear her. She knew she would be late for the morning meeting at work, but they would have to manage without her. As head nurse, Fletcher could lead. Finally she heard Bernie’s ragged breathing quieten and the blonde took her hands from her face. Her skin looked almost translucent and her eyes seemed haunted. “I’m sorry”, she murmured. “I – I can’t control it. And I’ve made you late. Sorry. Just – let me just call a cab and …”

“Bernie – it’s all right – really. You don’t have to apologise. It’s part of my job description, you know.”

“Of course but – I’m not your patient anymore.”

“No, you’re not – you’re my friend. And …” Serena hesitated and then decided to change tracks: “Would you like to tell me what caused it? As a friend, not as a therapist?”

Bernie sighed: “You, actually. When you insisted on me going to see your CEO. All my life people have been telling me what to do and what was good for me. My mother, my ex-husband… And…I just can’t take it anymore.”

Serena blushed guiltily – she had a reputation for being bossy and a little overbearing …Okay, maybe a lot… “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to bully you into it – I just wanted to help.”

“I know but … Just …I need time, Serena. For …Everything.”

“Okay – I understand. Come on – let’s go.”

The drive to Bernie’s was silent. When Serena stopped the car, Bernie briefly pressed her hand and murmured: “I’ll call you”. Serena didn’t want to let her go – she wanted to comfort her – to wrap her in a warm, soft blanket and cuddle her. “Yes, do…” She watched her get inside the building and sighed – she had never been the patient kind…

Once back in her flat, Bernie surveyed her surroundings despondently – not much to show for fifty-odd years of life. Suddenly, by contrast with Serena’s house, the small flat looked bleak and unfriendly. And empty. Just like her life. But this was how it had to be. She couldn’t be with anyone – she was damaged. The way her body now reacted to a simple suggestion proved it. She felt suddenly exhausted and rearranged her long legs on the sofa before closing her eyes. She fell asleep in minutes.

Meanwhile, Serena had finally arrived at the hospital, to be met with the unwelcome news that one of their young anorexic patients had had to be transferred to the ICU for kidney failure. Another patient, who’d arrived the day before from the ICU after a suicide attempt, had been restless ever since, complaining bitterly about having been revived, and was obviously not placated by whatever the two F1s, Dr Burrows and Dr Dunne, were telling him. She strode towards his bed to assess the situation. Dr Burrows looked pale, almost shaking and Dr Dunne was red and on the point of losing his temper. Indeed, she arrived just as the young doctor was beginning to give the patient a piece of his mind, and not in the most polite tone. Serena halted his diatribe with a glare, shooed the two F1s off and proceeded to calm the patient down, which took her some time. Then she went in search of her registrar, Xavier Duval, and tore a strip off him for having left the two F1s to deal with the patient alone, before doing the same to Cameron Dunne.
The day went on at a hectic pace and it wasn’t until the evening that she had time to reflect on the previous night. “Serena Campbell, lesbian…” She tasted the words … They didn’t sound half bad – especially when she remembered Bernie’s lips on hers … Her skin under her fingers. Most of her acquaintances would be surprised – if she ever told them. She wasn’t ready for that. She didn’t even know whether something would happen with Bernie – something more than a random night followed by an awkward morning. At least the blonde had promised her another evening – well, another diner at least. She looked around the kitchen where their two mugs still “decorated” the table – somehow they looked right where they was. They made the kitchen look lived-in – they left less space for ghosts.
Chapter 31

Serena’s insistence on finding her a job had made Bernie even more worried about her future. Not that the job question had ever been far from her mind since the accident, but seeing another person’s concern had brought it even more in the foreground. As the days went by, it became more and more obvious she would never be able to practice again as a surgeon. In the first months, she had clung to that hope, but now, more than four months on, she knew it was a pipe dream. She just couldn’t see herself as anything else, though. Medicine had constituted the biggest part of her life and if she was honest, the best part. Nothing the army offered – mostly admin positions – appealed. She wanted to stay in the medical field, but she could face the idea of teaching. Whenever she’d had to do it before, she had felt sick before each lecture, and had even twice thrown up afterwards. She couldn’t imagine doing it every day, having a sea of eyes watching her and herself just seeing a blur of faces and shapes. She couldn’t do it when she was at her best, she certainly wouldn’t do it at her worst. She thought about her options – she would have to retrain, but maybe she could use her qualifications somehow. She had always told her children that failure wasn’t an option…

She sighed … And look how well it had turned out – Charlotte was off gallivanting in London, studying something which would never guarantee her job security, and she didn’t want anything to do with her mother. And Cameron… She didn’t think she’d been harder with him than with Charlotte, but he certainly thought she had. And he’d made her pay for it. Somehow, even though she had been hundreds of miles away for most of his adolescence, everything had been her fault. Marcus had blamed her for their son’s misdemeanours, and she knew the school authorities had too. When Cameron had been expelled from his boarding school in year 11, she had been stationed in Iraq and she had asked for emergency leave to attend the meeting with the headmaster. Even her belonging to the British Army hadn’t softened him – he had made it clear that Cameron was no longer welcome and even if he hadn’t said so clearly, his supercilious attitude towards her had betrayed his contempt for absent working mothers. And Marcus had berated her for the whole time she’d been home. He had never wanted a surgeon wife – even less a major. He would have been very happy with her being a GP in a small private practice – that would have been enough to bolster his status with his colleagues. Getting Cameron in another secondary school had been a nightmare and he had finally ended up at the local state school. At least, as far as she knew, he had never done hard drugs… small mercies – he’d certainly tried everything else. She didn’t really know why he’d chosen to go to med school – nor why he had persevered after failing his first year. At least now he appeared to be on the right track. She hadn’t heard from him since the Keeley incident though… Maybe she really was too blame – maybe she’d pushed too hard. She wondered how Serena had been with her daughter – if she had been a better mother. She tried to imagine introducing Cameron and Charlotte to the brunette. Or maybe introducing Serena as her new partner to them – how would that go? She shook her head – as if that was even on the cards – they’d spent one night together, one awkward morning after. Serena was straight. Grieving for her daughter. And Bernie was building castles in Spain…

Ignoring the voice of reason in her brain telling her it was a terrible idea, Bernie felt compelled to honour her promise and meet Serena for dinner again later that week.

In an attempt to keep fit and busy, Bernie forced herself to go for long walks every day. It didn’t do much for her state of mind, as it left her brain ample time to wander, but at least it gave her a reason to get out of bed. On the day she was supposed to meet Serena for dinner, she had focused so hard on trying not to think that she had also lost track of time and she found herself having to hurry not to be late. Unable to decide whether to dress up or not and not having the time to dally, she grabbed one of her many black shirts and a black jacket from the wardrobe while she called a cab.
Both women arrived at the restaurant at the same time. Bernie looked admiratively and enviously at Serena’s sleek black Mercedes – one of the many things she had had to forego was her little blue coupé and the freedom of driving. They kissed chastely on the cheeks, although Serena’s mouth strayed towards Bernie’s lips…When the former tried to hold the blonde’s hand, however, Bernie pulled apart slightly. When she saw Serena’s hurt look, she bit her lips and started to apologize. The need to be discreet was one of the many scars the army had left her with. Even if she hadn’t been married and Alex’s superior, the forces gay ban had still been enforced when she had joined up, and although it had been lifted since, PDAs had not been encouraged. If that wasn’t enough, Bernie wasn’t a demonstrative person and holding hands in public didn’t come naturally to her.

The restaurant Serena had chosen was a traditional Italian, a far cry from the Pizza Hut in Camp Bastion and yet it took only a few minutes for Bernie’s memories to rush back. The smell of hot pizza dough and basil immediately took her back there, with Alex, and she had to blink hard not to cry. She focused on the menu, unable to take anything in, but thankful for something which would hide her torment. Nevermore – never again – the words beat a tattoo in her skull, an unrelenting rhythm of regrets. And it was all her fault – she had let Alex go. She missed Serena’s words and had to ask her to repeat.

“I said I thought a pizza looked good – want to share?”

“Err – no …I.. I don’t like pizza, sorry.”

Serena looked at her as if she was a Martian and Bernie cringed – what kind of person didn’t like pizza… Why couldn’t she act normal for just one evening? She was preparing an apology when Serena grinned: “I hope you’re not one of those no-gluten fanatics?”

“No, no, it’s just that …” What could she possibly say? Luckily, Serena helped her dig herself out of the hole.

“No need to explain, Major. After years of army rations, you’ve more than earned the right to eat what you want. Anyway, I probably shouldn’t yield to temptation – I’ll have the frutti di mare … much healthier.”

“You look perfect the way you are, Serena.” Bernie blushed – the words had been out of her mouth before she could stop them. Trying to hide her embarrassment, she went on: “And it wasn’t always rations, you know – only when we were on ops… Some of the mess cooks were pretty good.”

Bernie decided on spaghetti alla puttanesca and while they waited for their meal they talked about all
and nothing. Both were happy to discover they agreed on the Brexit nonsense. They were halfway through their main course when a huge bang resonated in the room. Bernie suddenly went rigid and then began to shake uncontrollably. Her body became numb and her vision blurred. She was back there. Back when the rebels had attacked the Afghan village where she had been treating a native child who’d been hit by shrapnel. She had been assessing his wound and trying to calm down his mother when they’d heard gunfire outside. She hadn’t had time to seize her weapon, the rifle she had carefully laid beside her – the rebels had burst into the house, firing at the ceiling and the walls. They had pushed everyone out and she had had no choice but to obey, trying to calm two crying toddlers whose mother was wailing as much as them. She would never understand why they had not taken her. Instead, they’d shot at her clumsily, but her bullet-proof vest had protected her and she had got off with a flesh wound in the arm. She had had the good sense to play dead, though, and after a few kicks they had left her lying in the dust. In a haze of pain, she’d heard their leader say “She’s dead – let’s go” in Pashto and they’d pushed several women and young girls at gunpoint into one of their jeeps before driving off. She saw everything in slow motion – heard the guns, saw herself sheltering the children, then going down as bullets ricocheted on her vest and pierced her sleeve. Tasted again the dirt in her mouth, felt each kick in her ribs and abdomen. Just a hazy pain and terror. She swayed and put her head in her hands, hunching her shoulders, completely unaware of her surroundings. When she opened her eyes, Serena had slid next to her on the banquette and was rubbing her back, murmuring soothing words. Still in a haze, Bernie laid her head on Serena’s shoulder and let herself be comforted. When she realised where she was, she jumped back almost violently, ashamed of having made a spectacle of herself.

“Serena – I’m so sorry.”

“No need to apologise, really.”

Serena gestured to a waiter who was picking up menus from the floor – a pile of heavy leather-bound menus that had fallen noisily on the tiles: “I hope he’s handier with plates than with menus…”

This got a small laugh from Bernie, who pictured a river of spaghetti cascading on the floor. Trying to change the subject, Serena switched to work talk, and she was relieved to see Bernie taking interest in her cases and having surprisingly good input for someone who wasn’t a psychiatrist. As they ate their main courses and desserts, Bernie slowly relaxed and began to look less pale and shaken. Wanting to make her laugh – she couldn’t get enough of the major’s infectious giggle – Serena recounted some of her F1’s mishaps. She didn’t notice her companion’s face darkening as she told her about how Dr Dunne was more preoccupied with flirting with Dr Barrows than with taking care of his patients, and she finished her narrative by a scathing: “He really needs to get off his high horse. I’ve had countless F1s in my ward, but Cameron Dunne is really the most arrogant little prick I have ever seen. He acts as if he knows everything and trust me, this is far from the case. He is so …so …entitled! I’ve heard him say to Dr Duval, my registrar, that his mother was a bigwig in the medical world, and so was his godmother – as if that should get him any preferential treatment!”

At the end of her rant, Serena finally noticed Bernie’s face. The major had turned deadly pale again and she was kneading her hands. However, since she said nothing, Serena completely misunderstood the problem: “You probably think I’m exaggerating – but I’m not. I’m not playing favourites either, but you know how it is – some of the kids are more…Well, personable than others.” Serena blushed as she thought of Leah Faulkner and prayed again that Bernie never heard about her dalliance. “I mean – we’re there to train them, and it’s our job to take them down a peg or two, isn’t it? I’m sure you would have reacted like me if he had been one of your F1s. I don’t know who his famous mother is, but she must be pretty insufferable too…”

Bernie swallowed hard and wetted her lips with her tongue: “Actually… That would be me…”
Serena’s eyes bulged: “I’m sorry?”

“I said – that would be me. Cameron Dunne is my son.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed Bernie’s statement...
Chapter 32

Serena reddened and gaped at her companion: “Oh gosh – I… I… I’m so sorry!”

Bernie sighed: “No, you’re not. And actually, I hope you’re not – I’d much rather you were honest with your feelings than lie. And you’re probably right – if an F1 acted like an entitled little jerk in my ward, I wouldn’t cut him any slack either. As for Cameron – I’d love to say he’s not like that, and you’re totally wrong about him, but … I can’t. Don’t get me wrong – I love my son, but … I can’t really say I’m surprised. His only excuse is … Well, me, I suppose. I wasn’t there while he was growing up, and when I was … Let’s just say I wasn’t all smiles and cuddles. I demanded a lot from him, and I guess he felt he would never be good enough. So … Under all his bravado, I think there’s an insecure little boy. Also … His father … I guess Marcus probably encouraged this kind of attitude – he … He was like that in med school. And he chose his godmother – she was a friend of his then and she now works for Public Health England. But – Cameron is not stupid – quite bright, actually – only … He doesn’t do well with rules and … I’m sorry…”

Bernie suddenly dried up, aware that she was prattling. Serena laid her hand on Bernie’s wrist: “Stop – just stop! You’re not responsible for your son’s behaviour, and you don’t have to apologise. And you’re right – he is intelligent – but … He needs to show it – and to take his work seriously.”

Bernie offered her a weak grin and Serena relaxed a little – if someone had said the same things about Eleanor, she doubted she would have reacted with the same equanimity. She was also worried about Bernie’s reaction, though. It wasn’t that she wanted the major to be mad at her, but she didn’t want her apologetic either. She was sure the woman she had in front of her was only a shadow of the hard-ass army trauma surgeon she had been before her accident and it pained her to see the blonde so diminished. However, she was in an awkward position. Cameron Dunne still had several weeks to go in her ward. The arrival of the dessert menus made a welcome diversion, and they both perused it with more attention than it deserved. The conversation dwindled after that – both were lost in thoughts and busied themselves with eating. When they separated that night, they hugged tentatively, but none of them suggested the evening should be extended.

Speaking of the devil… “Hi, Mum – I wondered if I could crash at your place for a few nights. Call me back. Thanks.” …

That was unexpected – and yet, not so much – Cameron knew she wouldn’t say no. He knew how to play on her guilt. Bernie couldn’t help feeling a little glimmer of hope – maybe he had come to his senses and ditched Keeley. She sent a short text back: “Yes – see you tonight? Mum.”

Cameron breathed a little easier – since Keeley had put an end to their relationship two weeks before, he had spent nights on Jasmine’s couch, on a mate’s floor and in the on-call rooms, but these arrangements made for little sleep and he didn’t function very well on short nights, and that had provoked Ms Campbell’s wrath too many times. He wasn’t looking forward to his mother’s “I told you so” lecture on Keeley but he would try to distract her with hospital gossip.

Bernie couldn’t keep still – she switched from the armchair to the couch and a few minutes later, back to the armchair. She tried to read but couldn’t concentrate on the words. She was unreasonably nervous about Cameron’s visit. She knew she would have a hard time not mentioning what Serena had told her. However, if she didn’t hold her tongue and began to berate him, she would damage their relationship even further, and that was the last thing she needed. When the doorbell rang she jumped up and fixed a smile on her face – time for the show. She had never been good at hiding her feelings – her career had often demanded from her a poker face, but she knew she was a terrible liar.
Obviously intend on making amends for the last time, Cameron had brought two chocolate eclairs and a bottle of wine and she ordered Chinese food for them. While she only nibbled at her food, he ate as if he hadn’t had a square meal for days – which was probably the case. She remembered her own diet of sandwiches and cereal in med school. Between two bites, he mumbled that he and Keeley were over, and she forced herself not to say anything except “I’m sorry”, in the sincerest way she could. He told her about his rotation at Holby Hospital and she wondered how and if she should mention she knew his boss. Before she could find a way, however, he began to tell her about the various members of the staff. She wanted to stop him – after all, she had never been a big fan of gossip. But the temptation was too great – despite herself, she was curious about Serena. From Cameron’s comments, she could see that he had already fallen in love again with the young F1 called Jasmine. At least she must be about his age. He had no great love for Xavier Duval, the registrar, and the others in the ward he could take or leave. She was waiting for him to talk about his boss, but he studiously avoided the topic. Bernie suspected he tried to avoid revealing his own failings. She drifted off a little, listening just enough to nod at the appropriate places. She had other things on her mind – like the call from the nursing home where her mother was living she had received at noon. And the letter from the palace, giving her the date of her OBE ceremony, which had arrived that morning. People said that bad things came in three – the news of her mother were certainly bad. As for the OBE – she didn’t want it, didn’t want the hassle of it, really. But surely her son’s visit was a good thing?

“…As for Ms Campbell – the consultant, you know – well, you wouldn’t believe what I’ve heard on the grapevine.” Full of food and wine – he’d drunk most of the bottle by himself – he’d completely forgotten he was talking to his mother, ex-army major and consultant surgeon… “The rumour is – well, she’s like 50ish, grey-haired, you know – you’d think she’d be all prim and proper – but apparently she’s quite the man eater. And guess what – not only that, but she’s a cougar as well – only with women. There was this F1 – Leah…and they…Well, someone saw them come out of her office and they’d done it! And then Leah told someone, and – you know, that just shows you can’t go by appearances, right?”

Engrossed in his tale, he hadn’t noticed his mother’s colour draining away as he spoke. When she spoke, her toneless voice told him he had said too much: “And maybe you should take care of your own business, Cam, and concentrate on your work. You should know one can’t always trust rumours.” He reddened, knowing she was thinking about the time in secondary school when his then-girlfriend had made everyone believe she was carrying his baby… Some of the parents had heard the rumour and a good soul had told Marcus, who had gone berserk. And told Bernie it was all her fault because she was away. As he still wanted to crash on his mother’s couch, he thought he’d better drop the subject. He nodded and escaped to the kitchen to make coffee. While he was busy in the other room, Bernie took several deep breaths and swallowed hard a few times, trying to dispel the feeling of nausea Cameron’s revelations had provoked. She had always thought herself a good judge of character – she could “feel” people. How could she had been so wrong about Serena? She didn’t care if the F1 was a man or a woman – that was beside the point – although if she was honest she did care, but she didn’t know if it made the whole thing even more or less sordid. The point was that Serena had used her position to prey on a subordinate. She almost burnt her tongue with the espresso Cameron brought her and cut the evening short, leaving him the run of the living-room while she retired to the bedroom. Without any hope of sleeping.
Chapter 33

Maybe she should just let go. Try to forget she’d ever met Serena and carry on as best as she could with her life. Cameron would soon change rotations, and if Serena tried to call, she could just block her number. Maybe it would be for the best – she didn’t need anyone. When she got up, Cameron was gone and she found herself faced with her daily dilemma – why get up at all? She had no job to go to, no one to see, no … Well, just nothing – and it wasn’t enough. She could kid herself she didn’t need anyone, but this wasn’t a life. And she had seen too many people die senselessly on the battlefield or on the operating table to throw her life away.

What she needed was an incentive – something to give her a reason to fight. Unwillingly, Cameron had provided her with one – not the best one, but a useful one nonetheless. Anger – pure, red-hot anger against Serena. She knew it was irrational, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t abide lies. Or deceit. Or abuse of power. Serena had told her she had never been with a woman before. She had never mentioned Leah. And this wasn’t all right. Bernie hated confrontation – she usually fled before conflict, but this time she would go to battle – because she couldn’t believe Serena had betrayed her so badly.

A quick, non-committal text would probably do the trick: “Hello Serena. I think…”

“…we need to talk. Are you free tonight for dinner? My place? Bernie.”

The dreaded four words, and they weren’t even in a real relationship. Or were they? They had had such a strange start that it was difficult to tell. Serena sighed – the trouble was that she really wanted it to be real, and she dreaded the “talk”. She texted back promising to be there at 7pm.

During the whole day, Serena obsessed about the evening – what did Bernie want to tell her? Cameron being even more obnoxious than usual, or so it seemed to her, didn’t help. Several times she bit her tongue instead of reprimanding him, and berated herself for doing so.

When she arrived at Bernie’s, clutching a bottle of Shiraz and a bunch of roses – a little cliché, but everyone liked roses, right? – she found her heart was pounding wildly and the cold expression on the major’s face when she opened the door did nothing to calm her.

“Hey, you… Here, I brought you flowers” said Serena unnecessarily as she proffered the roses.

“Thank you.”

Bernie went to the kitchen and left the flowers in the sink, as a vase was not part of her household equipment, and Serena sat awkwardly on the couch. Bernie came back with two glasses and a corkscrew but put her hand on her glass when Serena tried to pour her some wine.

“Thank you – no. I …I need a clear head for what I have to say.”

Serena took a big gulp of Shiraz as the worst scenari ran through her mind. Had Bernie’s sight got worse? Had she discovered she had cancer or another serious illness? Had something happened to her daughter? Her mind was so busy elaborating various catastrophes she missed what Bernie said and had to ask her to repeat.

“I said – I know, Serena. I know about Leah. And …I don’t understand. I don’t understand how I could have been so wrong about you. So …if you have an explanation…”
Serena gulped and the wine went the wrong way. She went into a fit of coughing and almost spilt the contents of her glass all over her blouse. Unable to look into Bernie’s puppy-dog eyes, she stared at the floor.

“I should have told you. But … How? I mean – it’s not exactly breakfast-table conversation, is it? And oh, by the way, I went mad one day and slept with an F1? No … I don’t think so. But what I can tell you is that I was terrified you would hear about it. Because it meant nothing – and what there is between us – it means everything to me.”

Serena lifted her head and risked a glance at her companion. The blonde sat ramrod-straight on the armchair, staring into space.

“Please, Bernie – say something? I’m so sorry.”

When Bernie spoke, her voice was small and shaky: “I trusted you. I bared my soul to you – you know so much about me, and I know so little about you. It’s … It’s not fair. The whole thing – that mess – you made a mistake – a lapse of judgment. I guess I can accept that – we all make mistakes. But I’m not sure I can get over the fact you lied.”

“I didn’t exactly lie to you – I just …didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“Yeah, right! You didn’t…”

“Bernie – please – I’m not proud of what I did. I don’t want to lose you over one stupid mistake. It’s hard enough to know I’m probably the talk of the hospital – not for the first time, too. With Edward … He was a doctor, too, and everyone knew about his affairs, and his alcoholism. I guess some people felt sorry for me – and probably some thought it served me right. I can be a bitch sometimes. And then …after the divorce …There were a few men – not that many, and nothing serious, but I know it got me a reputation. And with the last one – Robbie – he was a good man, but he was weak …Like Edward. You’re not weak, Bernie – you’re strong, even though you think you’re not. And …I probably don’t deserve you, but if you can forgive me, I swear I’ll never lie to you again.”

Bernie chewed on her lower lip and looked thoughtfully at Serena. Her head told her to flee, but her heart wanted her to give Serena another chance. Finally, she nodded: “All right. Like I said – we all make mistakes. But I want to know more about you. I’ll phone for some food, and you can tell me all about yourself. Where you were born. How your childhood was – that kind of things.”

Serena grinned and downed the rest of her wine: “Deal – so …once upon a time, there was a little girl whose parents named Serena Wendy …”

The evening went better than either of them had hoped. It even ended with a kiss. No more, but when their lips united, the sparks flew as strongly as ever.

They arranged to meet three days later, on Serena’s next day off and both went to bed in a hopeful mood.

When her phone rang two days later, Bernie answered mechanically. Not many people had her number, and she was expecting to hear Serena on the other end. However, the voice was unfamiliar, the news unwelcome and all thoughts of Serena flew out of her mind as she packed a bag and called for a cab. As she was waiting for it, she thought about calling Cameron and Charlotte, but she decided against it. She would deal with that on her own.

She tipped the cab driver generously to compensate him for having driven her more than a hour
away from Holby and took a deep breath before going into the care home and introducing herself. The staff was helpful and sympathetic. She had seen so many dead people that she had thought she would be able to maintain her composure. And yet, when she was ushered in the room where her mother’s body lay on a cold bed, she couldn’t keep her voice steady as she asked the staff to leave her alone for a little voice. She tentatively stroked her mother’s already waxy cheek and began to weep quietly. Not because she was dead, but because until that moment she had hoped for a brief instant of clarity in the haze of Alzheimer. A moment where her mother would have recognised her, where she might have told her she loved her. And more than for her mother’s death, it was for that moment she cried. When she felt sufficiently composed to face the staff, she wiped her eyes and left the room.

She booked herself in a hotel nearby and took care of the necessary administrative procedures. Then she phoned the vicar of the village where her mother had wanted to be buried – her native village. Discovered he had several parishes to take care of, and could only conduct the funeral four days later. Phoned Cameron and told him about his grand-mother. Told him not to come to the funeral – he had never really known his maternal grand-mother, and she knew it was important he completed his rotation without too many days away. Phoned Charlotte and left a message on her phone, telling her the same thing. Prepared to travel to the North of England. Went back to Holby to pack a little more clothes, and finally took the train up North, having met with Cam who to his credit offered to accompany. Refused. Told Charlotte the same when she phoned back a day later, during a stilted and short exchange. And four days later, stood in a near-empty church, with a vicar who called her mother the wrong name during the whole of the short service.

What she didn’t do was phone Serena and cancel their plans. Nor did she see her messages – in a hurry to leave, she had left her mobile plugged to the charger in her flat, and decided she would manage without one for a few days.

When Bernie didn’t show up at the expected time and place, Serena got worried. When she didn’t get any answers to her messages, she got even more worried. She almost asked Cameron, but if she revealed she knew his mother, things would get complicated. So she didn’t. She just grew angry. And then something happened which took her mind of the wayward blonde. Something so dreadful and unexpected it shook the whole hospital. And of course it had to happen in her ward. Because where else a former patient off his meds would manage to come in and stab one of the staff “because she looked like his f*ing, cheating girlfriend.” Everything could have been fine – and as Serena paced anxiously out of the theatre where Jasmine Barrows was fighting for her life, she was convinced the young woman would be fine. Only she wasn’t. Only she arrested too many times, and the surgeons were unable to save her. And as her colleague shook his head, Serena collapsed. Because this couldn’t happen. Not again. Not after Eleanor.

Everyone grieved for the young F1. Henrik Hanssen made a speech, and Serena almost resigned. Because it was all her fault. She should have taken better care of her staff. But she didn’t – because she had to stay strong for the rest of her team. The other F1s, who were shell-shocked – even Cameron didn’t have any smart comment to make. Her registrar. Everyone. She had to be there for them. The fact that Bernie wasn’t here for her made things worse.
Chapter 34

When Bernie came back home and found the messages, she swore. The army had given her quite a colourful vocabulary. She couldn’t believe she had fucked up so royally. Because who in their right mind would forget to call their girlfriend and cancel a date? Of course, she may not have been completely in her right mind, but even so… Serena’ messages were not the only one on her answer phone. Cameron had called too. And Sosia – which was even rarer. As she listened to those messages, she gritted her teeth. She could only imagine what Serena was going through – the death of a young person was always a tragedy, the loss of a team member always personal. Several medics had died during her days of service and she had mourned each one deeply. Coming so soon after Serena’s bereavement, the death of Jasmine Barrows must have re-opened fresh wounds. And she hadn’t been there for her.

She checked her watch – only 6pm – Serena was probably still at the hospital. Not taking the time to change or freshen up after her train journey, she jumped into another cab and a few minutes later she stood hesitantly in front of the psych ward doors. She took a deep breath and strode in, looking around to see if she could spot either Serena or her son. The whole ward appeared subdued – even the patients seemed less agitated than she would expect. Trying to look as if she belonged, she stepped towards Serena’s office, knocked and walked in without waiting for an answer. Serena was alone, staring unseeingingly at her computer screen. When Bernie entered, she raised her head sharply: “What are you doing here?”

Bernie tried a feeble joke: “Hm…taking a constitutional?”

Serena’s scowl remained firmly on her face and Bernie bit her lips: “Sorry. Am I – I mean, are you busy?”

Serena remained silent and Bernie perched on the rim of the couch. “Serena – I’m so sorry. I heard about Dr Barrows. It’s …It’s awful.”

“So that’s why you’re here? Do you want to know if I’d fucked her too?”

Bernie reeled back as if she’d been struck and tears welled up in her eyes. She swallowed hard and murmured: “Serena – that’s not fair. I know I messed up, but…”

Still in a bitter, harsh tone, Serena went on: “Oh – you messed up? So – I thought we were supposed to try and make this work? Try to make our relationship work! And you couldn’t even call me to cancel?”

Bernie hung her head and a few stray blond hairs covered her face: “I’m sorry. I – I had to go away, and I forgot my phone, and…”

“How nice for you – so you took a little trip and forgot all about us…”

“My mother died.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I said – my mother died. I had to make the arrangements for the funeral. I came back this afternoon.”
Serena felt mortified. She got up and took Bernie in her arms, stroking her hair. “Oh no – oh Bernie – I’m sorry – I’m so sorry – why didn’t you say something? Stop me from being an utter bitch…”

“I was trying to tell you” said Bernie in a muffled voice, her face buried in Serena’s blouse. They hugged each other harder and suddenly both women had their cheeks wet.

“Serena – I don’t want to lose you… I …I more than like you.”

“And I don’t want to lose you. I more than like you too.”

The two women remained entwined for a little while, both needing the comforting closeness and the reassurance. They sealed their reconciliation over a drink at Albie’s and Serena drove them both home – her home. The guest room wasn’t even mentioned.
Chapter 35

EPILOGUE

Her dress uniform had remained in the boxes, because Bernie had thought she would never wear it again. However, when one was to receive an OBE from the Queen, there were no other options. She had wanted to refuse it, because in her opinion she had only done her duty. But she hadn’t, because her former Commanding Officer would have been livid. And so she would do her duty again and accept it. Because once a soldier, always a soldier. She shook out the heavy jacket and laid it on her bed. She found a clean white shirt, tights and dug out the tie from the jacket’s pocket. She had cut her hair since her army days and they were no longer regulation length, which seemed odd as she glanced at herself in the mirror to make sure the tie was straight. She had also lost weight, so much that she had to secure the skirt with a safety pin. Two arms snuck out behind her and threatened to rumple the perfectly ironed shirt.

“Sorry, Major – never could resist a woman in uniform…”

“Because you’ve known a lot of them, have you?”

The arms turned her around and Serena pressed a kiss on her lips. “Just one – but it’s enough for me to know.”

Bernie giggled and handed Serena her tie. “Help me with that?”

In theory, she could do her tie with her eyes closed, but even many months after her diagnosis, she hadn’t completely accepted the fact she needed help now and then, and for her to ask for it was a big step. Serena did a careful knot, stealing a few kisses in between and smoothed Bernie’s shirt with her fingers. She then helped her into the navy blue jacket with red and gold trimmings and Bernie slipped the skirt on. After another long and loving kiss, she took her cap and tucked it under her arm, offering her other arm to Serena: “Shall we?”

Standing at attention for the National Anthem, Bernie kept her eyes firmly in front of her but let her mind wander on the last months. Part of her still couldn’t believe what had happened, especially as she was standing in uniform once again. She still belonged to the army in a way, and always would. But that life was over – a new one had begun. Just before her name was called by the Lord Chamberlain, Bernie sought out her guests in the small crowd. She had asked Charlotte to come, but her daughter was on a road trip with her boyfriend – four months backpacking in Australia. Her three guests, therefore, were Serena, looking very elegant and utterly delicious in a black satin sheath dress, Cameron, very smart in a dark grey suit and Sosia, without whom she would never have met the love of her life, and who had been delighted to be asked. These three people tied her to Holby with gossamer threads. The relationship with her son had its ups and downs, but she at last had a chance to make up for her absence during his childhood. He was her family. Her relationship with Serena was still in the blundering stages of youth, but it was also a promise for the future – she would never be alone again. As for Sosia, she represented her link to the hospital and her new career – she had begun to train as a psychologist, and when she qualified, Henrik Hanssen had promised her a job. He had driven a hard bargain, though – he had somehow extorted the promise she would deliver a series of lectures on trauma surgery…

“Major Berenice Wolfe!”

Bernie started as she heard her name and walked towards the Queen as she had been told to do. She executed a small bob and probably answered the sovereign, but afterwards, she couldn’t for the life
of her remember what either of them had said. As she posed outside with her guests for pictures, she finally allowed herself to relax and smile – for the first time in months, she felt happy.

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