Relocating Happiness: Penguins Not Included
by ncruuk

Summary

Bernie's shift is over, their bags are packed: it's time for a Major and her Captain to fly south and begin their next joint adventure, together in their happy bubble.

[Immediate chronological sequel to 'In the Wee Small Hours...' chapter 5, series sequel to 'The Migratory Flight of a Flightless Bird....or why the answer should always include Penguins' (story 10 of the series). It won't make much sense if you haven't read those to stories as a minimum].

It is set in my 'headcanon' in which Alex comes back and diverges from show canon almost immediately after the first Alex appearance in 2016 [you really need to read the rest of the series by this point! Oh, and I really don't like Marcus.....].

Notes

The characters you recognise from the TV show are not mine, but the original characters of Bernie's father, grandmother and assorted Army patients and colleagues are my own, entirely fictitious creations.

I am neither a soldier, medic, nor in any way connected with the Falklands (would love to visit) but have tried to create a story which is readable and plausible, based on my research for this particular story and years of general interest/reading. However, if there's anything that is hideously wrong and detracting from the overall read, please let me know.
Chapter 1

"Do I need to salute?" teased Alex gently, drawing her partner out of her own thoughts.

"I don't think this counts as uniform..." Bernie turned her attention away from the window and smiled at Alex. "Very smart..." Once upon a time she would have tried to explain away the huskiness in her voice by clearing her throat and coughing but those times were in the past. "...Captain." Bernie leaned forwards, the arm that wasn't keeping the towel tucked neatly in at her chest reaching towards Alex, the invitation clear. "Hey you..." she murmured as Alex's hips pressed against hers and long arms wrapped around her.

"Hey yourself..." Lips pressed together for a moment before parting, each aware that the time they had together just now was precious and short. "...how was it?"

“Long…” Even as Bernie thought back over her double length shift she’d just completed on Keller, she felt the yawn coming and decided not to bother fighting it. “...Very civilian…” she added once she’d recovered from the yawn, her forehead dropping onto Alex’s as she tried to regain some energy from somewhere. She hadn’t been fazed by the long shifts she’d signed up for, nor the relative predictability of the general surgery ward workload of this specific shift compared to the more trauma-like cases she had habitually been given via AAU and the Emergency Department in the last few weeks. She'd accepted it as a possibility since she’d technically switched from staff consultant to locum cover once she knew she would be being posted 'soon' but without a precise date. Long shifts had been a part of her medical life, military or civilian for as long as she could remember, but these last few weeks, as she’d been helping out wherever she was most useful while counting down the weeks until she resumed her military career, the awkwardness that she’d been so conscious of at the start of her Holby career had returned. "And I’d forgotten how calm general surgery can be at night." With so much of the ward's cases coming from planned procedures, the nighttime activities lurched between entirely non-surgical and emergency, but even then the emergency interventions came with a full patient history and a very short patient transfer time if surgery was required. Compared to the full-on chaos of a military trauma unit in an active conflict zone, even a busy night felt eerily quiet.

Closing her eyes, Bernie took a deep breath, letting her fingers find and then trace the crisp straight edge of Alex’s uniform belt as she gathered up the last fragments of Ms Wolfe and tidied them away to the far reaches of her thoughts, creating the space for Major Wolfe to uncoil once more and settle about her. After another centreing breath, she lifted her head and opened her eyes, her exhaustion replaced with a new energy as she let her mind finally turn towards their future, together. “It doesn’t feel real...” she whispered, her forehead resting against Alex’s again as she tried to relax and let the rhythm of military life become part of their rhythm once more, only this time everything could fit together in harmony without any shadows or fears.

“It’s real…” promised Alex, knowing what Bernie meant. Like Bernie, she’d joined the Army
before the ban on being ‘out’ was lifted, and while she hadn’t seen fellow soldiers dismissed for their orientation, unlike Bernie, this day had still been nothing more than a dream for so long. And that had just been the dream of being able to deploy with the name of her female partner on her ‘next of kin’ forms rather than her brother. Then, in more recent years, when that generic dream had begun to feel possible, there had been the unique challenges that loving Bernie had brought, challenges that had again made the dream feel unattainable… “...hey!”

“It wasn’t that hard,” teased Bernie, running her fingers over the smooth curve of uniform-covered rear that she’d just pinched, “and I’m not in uniform yet,” she added, not sure if she was reminding Alex that her only defence against being pinched was a towel so retaliation was unfair or that all bets were off.

“No,” agreed Alex, taking advantage of the bare slope of shoulder meeting neck and dropping her lips to press against the still damp skin. She still wasn’t quite sure why Bernie had pinched her, but that was something she could find a way to ask once they were both in uniform, whereas her lover’s neck and collar-bones would be shortly off-limit for several days. Their relationship was no longer forbidden and Bernie was not strictly her CO anymore, but there were still lines they shouldn’t and wouldn’t cross until they were both off duty and out of uniform once more, something that wasn’t going to happen until they’d both been in the Falklands for at least a couple of days.

“Al...” Bernie felt the cold edge of the window sill connect with her shoulder blades as she leaned back, any feeble attempt at trying to move out of kissing range negated by her arching neck as she tried to keep her chin from getting in the way. “...not fair...”

“’S’fair.” Alex’s response was muffled as she followed the taut line of the sternocleido-mastoid muscle with her lips, using it to move from Bernie’s neck to jaw, smiling as she heard the familiar sounds of her lover confirming she was finding all the right spots to kiss.

“Al...” It wasn’t fair, in Bernie’s view, that she wasn’t able to return the kisses and touches in the same way, although an annoying voice at the back of her mind was trying to remind her that this was a surprise extra moment for the two of them being together and alone before their lengthy transit to the South Atlantic. “...m...mmm...” Any further protests she’d been going to make about not feeling able to reciprocate were abandoned when she felt Alex’s lips on hers and she was able to express herself using a different shared vocabulary. Letting go of her towel, trusting the combination of Alex’s body pressed against her and the window ledge at her back would keep the towel in place and therefore shielded from unwanted observation, Bernie ran her hands up the now familiar dips and curves of Alex’s back, feeling the contours of muscle and bone in spite of the layers of uniform covering them before tangling her fingers in the short strands at the nape of her lover’s neck.
A few moments later the quiet but insistent beeping sound coming from Alex’s mobile phone managed to see their lips and bodies part, Bernie’s towel still just about in place. The combination of lockers and Alex had prevented anyone who might have entered the locker room from turning their private moment into exhibitionism and this far up the hospital, only the occasional passing pigeon stood a chance of spotting anything through the slatted blinds.

In fact, it was precisely because of this particular locker room’s high vantage point that Bernie had even been looking out of the window in the first place, with its view of the Peace Garden and car parks, Holby in the distance. What had once been an alien landscape to her for its lack of khaki and sand was now a familiar vista showing her the very different greens of Southern England’s trees and plants, with civilian paramedics moving around their ambulances. And yet, as at ease as she had finally begun to feel within it, it still never quite felt familiar, never quite managed to give her the sense of peace and perspective she knew she managed to find in far less calm or civilian landscapes. And now it was going to change as they swapped South West England for the Southern Atlantic, exchanged one sort of ‘green and pleasant’ landscape for another, exchanged the now familiar blues and reds of Holby’s scrubs for the uniform she’d always felt at ease in from the very start.

Stepping back from temptation, Alex shoved her hands in her trouser pockets and leant back against the lockers, pulling out her mobile phone in her right hand and switching off the alarm she’d set.

“Problem?” Bernie’s mobile phone made one sort of noise when she got an email (which she then ignored as it was invariably some meaningless email version of junk mail), another sort of noise when she got a text message of some sort (which she paid attention to as it would generally be Alex or her kids) or a nice traditional ringing sound if someone actually wanted to talk to her (usually fifty-fifty for being answered). Alex’s phone however, was far more tuneful, with the range of noises being augmented by alarms, reminders and other useful nudges that often were set up by Alex more for Bernie’s benefit than her own.

“A reminder…” Alex put the phone back in her pocket and crossed her arms in an effort to help resist any temptation she might have to ‘help’ Bernie until at least the first couple of layers of uniform were in place. “…we need to be downstairs again in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty?” Bernie frowned as she moved over to the locker she’d been using this shift, having been tipped off by Dom Copeland when she’d started her two weeks of covering Keller shifts that it had been left unclaimed after the latest influx of F1s. Sharing the small AAU office with Serena, it hadn’t mattered how little space there was for anything other than the inevitable heaps of reports and paperwork there always was because she’d never been one to have ‘things’ she needed space for. Covering for Sasha Levy’s surgeries and teaching while he was off had left her wondering what she’d need an office for - there was significantly less paperwork than she’d had to cope with on AAU and so, after her first day she’d politely refused his offer of his office. “I didn’t take that long showering did I?” She might have moved a little slower, lingered just a little longer under the surprisingly hot water than she usually did, knowing she had most of the next twenty-four hours in an aircraft, even if it was going to be one of the RAF’s more comfortable ‘civilian’ style planes
rather than an out-and-out military aircraft that prioritised armaments and cargo space over seat padding and leg room.

“No.” Alex looked at her boots while she tried to wait until Bernie was a little more dressed than not so they didn’t end up running out of time. “New plan…that’s not my idea by the way, I’m just the messenger.” She looked up in time to see that her girlfriend was no longer towel clad, instead Bernie was in the process of fastening layers of uniform before the final tucking in and squaring away, Bernie having left her uniform ready to pull on extra quickly in case she’d had a surgery overrun.

“Oh?” asked Bernie, sitting down on the bench to start to put her socks and boots on. "Whose plan is it? And have I time for something to eat on the way?"
"Fidgeting was not part of the plan Peter…"

"No Sir." His sheepish smile was more befitting a Cadet than a Lieutenant-Colonel, but Peter Parker tried to at least hold the thick envelope still and not bounce his knee. "Thank you for being here Sir."

"Wouldn't have missed it." The older man, now weeks away from his retirement from the Army had needed no persuasion to leave his desk for the trip down to Holby. "And better here than a parade square." Standing up to conceal his own desire to fidget, he turned to look out at the Holby AAU ward through the slatted blinds of the small consultant's office they were borrowing as a waiting room. "Or an Air Base."

"Would we have got her to a parade square?" asked Peter, resisting the urge to stand by the windows as well.

"I was never stupid enough to try." Anything more he might have been going to say was quickly abandoned when he saw the flash of khaki in amongst the group of blue scrub wearing staff that had just come onto the ward. "Look alive Peter."

"Serena's still in theatre…” Bernie had managed to have a coffee with her fellow AAU Consultant a few hours ago between respective surgeries, so she was unclear why Alex was heading to the AAU Consultant's Office, and why she was insisting on carrying Bernie’s Bergen. "... and I moved out a couple of weeks ago." Clearing out of the office had been a bit more involved than emptying her locker upstairs just now, but still only required a small bag to put a few photographs and books in. She saw a figure stand up inside the office, his distinctive build immediately recognisable, causing her shoulders to stiffen slightly, a movement Alex was all too aware of, though it was masked by Bernie detouring to throw away her banana peel.

"He's only here because of seeing me earlier - remember I didn't go to HQ because we helped Ronnie and Charlie move." Although she now understood why her attempt to duck a half day of RAMC admin had been so easily relocated to the hospital coffee shop on Bernie's last day - it was a convenient cover for a larger plan.

"Ah." Pausing by the nurse's station as a final, rare moment of procrastination by Bernie, she looked at Alex with a crooked smile, partly acknowledging she'd been 'caught' by Alex but mostly because she was, the unexpected appearance of 'Perfect Peter' aside, feeling genuinely happy about what lay ahead for them, together. "So the kids are the ones who ruined my plan?"
"What was your plan?"

"Ten more minutes than we had with only one of us in uniform Captain."

"That was a good plan," agreed Alex, leaning against the desk, planning to hang back once Bernie saw who was just now opening the Consultant's Office door, dropping her voice to a quieter, less official sounding tone. "But I think his takes precedence..." she added, jerking her chin towards the office. "... Go on Bern..." she encouraged, smiling confidently, not knowing anything about what was going to happen, just knowing from Colonel Parker's request that she should bring Bernie down to the office as an old, good friend of hers wanted to see her before their flight.

"But.." Confused, and really hating surprises, Bernie's curiosity outvoted her reluctance and she turned around, her frown confirming that she was prepared to not like what she saw. "... General?"

Alex watched, her own smile growing as she saw her lover's shoulders relax a little bit when she saw the man who was standing in the AAU office doorway, the only hint of his military identity the ubiquitous RAMC regimental tie the men all felt obliged to wear when on Army business and not in uniform. His own answering smile, that was better described as a broad grin, saw Alex's own shoulders relax as the last bit of slight distrust in the veracity of the Colonel's message disappeared.

"Try again Berenice ..." Hearing the teasing use of her lover's rarely ever heard full first name with the gentle, lazy rhythm that reminded Alex of some of the Caribbean-born staff and patients she'd worked with in her career told her who this friendly giant of a man was, and she was extra glad she'd decided to obey Parker's almost-order.

"Algie!" With a single bark of her distinctive laugh, Bernie strode across the ward and met her old friend in the doorway, their handshake quickly evolving into the rather strange looking hug that happens when two people, neither natural huggers, find themselves in an embrace.

"It's good to see you." With a final tight squeeze of her shoulders, he let go and stepped back, studying her. "You're..."

"Whole," agreed Bernie, knowing what he was going to say, seeing his eyes dart away from hers to where she knew Alex was standing. "And yes."
"Good." Nodding in satisfaction with everything, the General stepped back, gesturing for Bernie to join him in her old office, not remotely bothered that the other man had no idea what he and Bernie were talking about. "Captain Dawson?" he called out, waving her over.

"Sir?" Bernie may get away with addressing him by some sort of nickname, but Alex was certain that was a right General Winsham granted to a very few.

"Join us please?"

Alex was torn - she wanted to be with Bernie if Bernie wanted her to be there, but she also knew that their transport would be arriving any moment and their mountain of bags had to be sorted.

"Peter can meet your transport, can't you?"

"Yes General." Passing the envelope to the General, Peter realised that he was actually relieved to be ordered to take over from Alex, feeling rather out of place suddenly, like he was about to intrude on something private. “I’ll take that for you Captain,” he offered as he passed Alex, taking Bernie’s Bergen from her and shouldering it easily, it being the last piece of their accumulated luggage that Jason was currently guarding for them just outside the Wyvern Wing entrance.

"Algie?" Stepping aside so that her former pupil could leave, Bernie tried to work out from her first proper mentor what exactly he was up to while she waited for Alex to join them in the office.

“Introductions first.” He turned to concentrate on Alex, determined to make sure she felt included in the conversation that was about to happen. “Hello Captain, we’ve never met I don’t think?"

“No Sir…” Alex shook the offered hand, working through her memory to place when she might have crossed paths with him from a distance. “...a couple of ‘welcome home’ parade ground speeches is the closest I think.” Most of her memories were actually being told to clear out of the Mess because ‘the CO’s coming’ and she and her fellow ‘in-transit’ medics weren’t compatible with the dress code, but she decided not to mention that.

“Ah, Bergen-Hohne?” Once upon a time, every member of the RAMC had spent significant time based in Germany where there were Corps Regiments permanently stationed, meaning large numbers of the Army’s medical staff had passed through Algie’s direct command over the years he had been posted there in various positions. But that number was dwindling now, with the regiments back in the UK or disbanded - it was, instead, increasingly becoming a useful yardstick
by which to unofficially ‘age’ someone, especially useful given experience and rank didn’t always correlate.

“Yes Sir.”

“Not my best speeches to be honest, never saw the point to them myself, only got in the way of the good bit.”

Before she answered, Alex risked a sideways glance at Bernie who was now just in Alex’s eyeline, and just out of the General’s, hoping she’d provide some sort of hint as to what might be meant by ‘the good bit’. The smirk and nod that suggested she was on safe ground, with Bernie knowing what Alex had come to consider her immediate priority when returning from her Reserve Duty weekends.

“Partner and pint?” hazarded Alex, trying to use one of the less crude variants she’d heard throughout her Army career, not sure that ‘Bernie and a Beer’ was quite appropriate given their current company.

“My wife and a whiskey, but close enough Captain. Nice to finally meet you properly, General Albert Winsham but when it’s just us call me Algie.”

“Alex Dawson…” She wasn’t really sure what to say next, not being in the habit of meeting Generals when they weren’t in uniform and she was, and never when they were insisting she call them by something other than their rank. “And it’s an unexpected surprise to meet you here.” He seemed as nice as Bernie had always implied he was, and clearly the two were genuinely fond of each other - Alex had met enough officers that Bernie merely tolerated to know he was different. But none of that explained why he’d decided to come to Holby with just enough time to meet Bernie before she headed East across Southern England to fly to the Falklands, nor why he’d included Alex in whatever it was he was here to talk about.

“Why are you here Algie?” asked Bernie, reinserting herself into the conversation now they’d both finished introducing themselves to each other. “I’ve done all the paperwork I was sent…”

“By Peter, yes. But there’s a couple of pieces he didn’t send.” Algie opened the thick envelope Peter had given him as he’d left the office and pulled out two sheets of paper, before passing the envelope itself to Alex. “This one because I asked him not to,” he continued, passing over one of the sheets to Bernie who took it automatically but didn’t look at it, waiting for him to continue to explain himself. “And this one because I wanted to give it to you myself…” He held out the second piece of paper but didn’t immediately pass it over, adding, “…I thought Captain Dawson
"Honours Sir?" Alex knew that he'd just told her to call him Algie, but it was going to take a bit to adjust to… and she'd wait until he was calling her Alex.

His nod towards the envelope encouraged her to look inside. Seeing what it contained, she wasn't sure whether to grin or frown, but she was at least now a bit clearer on why he was here and not just intercepting them at the Air Base. At least she now knew the surprise pieces of paper weren’t discharge orders.

"I don't understand…” Bernie had now looked at the first piece of paper he'd handed over, which, once she'd signed it would see her reinstated to Lieutenant-Colonel, a rank she had surrendered years ago, publicly declaring it was because she had found it had forced her out of the operating theatre.

It hadn't been a particularly good time for her professionally, with Army colleagues not understanding something she couldn't explain and her family...Marcus not understanding hadn’t been new, whether she explained or not, so she’d elected to not explain. Not that she could, because how could she explain that the promotion wasn't just taking her out of her surgical theatre, but it was also taking her out of the military theatre and forcing her to try to be the woman her husband had been waiting for? How could she explain that her only now realised how much she hated it? How much she couldn't live as the woman she was being forced to pretend to be? How could it be different now? It had to be different…she'd not finally broken free of the illusions and been able to be herself now she knew who that was, with Alex...Alex who was here, at her old friend’s invitation... How was this even possible?

"You never read what you signed then, did you?” His gentle question, a hint of fatherly amusement in his voice that still now had the power to remind her of her own father, brought her out of her spiraling whirlwind of doubt and confusion.

"You know I didn't, I trust you Algie." She'd been far more interested in reading the details of her deployment that she'd be going on once she was 'Major Wolfe' again. All the paperwork had been the means to an end and the start of something better again. So she'd signed where he said to sign, removed her rank slides from her uniform and replaced them with the familiar crown denoting the rank of 'Major'.

"You signed for a temporary reduction in rank in order to enable a specialist deployment. Your new deployment doesn't have that rank restriction so you can be reinstated." He held up a friendly hand to stop her from interrupting him. "And no, this doesn't alter what you are doing - there's been a quiet revolution since last time." Actually it hadn't been that quiet, with Algie arguing himself almost hoarse on multiple occasions but finally he’d persuaded enough of his colleagues to see the
attitudes and approaches change.

"I can still do surgery?"

"You can, anywhere you deploy." It had taken a while, but finally the penny had dropped that the 'surgeon' in the rank of Surgeon-General wasn’t supposed to be honorific, meaning that the inferred presumption that at a certain rank Medical Officers ceased to do their actual medical specialty was finally and thoroughly condemned. He’d even made damn certain of that by doing a final surgery right before his final transfer to his current pre-retirement post. "You've more than earned it Bernie, I'm just sorry it took so long."

"Doesn't matter." Bernie had never seen her military career as being defined by her rank, nor had she measured her success by her accumulated rank. Still it was nice to have what she'd earned and, petty though it was, she was glad not to have to call Perfect Peter 'Sir', if only because she’d realised that made her feel like a dinosaur rather than the one they’d all learned from. "When does it become effective?" She'd taken a while to remember to answer to 'Colonel' the first time around, so ingrained was responding to 'Major', but this time she was just out of practice at being addressed by any rank, so she’d have to adjust again no matter what.

"When you sign that paper." Before Algie could reach into his jacket pocket for his pen to lend her, Alex had plucked one from her uniform and held it out for Bernie, silently confirming that she was entirely supportive of the idea of her girlfriend being Lieutenant-Colonel Wolfe one more.

"Thanks Al…"

"You're welcome Major …" Alex’s teasing, uttered just before Bernie put pen to paper caused the blond to huff in mock annoyance and Algie to chuckle, knowing he had been going to say exactly the same thing.

"And this one…” Algie didn't give Bernie a chance to react to the moment she'd regained her rank, instead passing her the other piece of paper he'd brought with him.

"The Army not got photocopiers anymore?" asked Bernie, seeing that the paper appeared identical and automatically signing it in the same place as the first one.

"We've got photocopiers Colonel, but that wasn't a copy…” He knew he was pushing it a bit close in terms of respecting proper process but he had few opportunities to tease her over the last few
years and knew she'd forgive him, eventually. Plus he knew she'd appreciate the efficiency - this way was saving them wasting time arguing.

"Then…" Bernie scanned the not quite identical page, her widening eyes letting Algie and Alex know when she found the subtle but important difference, a difference Alex had been clued in on when she’d looked inside the envelope she’d been given.

"Long overdue if you ask me." Algie spoke to fill the silence, not wanting Bernie to have an opportunity to start talking herself out of it. Some officers seemed to join the Army specifically for the rank they sought rapid progression into, with little to no regard for the soldiers in their command along the way. Others, like Bernie, focused on the day job and only considered promotion as a mechanism by which they could be in a more effective position to keep doing the day job. It was recognising that mindset that had seen Algie officially sign off on Bernie’s request to be reduced in rank originally, but now also was the reason for him revisiting her records and being able to put together not only the case for reinstatement but also promotion. “And it does mean the number of people within 8,000 miles who can pull rank on you is about a handful.”

For some, such absolute authority might be a risk, with the lack of a sounding board or counterbalancing second opinion creating the potential for egomania or disaster, but he’d no such worries or concerns here. Bernie Wolfe had, in her professional lives of medicine and the military, not been prone to wild flights of fancy or recklessness. Privately, Algie’d always thought it was her personal life where things were most likely to go awry, with her decision making in his view generally tending towards the stupid and involved her husband, although the presence of Alex Dawson openly in her life seemed to be proof he didn’t need to worry about that now either.

“And Alex.”

“And Alex what?” Algie looked at the Captain, hoping for some hint as to what he’d missed while he’d been letting his mind wander back to the time when he’d been the Major and Bernie the Captain.

“Can pull rank on me,” teased Bernie, using the opportunity to check with her partner before she signed this latest piece of paper. “Always has been able to,” she added, seeing Alex’s small nod and mouthed ‘sap’ as the necessary hint to get on and sign what was hopefully her last piece of paperwork about herself for a while.

“I…” Algie wasn’t quite sure what he was supposed to make of that remark, but he wasn’t sure it was his place to outright ask or look to Alex for an explanation.
“The…” Alex canted her head to one side as she watched Bernie’s confident signature complete, confirming her acceptance of her new rank, “…Colonel perhaps should have mentioned I’m an anaesthetist and that surgeons don’t always remember that they need a bit of help from us mere mortals to successfully operate.”

“That too…” agreed Bernie, giving Alex back her pen and Algie the now signed paperwork. “…but I was thinking about how you refuse to do the washing up.”

Algie was delighted in the lightness of his old friend’s mood and her confident casual openness about her life with Alex, an openness and lightness that he’d always felt was worryingly absent whenever conversation had ventured towards her then-husband. Seizing the opportunity to join in the conversation and, in his own small way, confirm to them both how happy he was for them without embarrassing either of them with some ham-fisted attempt at saying so directly, he admitted that his wife was the same, adding. “She claimed it because she couldn’t stand to watch me do the drying because I always looked like I was going to drop everything. Actually…” Completely unexpectedly, he was suddenly struck by something. “…since moving back from Germany we’ve had a dishwasher. I think I miss doing the washing up!” Loading and unloading the dishwasher together wasn’t quite the same as those quiet few minutes together with him washing the dishes after dinner and them idly chatting about whatever occurred to them while Meg dried.

"I don't know what to say Algie…"

"About dishwashers?"

"Funny boy."

"That's General Funny Boy to you Colonel, and you don't need to say anything." His expression shifted to a more serious one as he made his point. "Your promotion to Colonel was overdue before you left for Afghanistan the last time. This is not undeserved, nor is it a sympathy job. There's just one problem." He was a General, he was supposed to be expert at being serious but today with her? He was struggling to contain his delight for her and relief at seeing her so at ease with herself.

"Problem Sir?" Bernie could think of several problems that this double promotion was causing, starting with all her travel plans which were organised for Major Wolfe.

"Your uniform could do with a little bit of work…” he let his gaze drop from hers to the front of her uniform where she was, unsurprisingly, still wearing the rank slide showing the single crown
that denoted the rank of Major. "Captain? Perhaps you could assist the Colonel while I go and find my briefcase. I believe a young man called Jason was looking after it for me…” And, with a final grin and a wink, General Winsham excused himself and left the AAU Consultant's office.
“I promise I knew nothing about any of this!” Knowing Bernie didn’t really like surprises, Alex was keen to emphasise that the somewhat risky idea of surprising her with a double promotion was definitely not something the anaesthetist had been involved in advocating for.

“I believe you,” assured Bernie, looking down at her rank slide as if seeing it for the first time when she was actually seeing this particular rank for the last time. “He was always seek forgiveness rather than ask permission, even in theatre.” He’d been the one to teach her about prioritising in a trauma, and about how to modify her mindset when they shifted from peacetime military medicine to warzones.

“He’s got you these…” Alex pulled the contents of the envelope out, carefully clutching the fabric rank slides that they wore on their shoulders or chests depending on which uniform they were wearing, as well as a small laminated card. “...and a new ID.” Alex looked at the photograph on it which was identical to the one on Bernie’s current ID and was the one she’d endured being taken a few weeks back when she’d been at HQ to complete all her returning to active duty paperwork. “Still look like a zombie.”

“Ah, but it’s Colonel Zombie now…” grumbled Bernie, taking the ID from Alex and putting it in the same pocket as the one she’d only recently got.

“Colonel Wolfe…” Alex canted her head as she studied Bernie, trying the new rank out but mostly just feeling really proud for her. Plus it wasn’t exactly a new experience, addressing Bernie as Colonel as there had been a brief period before, after Alex’s first tour in Afghanistan, when Bernie was enduring being a Lieutenant-Colonel based in England, when their paths had crossed.

“Not too intimidating?” Bernie’s tone was serious, but her smirk and arched eyebrow gave away her amusement, recalling Alex explaining the real reason she’d avoided the newly promoted Major-now-Lt-Colonel Wolfe that time they’d both been stuck at the same boring Regimental dinner. 

“That was before I knew your knickers had sheep on them…” Admittedly, the knickers were a silly gift from Alex who was rather amused by the wordplay of ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’. She’d rather assumed that they’d never be worn but ever practical Bernie, who had immediately got the joke, was not going to let a print pattern prevent her from wearing what was a fundamentally decent pair of knickers from Marks’. And she certainly wasn’t going to leave them behind - she wasn’t quite sure how straightforward getting new underwear might be in the Falklands so had made a point of packing plenty to take with her. As a rule, she was perfectly content to, if necessary, essentially live in her uniform if she ran out of civvies, but she would never resort to Army issue underwear - she’d managed to avoid having to descend to that level of discomfort in wartime, she’d
continue to avoid it in a peacetime posting too.

“Not today, those are packed.” Bernie moved her hand to her chest, preparing to remove the rank slide showing her to be a Major when Alex’s hand settled on hers, stopping her.

“May I?”

Wordlessly, Bernie dropped her hand and shifted her weight backwards until she was perched on the edge of her old desk, yet to be reclaimed by hospital maintenance, very content to have these last few private moments with Alex before they set off travelling. It was one thing to not be publically demonstrative with affection because of military rules and her marriage, but with neither of those obstacles in place, they’d both discovered that they shared a preference for non-public physical displays of their shared love and affection. In uniform or not, Bernie had admitted to Alex she’d struggled to picture herself getting lost in kissing Alex while sat on an airplane surrounded by 200 strangers, only to discover Alex shared her struggle. Plus, if she was honest with herself, the double shift was starting to take its toll on her and she’d probably fall asleep moments after take off if given half a chance.

It only took a few seconds for Alex to remove Bernie’s old rank and fix the slide showing the two Stars and a Crown denoting her new rank in place, the patterned khaki uniform they were both wearing far less fiddly to affix rank emblems to than their other work day uniforms where their ranks were on their shoulders. Pausing after she’d sorted out Bernie’s thick outer jacket layer, Alex debated with herself as to whether she should ask Bernie to undo her jacket so Alex could change over the rank on Bernie’s shirt, before realising that her partner had closed her eyes. Whether it was to have a one minute micro-nap to alleviate strained eyes (Alex hadn’t had a chance yet to find out how much of Bernie’s double shift had been spent wearing the magnifying glasses certain surgical procedures warranted) or to just process everything that had just happened to her, Alex didn’t know, but she decided to just quietly work around her partner’s ‘nap’ and ensure her shirt was showing the correct rank too. Pulling open the jacket’s velcro fastening, Alex wasn’t surprised to see that Bernie had properly fastened her jacket with the zipper too, despite it being far too thick and warm for the current Holby climate. Pulling down the zipper, the rasp of the zip’s teeth sounded loud in the quiet of the small office, Alex stopped when she could see the shirt’s rank slide. Removing this one and switching it for the Colonel’s rank took both hands, but familiarity with the uniform helped and seconds later Alex was closing the velcro over the jacket zip once more, though she refused to fully zip the jacket.

“Very smart…” she whispered, tracing over the stitching of the Crown emblem, a familiar gesture she’d done on more than one occasion when lying on Bernie’s bunk during an Afghan night, only now the Crown was towards the top of the fabric rectangle, sitting above the two stars that were identical in shape to the star Alex’s own uniform had three of.

Bernie slowly opened one eye, studying Alex with curiosity, wondering what she was thinking.
She wasn’t sure what she was thinking about this sudden promotion news, just recognising from Algie’s behaviour that she should go with it now and worry about the details later. But while she could accept the change of rank being thrust on her like this, it somehow felt wrong to just expect Alex to go along with it as easily. Just as it hadn’t occurred to Bernie to decide to take the Falklands’ posting without discussing with Alex what she wanted (something she’d never felt the urge to do with Marcus), it somehow felt strange not discussing this with Alex… "You once said Colonel Wolfe was too intimidating to ask out…"

"I did." Alex didn't see much point in disagreeing with Bernie - she was correct. "You were." Alex was fairly certain her cheeks were pinking as she remembered bumping into the newly promoted Lieutenant-Colonel in the ladies at some regiment function requiring the Mess Dress uniform that never really worked in the female variant the way it did for the men. "Sort of." Now wasn't the time to try and untangle what she'd meant then, nor was it really relevant now, not when she had something much more interesting to do. "Permission to kiss the Colonel?"

Bernie slipped her hands over the familiar curve of Alex’s hips, instinctively finding her way between the untucked ends of their uniform’s outer jacket layer so she was running her hands over the patterned fabric of the uniform trousers, gently coaxing the woman she loved into a gentle embrace. As their bodies pressed together, Bernie angled her head slightly and, eyes locked with Alex’s, nodded her ‘permission’.

“I love you…” Bernie’s voice was low and quiet, her whispered words made hoarser and quieter by the sudden thickness of emotion that she was trying to talk past as the reality of what Alex’s question was asking her really meant. She was Colonel Wolfe, trauma surgeon who was about to start her latest posting in the South Atlantic...and she was in love with Alexandra Dawson and it didn’t matter who knew it now, not amongst their families or the Army. “…so much…”

It didn’t matter that she didn’t feel she had the words to explain anything else to Alex, she didn’t need to - everything she wanted to make sure Alex knew she was able to explain with a kiss, a kiss Alex understood and reciprocated with equally heartfelt enthusiasm.
"Colonel?"

"She's asleep Corporal." Alex hadn't been expecting their car to RAF Brize Norton to be a military driver, but had quickly realised that it was a blessing in disguise as it meant there was no attempt by the driver to make small talk with her passengers. It hadn't taken very long once they were on the motorway for Bernie's early start before yesterday's dawn and subsequent double shift to catch up with her - within two junctions sleepy calm Bernie turned into a sleeping Bernie.

"Sorry Ma'am." The driver instinctively lowered her voice to barely louder than a whisper only to realise that the Captain had made no attempt to speak quietly and presumably the Colonel was still asleep. Clearly Colonel Wolfe was the sort of officer who could sleep through anything if they wanted to, so she continued to follow the Captain's lead and talk in a more normal speaking voice as she switched lanes to avoid being stuck behind the lorry as they climbed the hill. "Would you like to stop for anything before we get to the Base Ma'am?"

"Stop?" For a moment Alex was bemused by the question, unsure why they would break the journey given that they would need to be checking in for their flight in just over three hours or so, a mere four hours before their departure time later that evening. Their very long flight was supposed to be more comfortable than a combat zone troop plane as the 'air bridge' was operated with aircraft configured to be passenger carrying aircraft rather than cargo planes, but was nevertheless not going to be offering an overly luxurious service. "Please. But when we are nearer the Base if possible." That way not only could Bernie get a bit more sleep, but they would be better able to judge how long the remainder of the journey to the Base would take. Alex had no desire to be rushing to check in, but she also wasn't keen on spending longer than necessary waiting on the Base if it could be avoided - a half decent cup of coffee and some food that had recognisable ingredients in it would be a welcome bonus, especially if consumed slow enough to avoid indigestion and coffee stains.

"Of course Ma'am." The Corporal concentrated on changing back into the inside lane now they were up the hill - compared to an Army truck the estate car was fast, but with its boot full of the two Officers' kit and civilian luggage she could tell the car was well loaded and not accelerating as quickly as when she'd been driving down to Holby that morning to collect them.
"Thanks…” Alex lapsed into thoughtful silence as she watched the trees on the motorway embankment rush by, before turning her head away from the window and looking across at Bernie.

The tall surgeon had, despite the front passenger seat being pulled forwards to create decent legroom, turned in towards Alex and was now sitting as if wedged up against the corner between the car door and seat. Her arms were loosely folded across her chest and the side of her head was resting against the headrest. She was, as Alex had said to the driver fast asleep, a faint smile on her lips. With a smile of her own, Alex shifted slightly in her seat, mirroring Bernie's position and let her mind wander…

“Anyone seen the Major?”

“Wasn’t she with you?”

“No.” Alex ran her fingers through her sweaty hair and exhaled deeply, then immediately regretted taking a deep breath as all she got was a lungful of hot dusty desert air which only made her hotter. “Why did you think she was with me?” That might explain why she hadn’t been able to find her, because she was moving about looking for Alex.

“We walked here together, then she said she was continuing to ‘find where Captain Dawson had built the paperwork mountain this time’.” The nurse wiped her face with the small towel she’d brought into the makeshift gym and blinked away a few drops of sweat from her eyes before refocusing on Alex. “She never found you Ma’am?”

“No.” Alex hadn’t really expected to find the surgeon in the gym, but she’d last seen her talking to Thompson who was an self-confessed ‘gym bunny’. Therefore, having lost Major Wolfe somewhere between the wards and her ‘office’, the gym had seemed a good place to restart her hunt from. And the plan had worked. “But thank you,” she smiled at ‘Tommie’ Thompson and prepared to turn back out into the unrelenting sunshine. “I know where to look now.”

Alex walked on autopilot through the ‘streets’ of Bastion, nodding to soldiers she knew or needed to acknowledge as she wove her way around the curious mixture of tents, temporary buildings and shipping containers that made up the buildings of the base. When she’d started her first deployment out here she’d found the base huge and impossible to navigate, with everything looking the same or worse, looking like nothing at all due to the sand whipped up by the swirling winds. But now, at the start of her second deployment, she’d only needed a couple of days to reorientate herself, adjusting for the changes and improvements that had happened in her absence and retraining her autopilot to home in on her current bunk, not her previous one.
Turning to walk down the row of tents that was the female officers’ accommodations, she came to a stop in front of the flap that served as the ‘front door’ to the Major’s tent which, unusually for Bastion was currently only occupied by Major Wolfe. Seeing the flap was only half fastened, the normal convention for indicating that the tent was occupied but whoever was inside was disturbable, Alex quietly called out ‘knock knock’ since there was nothing solid against which to knock. After a few moments of silence and no answering call to enter, Alex moved to part the flap edges far enough to see if the Major was ‘at home’, only to dislodge a piece of paper that had been tucked into the fabric folds. Recognising the surgeon’s distinctive handwriting, she read the message and smiled before tucking it into her pocket and continuing into the tent. She had neither coffee (one of the requested peace offerings) nor a death wish (one of the penalties for failing to bring a peace offering). Expecting to be immediately confronted with the surgeon’s quick wit about her folly, especially considering the large stack of paperwork on the end of the vacant bunk had been left by Alex in what passed for the surgeon’s office to add to or complete, Alex wasn’t surprised to see the Major sat on the floor, back propped up by her rack.

Knowing that Major Wolfe had been in theatre for almost 24 hours continuously as they worked to stabilise the wounded from three separate IED incidents as well as an unfortunate accident at the helicopter airfield within the base, it wasn’t surprising that the Major’s body was in need of sleep, but Alex was surprised the formidable surgeon had given into her body’s demands. Not seeing the need to wake her just yet, Alex glanced back at the tent flap to make sure it was still in the appropriate half opened ‘occupied and disturbable’ position that decorum dictated, then quietly sat down on the unused bunk and began to work on sorting and completing as much of the reports as she could for when the Major woke up...

Bernie watched Alex sit lost in thought. When she'd first opened her eyes from her unexpected nap, the setting sun now at the right angle to hit her straight in the eyes and disturb her sleep, she'd seen Alex looking in her direction. The lack of reaction to her waking up had told her Alex was lost in her own thoughts, though she was reassured by the smile on her lover's face. In a rare moment of non-surgical skill related confidence, Bernie guessed that Alex's thoughts were probably involving her given the faint pinking in her cheeks and how her lower lip was caught between her teeth. It was a look Bernie was more familiar with from Afghanistan than England, earning it when she'd managed to hide something Alex considered to be 'sweet' or 'loveable' within whatever private teasing pun or joke she'd said while they were in the Mess Hall or on the wards. She'd still seen it on occasions when they'd been living in Holby, but it was rarer - she was still, according to Alex, just as loveable and sweet as she'd been in Afghanistan but now Alex’s response was more overt whether it be a kiss, an eye-roll, head shake or some combination of all of them.

Suddenly acutely conscious of the rather awkward twist she'd contorted herself into during her nap, Bernie tried to carefully unwind herself into a more comfortable position without fully turning away from Alex. It was during this repositioning that she managed to attract Alex's attention and bring her back to the here and now of the car.

"You're awake…" Alex frowned at herself for sounding so accusatory, never having intended for Bernie to be responsible for entertaining her during the long car journey across Southern England.
"I hadn't meant to fall asleep…" Bernie looked at her watch and frowned, "... For almost two hours. Where are we?" In the dusk of the autumnal early-evening, it was hard to work out where they were and whether they were nearer one or three hours away still unless a junction suddenly appeared.

"We passed the exits for Bristol not that long ago." Alex thought about asking the Corporal for a more precise position but since clearly she hadn't heard enough of their conversation to volunteer the information, Alex was quite happy to maintain their relative privacy and not attract her attention. "So just past halfway."

"You should have woken me." Bernie reached across the darkened car for Alex’s hand, her smile when she caught it mid air as Alex mirrored her movement illuminated by the sudden return of now-streetlights throwing bursts of light into the car as they rushed by.

"You didn't miss anything." Their small itinerary adjustment so it included a stop for some departure lounge and in flight sustenance didn't warrant a wake up. "You looked…"

"Uncomfortable?" With her free hand Bernie began to rub the back of her neck, a little too aware of the crick she had given herself.

"Loveable."

"I remember the first time you called me that…"

"Hey you…" Still more asleep than awake, Bernie blinked a few times to try and clear the fuzziness from her eyes. Still not entirely sure who was sat cross legged on the second bunk in her tent, her eyes struggling to focus in the shadowy light, she was fairly certain it could only be Captain Dawson. More to the point, she wanted it to be her, something that she couldn't yet explain to herself but strangely, she found she was reluctant to complete the analysis. "...you should have woken me up…"

“You didn’t miss anything.” Alex put the report she’d been working on aside and looked at the Major, a half smile on her face. “You looked…”

“Uncomfortable?” guessed Bernie, rotating her shoulders and stretching her neck, feeling a semi-
satisfying stretch of tired muscles in the process, causing her to sigh in relief.

“Loveable.” The word was out of Alex’s mouth, an instinctive response based on the Major’s sleepily sluggish behaviour escaping before her brain could catch up and override her ‘human’ response and convert it into a more appropriately ‘professional’ observation about her commanding officer. “I’m sorry Ma’am…” Rectification was too late, it was clear that she’d been heard, and judging by the developing frown on the Major’s face, trying to pretend she’d said something else wasn’t going to be an option.

“Why?” Bernie’s frown turned into a look of genuine curiosity, before she saw that her question was having the opposite effect on the anaesthetist to what she’d intended, with the Captain looking even more like she wanted to disappear through the tent’s groundsheet and disintegrate into the desert below. “I mean what do you think you’re apologising for?” That attempted clarification hadn’t had much effect either, with Alex’s troubled frown now being accompanied by widening eyes, making Bernie continue to stumble her way through a further attempt at assurance. “If you feel you have to apologise for sharing something about yourself then I’ve done something wrong, because there’s nothing to apologise for.”

Although it was something she’d said previously, on more than one occasion when talking with the wounded soldiers and their loved ones both before and after the lifting of the ban on serving in the Armed Forces that not-heterosexual people had lived with since long before she’d joined up, there was something different about this time, with the words feeling even more important and her genuine belief in them needed to be conveyed even more clearly. “Have I done something wrong?” she asked softly, hoping she hadn’t, fervently wishing she hadn’t but not daring to believe she wasn’t somehow at fault, wasn’t somehow radiating her long buried internal conflict externally. Once she might have been hiding because of the Army, but those days were in the past. She’d long ago accepted that she was probably using the Army to now hide from herself but hadn’t attempted to push her inner thoughts further on the subject, preferring instead the comfort of the status quo rather than a hypothetical inner peace.

“No…” Autopilot meant Alex’s mouth was instinctively going to say ‘Ma’am’ but it was caught by her teeth trapping her lower lip, her jaw moving but no sound emerging. She’d quickly learned to read the surgeon in the operating theatre, able to tell when the surgeon had found something in the surgical field that was unforeseen and complicating matters, able to sense when the complication meant a tougher demand on the Major’s exceptional surgical skills in order to keep them tracking along the same course as before, or whether they were about to have to change the plan. She had no idea what it was she saw or how she knew, but so far she’d been right in her anticipation too often to not accept she was picking up on something…and that same skill was telling her now that her friend wasn’t finished, but also wasn’t being polite and kind because that was what was expected or ‘done’.

“My father used to say that, amongst other things, a fool is someone who refuses to accept a genuine compliment sincerely given and a narcissist fails to spot an insincere one.” Bernie had to stop from smiling at the look of surprise on Alex’s face, though it also made her decide not to
mention it was from one of her favourites of the countless sermons she’d heard her father give as she was growing up. “He also encouraged me to be neither, something I try to do even now.”

For a brief moment Bernie was distracted with the memory of her father, whose death had been seen by many as the trigger for her almost continuous tours of duty anywhere but England, not realising how near and yet far from the truth they were. Shaking her head with a wry smile as she brought herself back from the past with the memory of her father that was actually relevant to their current situation, she looked up at Alex. “I think you’re the only person, aside from him, that I can remember ever calling me that. Please don’t apologise for saying something so kind.” She managed to catch a nervous Alex’s eyes with her own and this time her smile was equally nervous. “Because that would make me a fool or a narcissist in your eyes and I’d hoped…” Bernie cleared her throat, refusing to think about anything else that particular compliment might mean specifically, dismissing it as the fantasist delusions of a jaded old Major. “…I’d hoped we were becoming friends?”

"Well you were," admitted Alex, also remembering that early morning that was the first step they took together along what was the beginning of the winding, bumping route they tried to steer their happy bubble. "And still are." Their seat belts made trying to augment her declaration with a kiss an awkward and uncomfortable proposition, so Alex made do with giving Bernie's hand a tight squeeze, smiling when she felt the answering squeeze. "Even when you're not asleep."

"I love you." That Bernie didn't make any attempt to whisper or mouth the words, but instead continued with what Alex always thought of as her 'theatre voice', gave the declaration additional meaning, as there was no way the driver could not have heard Bernie's words. "So much."

"I…” Alex found that she couldn't speak, her voice unable to fill the small space with the same words not because she didn't want to say them, but because the need to say then was overwhelming to the point of silence as she felt her jaw and mouth moving, making the shapes for the words but ultimately mute.

Disregarding everything she knew about being responsible, disregarding every flashing image of every patient she’d met in theatre whose injuries were influenced by the presence or absence of a seat belt, disregarding everything ingrained in her by the Army and her own reluctance to attract too much attention in case the wrong people were watching…. Disregarding all of that and everything except her frustration with herself for not being able to respond to Bernie with words, Alex had unfastened her seatbelt and slid across the back seat and pressed her lips to Bernie’s.

For a brief moment Bernie was stunned into stillness, caught completely off guard by Alex’s sudden movement across the car. As lips touched hers, they instinctively parted as her tongue crept forward to find its mate and begin the wonderful, now familiar and yet always new tangling, teasing dance that kissing Alex was. Vaguely aware of the moving car and the logical part of her brain concluding that the Alex must be no longer wearing her seatbelt, Bernie wrapped her arm around Alex’s shoulders, holding her tightly as they continued to kiss. Logically, reminded that
part of her that she really wished would shut up and let her focus on loving Alex, her arm wasn’t going to be anything like as good a safety measure as a seatbelt in the event the car suddenly decelerated, so hopefully the driver was paying attention to the road and not them....

Glancing in the rear view mirror to see whether the traffic behind them was keeping its distance, Corporal Depta was a little surprised when her view of the rear windscreen was partially blocked by the Captain who was leaning across the back seat. Mindful that they were currently in the middle lane, she checked her wing mirrors and, taking advantage of the clear gap in the traffic, completed a textbook lane change. Once she'd adjusted to the inside lane's running speed, she once again looked at her rear view mirror, not wanting to pry into her passengers' affairs but equally not wanting to have ignored a crisis like she'd done a couple of years back with the General's heart attack, although since both her passengers were RAMC even that probably didn't count as a crisis.

The sudden lack of street lights along this stretch of motorway was making it hard to see anything in the mirror other than the illuminated silhouettes of headrests and heads from the headlights of the vehicle behind them, so she abandoned trying to visually check on her passengers' wellbeing. It was tempting to just ask if they were alright, but the Captain's earlier confirmation that the Colonel was asleep made her even more reluctant than she usually was to ask in case they were now both asleep. Except....

Interrupting her own internal debate to concentrate fully on the traffic as she decelerated slightly so that there was a bigger gap for the car ahead to cut across and exit at the junction, she then moved back out into the middle lane to make room for any merging traffic that was joining the motorway in the brightly lit carriageway on the other side of the bridge

… And then remembered that she’d heard the sounds of conversation only a few minutes ago, suggesting it was unlikely that they were both asleep, which meant she was back to where she’d started. Still reluctant to disturb her passengers, but unable to shift her nagging sense that something had changed in the back seat, she once again glanced up at the rear view mirror, which was no longer quite so obstructed as before.

Definitely not asleep.

Smiling to herself, now understanding a little bit better why she'd overheard General Winsham say 'take care of her' as he shook the Captain's hand as goodbyes were said at the hospital, Corporal Depta once again focused solely on the road ahead and resolutely ignored the rear view mirror.

There was another services in a few miles that was just as decent as this one coming up. They
would stop at that one instead.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

To those of you up to speed on aviation news, yes, I know at the time of posting that the Air Bridge connecting UK-Falklands is not via Ascension Island, but is currently via Cape Verde. But that doesn't work as well for the story, so we're going to be pretending the Ascension Island stop is in place still because they never had/managed to fix their potholes.

"You sure?" Bernie's lower lip was firmly trapped between her teeth as she studied Alex for any hint she was offering out of a sense of obligation.

"Positive." Alex made a vague shooing motion with her hands, encouraging her lover to go in the direction Corporal Depta had pointed was the right one given what Bernie had to do before she could board the flight. "I'll get started on check-in." Whether you were flying on a civilian operated commercial flight, a military troop transport or, as in the case with the Air Bridge to the Falklands, something in between, actually getting on the aircraft involved arriving early and rushing to have the privilege of waiting.

"Thanks."

Setting off at a steady 'with purpose but without rushing’ pace, hoping the loadmaster would appear soon so she didn’t have to stand around in the dark for too long, Bernie had only taken a few steps when she heard Alex call out to a Colonel. Slowing her stride, she turned back to Alex, guessing from her smirk that she had taken that split second longer to realise it was her that was being called.

"Yes Captain?" Bernie waited as Alex walked closer, taking the opportunity to give herself a quick mental inspection to make sure she hadn't missed a piece of her uniform or some equally rudimentary military error that she was still at risk of while she adjusted to being back in uniform full time. After almost two years out of uniform while she worked at Holby (the handful of days she wore it for one reason or another not really counting), she decided that a couple of days of new recruit level paranoia was probably sensible.

"Your papers Ma'am." Alex held out the cardboard file that Bernie had collected from Parker as they were loading the car with the final bags. Alex wasn't entirely sure what they were, so wasn't sure if Bernie hadn't asked for them deliberately or not. "They ended up in my pack..." added Alex quietly, not wanting to tell everyone who was in earshot at the busy departure drop off entrance.
that their lives were sufficiently intertwined that Bernie’s papers being shoved in Alex’s rucksack was a non-event.

"Thanks." Bernie accepted the file with a grin and opened it, flicking through the various stapled documents and forms until she’d found the two she did actually need now. "Do you mind hanging onto it still?"

"Sure..." Alex took the file back, holding it against her body with her left arm so there was no chance of the suddenly strengthening breeze messing with it. "My packhorse rates are very reasonable."

"Oh?" Pleased that, so far, neither her change in rank nor their relationship being 'out in the open' was affecting their shared sense of humour and near constant teasing of each other when the opportunity presented itself, Bernie haphazardly folded the papers she wanted into four and stuffed them into a pocket. "I was hoping for a discount..."

"Perhaps you should wait for the estimate before negotiating Colonel." Alex shifted to stand just a little bit straighter and squarer, seeing the loadmaster appear just beyond where Bernie was, clearly expecting her as they were holding a spare set of safety equipment.

"I'll bear that in mind," agreed Bernie, picking up on the hint Alex was giving her and guessing that she was needed for what was going to be the first official act of her second attempt at being Colonel Wolfe. "I'll come find you by the check in?" Although framed by Bernie to Alex as a question, as Captain Dawson it was only really interpretable as an order.

"Thank you Ma'am."

Their grins were decidedly non-regulation as both knew Bernie was having to try hard not to stick her tongue out at Alex as they saluted each other, but everything else about their exchange was textbook military as they both turned around and set off to finish getting ready for the long flight south.

"... and sign there please Ma'am."
"Sure." Alex took the offered pen and scribbled her signature where she was instructed to by the ticketing agent.

"The Colonel will need to be present at the check-in desk to complete check-in," explained the agent as he efficiently took back the now signed paperwork and, making sure he kept the correct copy from the triplicate form, handed Alex the tickets both she and Bernie needed to check-in for the flight. "And it closes in 45 minutes." He tapped away at his computer screen, frowning slightly when he saw how overall progress for the flight was doing, missing Alex's own frown. "It's showing as having an earlier departure so everything has advanced an hour."

"Oh?" Mystery partially solved as to why they had less time than they'd expected, Alex decided that this was probably a first for her in all her flights, military or civilian. "That unusual?"

"It's more common to be pushed back..." there was more tapping on the computer, giving Alex a chance to get her phone out and fire off a text to Bernie, not that she expected Bernie to get it yet as she'd probably had to turn her phone off for a bit. "But there's some weather they're trying to avoid and we've got all but one cargo load cleared..."

"Is it a full flight?" Since she couldn't do anything until Bernie returned, as there was no way Alex was leaving without her, and he was seemingly now inclined to be chatty, she decided to see what else she could learn about the long journey ahead.

"Pretty much." Another tap or two. "Quiet time of year for the Islanders, probably because they know it’s redeployment time." He looked up at her with a sudden renewed interest. "But you're not on the regiment list." Operating in a grey area between fully military and civilian, the staff who managed the flights between the South Atlantic and the UK were very well versed in all the oddities of the postings that the various branches of the military had, with all but a handful of the Royal Navy flying out on their flights. A quick study of the Captain's uniform, something that usually answered any questions he might have had, only raised new ones.

"No." Alex was tempted to ask which regiments were rotating but decided not to - she assumed Bernie probably knew and if she didn't, it would be easily discovered once they were in the Falklands if not before. "Reserve Duty." She rather hoped he wouldn't be overly curious as she hadn't yet worked out how to explain what exactly she was going to be doing when 'on duty' from the Army's perspective. "But I'm mostly the new anaesthetist at the hospital in Port Stanley." If everyone traveled to the island via this air route, then Alex was fairly certain that, like hospital porters, the Brize Norton check-in staff had a pretty thorough understanding of who was where of the key people that made the island’s community tick.

"That makes more sense..." For the first time in their conversation he cracked a smile, leaning forwards in an almost conspiratorial manner. "You didn't exactly look like a paratrooper!"
"Thanks..." She saw his gaze return back to his screen for a second, then glance at the ticket she was holding, his question obvious. "...and neither is Colonel Wolfe." Well, not officially at least, but he didn't need to know about that, and anyway, it was Bernie's story to tell, not Alex's. And Alex was still waiting for her lover to tell it, and many other stories from her career, 'properly' with all the details not just the bullet point conclusion.

"Another anaesthetist?" His screen flashed up to tell him that the final cargo consignment, which had been one of the most complex he'd ever seen in terms of security classifications and special restrictions, had been loaded and the aircraft was now ready for the passenger luggage once they'd closed check-in. This Colonel had better be getting a move on, as apart from the Captain, there were only another six people they were waiting on.

"Trauma Surgeon," corrected Alex automatically, guessing he hadn't yet made the connection between the missing Colonel and the final cargo load clearance. "But the Colonel's the new..." As Alex rattled off Bernie's new acronym without tripping over the tongue-twister, she saw her audience had lost her, so she provided a horribly imprecise but comprehensible civilian translation, "...Big Boss of all the Medicine for the South Atlantic Force." Which reminded Alex she had a question that might be important for Bernie to know the answer to. "The earlier departure, is that going to affect how long we're at Ascension or is the weather issue in the Falklands?"

"Here..." Bernie held out the cardboard carton for Alex to take. "The 'not coffee' options were limited."

"Thanks." Smiling as she took the fruit juice, seeing Bernie had the sort of fizzy drink that gave her hiccups, Alex glanced in the general direction of the group of soldiers Bernie had been talking to on her walk to and from the vending machine. "New friends?"

"Old ones actually," explained Bernie as she sat down next to Alex, trying not to wince as her tired back muscles protested. "Well, the NCO at least. Guess the rest of them now qualify as new friends."

"Small world?" Alex leaned forwards so that she wouldn't get covered in sticky fruit juice if it decided to go everywhere when she opened it.

"Small army." Bernie instinctively reached out and pulled the back of Alex's patterned overshirt down automatically, their heaviest 'temperate' outdoor jackets too warm to wear in the terminal.
The brief, familiar physical contact was too much to resist and she continued to run her hand over her lover's back to smooth out any wrinkles and just generally reconnect. "I haven't seen him for..." Staring into space while she worked it out, Bernie continued to absently trace circles on Alex's lower back, "...Well, I was a fairly new Captain."

"In Germany?" Alex wasn't sure if Bernie was aware that her hand had worked its way under Alex's outer shirt layer, but as lovely as it was to be able to feel the warmth of Bernie’s palm through her uniform t-shirt, it was stopping her from sitting back upright.

"Mmm..." Bernie solved Alex's dilemma for her by needing her hand to open her own drink, making her realise where she had worked it to. "Sorry."

"I'm not." Alex sat back properly and nudged Bernie's knee with her own, trying to confirm that she wasn't unnerved by their first ‘officially permitted’ forays into relatively overt public displays of affection in the Army environment. "He's got a good memory then?" Personally she found Bernie extremely memorable and impossible to forget, but it was a bit unexpected to come across a soldier who remembered her that well and from that long ago.

"He remembers the Court Martial mostly I think."

"Wait..." Alex felt pieces of very broken jigsaw, collected over long nights waiting for the next big rush of casualties in various named and unnamed parts of the Afghanistan countryside, which she’d previously thought had fallen into place, become thoroughly scattered once again. "What?"

"Sergeant Boodon is now Staff Sergeant Boodon and our..." Bernie took a sip of her drink while she sought out the best word, "...interaction remains the only blemish on this otherwise rather impressive record."

“That’s the guy that...” Alex was struggling to reconcile Bernie’s clearly friendly handshake and brief hug she’d watched happen a few minutes ago with the passing reference to the years ago incident she’d heard Bernie mention one night in Afghanistan.

“...threw me into a wall that wasn’t as strong as my shoulder?” Bernie’s wry smile as she looked at Alex suggested she understood the confusion this whole trip down memory lane was causing for Alex. “Yes.”

“But?”
“In the wall’s defence, my shoulder was quite solid…” Bernie’s grin shifted from wry to lazy smirk when she felt Alex reach out and pointedly give said shoulder a gentle shove and firm squeeze, accompanied by a quietly muttered ‘still is’. “...and I did understand his frustration.” Taking another long sip of her drink, Bernie turned slightly in her seat so it was easier to look at Alex, her knee now deliberately pressed into Alex’s thigh as her arm reached out to straighten the slightly caught up collar of Alex’s jacket. “...as, fortunately, did Algie.”

“General Winsham Algie?”

“Only Major Winsham then…”

"Have you already hit your head on something else today?"

"Sir?" Bernie had only properly met Major Winsham yesterday, having arrived to start her posting just after he’d gone off on leave for three weeks. Base gossip was that he’d been getting married, though Bernie hadn't thought something as public as being married really met the criteria of 'gossip'.

"I'm trying to understand what possible reason you might have for not wanting Boodon up on charges." He looked up from the file he'd been considering as he leaned against the doorframe, waiting for some indication from his most trusted nurse that his newest surgeon was merely suffering from an unusually thick skull and scapula. "Which he is…” he added, sensing that she was trying to debate that with him, but the nurse was too experienced at the ‘follow the light’ routine to let her get anywhere with the attempt. “So you can forget any trips or slips explanations if that was your plan?”

“It wasn’t.” The glare Bernie shot the nurse was enough to get the penlight put away and, with a muttered ‘going to check on x-ray’, the two surgeons were left in relative privacy.

“So?” Sensing his newest Captain was not a rambler, nor easily intimidated into doing something she didn’t agree with, he decided to come fully into the room and shut the door, enabling her to hopefully be a little bit more forthcoming with him. “What else do I need to know about Boodon?”

“Not Boodon Sir, the patient, Private Wolken.”
“Trauma admission from car crash?” He’d looked at the patient file as a matter of routine when he’d come into the hospital on hearing that there had been an incident that was best described as the physical assault of one of his officers, but his focus had been on finding out who the soldier involved in the incident was, not their motivation.

“Private Wolken’s one of Sergeant Boodon’s Sir, only just jump qualified.” Bernie stood up and tested her shoulder, pleased it merely felt stiff and bruised rather than actually damaged.

“Did you cause the car crash?”

“No Sir.”

“Then I’m still not understanding why you’re so reluctant to have the Sergeant’s behaviour excused Captain.”

“Not excused Sir, more…” Bernie chewed on her lip as she tried to find a way of explaining what she felt without creating new problems that would potentially be harder to recover from than a bruised shoulder. “...understood in context.”

“Go on…” He looked at the file he’d been given again, noticing something he’d previously overlooked. “You assisted Tronboll?” That made no sense surgically, with everything he’d seen on her record suggesting that Captain Berenice Wolfe was probably going to be one of the finest military surgeons of her generation, while everything he knew from direct experience of being in theatre with Captain Tobias Tronboll was best summed up as ‘ordinary’.

“Yes.” She swallowed, the only hint Algie Winsham got from her otherwise perfectly still and steady study of him that she was perhaps not quite as calm as she at first seemed. “It was his surgical plan, I was, as he repeatedly informed me, only there to assist.”

“You would have operated differently?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Specifically?” Algie was kicking himself now for not looking in more depth at Wolken’s notes before coming and finding her, but he had operated on enough car crash victims to have a fair sense of what his injuries would have been, and was familiar enough with Tronboll’s surgeries to
be able to hazard a guess as to how they might not be measuring up with Captain Wolfe’s.

“The shoulder repair.” She instinctively tested her own shoulder again while she waited to see if the Major was going to fill in the gaps or whether she had to spell it out for him, before realising from his frown that he probably hadn’t seen Wolken’s full file yet. “He was jump qualified.”

“What do you mean ‘was’? You said he is newly qualified. What’s changed?”

“His shoulder.” Bernie mimed what she thought was a not implausible ‘pulling on a rip cord’ movement. “There’s no chance of him passing the jump medical now based on his current treatment plan.”

“Are you saying Tronboll performed the wrong surgery Captain?” It was a big question to ask, and depending on her answer, could have major ramifications for all of them.

“On a civilian or near retirement infantryman no, but on a 19 year old paratrooper who’s just earned his wings? We should have started with the least invasive surgical intervention and waited to see what infection risk and impingement there was during recovery, not started with the most aggressive intervention.”

“Did we know his operational status at the start of the surgery?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if we did,” admitted Bernie honestly, getting to the point in the whole sad situation that really made her frustrated and cross, “because we still wouldn’t have known how crucial the shoulder was to a paratrooper compared to an infantryman.” Although her shoulder was starting to throb, she forced herself to stand up straight and look the Major in the eye. “That’s what upset Sergeant Boodon Sir, our lack of understanding about the significance of Wolken’s injury on his operational status. He interpreted it as an indifference to Wolken’s overall health, perhaps influenced because his injuries happened while he was off-duty.” She took a steadying breath. “That’s when he became a bit physical Sir.”

“Is your middle name understatement?” asked Algie, starting to understand why she was so clearly uncomfortable with Booden being charged with assaulting an officer, even if she was in a minority of one there.

“Griselda.” She’d long ago come to terms with her given and middle names, with nothing ever quite matching the levels of teasing and embarrassment she’d had to endure at school when
missing front teeth had made it impossible to say her own name without a heavy lisp. As cruel as soldiers could be, fellow six year olds could be meaner.

“...turned out his middle name was Granville.”

“You’re making that up!” protested Alex, taking Bernie’s now empty drinks can and putting it with her own empty juice can in the nearby bin before sitting down again.

“No, it’s how he got the name ‘Algie’. He’s a twin.”

“What’s being a twin got to do with it?” Alex hadn’t missed Bernie had avoided finishing her story, but was prepared to go on a brief conversational detour before calling her on it. Her lover was a mine of wonderful stories, both medical and military, but getting her to actually tell them from beginning to end with all the good bits left in was a delicate art that Alex took every opportunity to practice.

“Family tradition had it that the first born son should be called Albert, but his father didn’t know which of the twins was technically first. So one was registered as Albert Joseph and the other as Albert Granville after their grandfathers. Albert J became AJ and Albert G became Algie…”

“He didn’t seem like an ‘Albert’.”

“Only to his grandmother, same as for me really.” Bernie had only been called ‘Berenice’ by her grandmother when she’d been growing up, with her father and anyone she met always calling her Bernie if she was allowed to express a preference.

"You don't seem like an 'Albert'."

"Funny." Although her tone was deadly serious, Bernie's eyes were sparkling with amusement as she shuffled back up close to Alex, her back now fed up with these chairs that wouldn't let her slouch.

"Comfy?" asked Alex, feeling her arm being moved about until she was clearly arranged in optimum 'pillow' position for Bernie to slouch up against.
"Almost." There was something pointy digging into Bernie and she quickly diagnosed the culprit - Alex's pen, which she removed from the offending sleeve pocket, tucking it automatically in her own. "Now I am."

"I should write you a receipt for that…"

"But?" It was a long running friendly tussle between them, one of their earliest private jokes - Alex always had a pen, even in the operating theatre, while Bernie rarely did. Even when she started the shift with a pen, it rarely stayed with her, being instead lost at one scrub station or another.

"I don't have a pen…" Alex smiled as she felt Bernie tuck herself up against Alex's side, comfortable once more and seemingly oblivious to the people they were sharing the departure area with. "What happened?"

"Mmm?" It took Bernie a moment to work out what Alex meant and still wasn't quite certain. "With Boodon or his man?"

"Both?" Alex hadn't actually been wondering what to happened to the soldier with the damaged shoulder but now Bernie had reminded her, she did want to know. "And you…" She was fairly certain this was how Bernie was held in especially high regard whenever their paths had crossed with the Airborne Brigade, but never managed to extract any proper details.

"Boodon got… pay stopped and some sort of restriction but avoided Colchester."

"Your doing?" Managing to avoid a sentence in the Army's jail was not something that would have been available without a lot of persuasion from Bernie. It also sounded excessively generous given the severity of the military discipline breach.

"On condition he helped us learn more about the specific biomechanical challenges faced by airborne forces." Bernie still remembered the phrase, which she and Algie had coached the Presiding Officer on, which was then repeated countless more times when they were presenting their conclusions to their own Command and the wider Airborne Command.

"What does that really mean?"
"He taught me to jump."

"Jump as in the ground training? Or with him from the plane?" Alex had friends from med school who had done charity tandem skydives, but she couldn’t remember anyone in the Army doing one.

"Yes." Bernie's attention was caught by the screens changing to a message telling them that they were now boarding and began to move into a more upright position. "What row are we?"

"Seven, you have the aisle." Alex's own automatic 'move out' mindset had kicked in when she saw the signs change and she was standing up with the repacked backpack they were using as shared cabin baggage on her back, beret at the ready to pull on if necessary when she realised the true significance of Bernie's reply. "You jumped on your own?"

"Of course." Bernie was concentrating on separating the cargo paperwork from her boarding pass, passport and military ID so missed Alex’s rolled eyes, but she felt the thump on her shoulder. "What was that for?"

"Being an idiot who can’t tell a story properly."

"That..." pointed out Bernie almost sounding indignant as she passed Alex her jacket and began to pull her own one on. "... is not news." They had long ago established that no matter how great the story might be, if it was Bernie telling it, it would be undersold - her preference for quietly stating the facts generally meant the listener failed to appreciate the significance of what she was saying, something that was compounded if Bernie herself was the ‘hero’ in the story.

"True, but how did I not know you were jump certified?" Suddenly doubting herself, Alex tugged on Bernie’s jacket sleeve to double check what patches she wore, fairly certain she’d never seen the parachutist skill badge on her partner’s uniform, but wanting additional proof. Seeing it wasn’t there, she looked at Bernie’s now amused face, wondering what she was finding funny. "You don’t have the badge..."

"No, I don’t." Bernie put her now sorted paperwork into two different pockets, separating the paperwork needed to transport her down to the Falklands from the paperwork that applied to the assorted medical equipment and supplies she was overseeing being delivered to both Ascension and the Falklands. "And you didn’t know I was jump certified because I’m not."

"But you did all the jumps..." Alex had started to connect the dots and begun to realise this was
going to end up being one of those situations where the almost ten year gap between when she and Bernie took up their Commissions was significant, but she never wanted to believe how different and difficult it had been for Bernie. “I don’t understand.”

“I was never on the course, so I never tested.” Bernie picked up the backpack and put it on, ignoring Alex’s protest that she’d intended to carry it. “Remember, teaching me was a punishment duty...in fact I think he did it without pay.” And a lot of mickey taking from what she remembered, given her gender and rank. “And anyway, it’s a combat skill.” That, as far as Bernie was concerned, was the main point - back then, women were out and out prohibited from combat roles, so even being taught to parachute back then was unusual. And it wasn’t as if she’d continued to go parachute jumping after she’d understood what was happening to the body during the jump and what, specifically as a paratrooper jumping, they had to be able to do in order to operate their parachute safely while being loaded down with full kit. She’d never jumped again either in the military or as a civilian. Instinctively she rubbed the side of her neck where there was the lingering faint scar from the surgery - now she felt it would be unwise to restart her brief parachutist career even if medically her concern wasn’t entirely rational.

“So that’s why they called you Doc Wolfe...” Alex had quickly picked up on the fact that, for some unspoken reason that everyone at the hospital in Bastion just accepted without debate, to anyone from the Airborne Division Bernie was always referred to as ‘Doc Wolfe’ no matter what the situation or whether they’d met her before. It somehow was just part of the collective consciousness of the Army, few ever knowing where it originated or what it actually meant but it being universally acknowledged and accepted, with its correct and incorrect usage being understood and adhered to. “...we all wondered.”

“That’s when it started…”

“Good afternoon Private.”

“Ma’am.” Wolken blinked sleepily on hearing the greeting, the boredom of being stuck in the hospital bed without being able to get properly comfortable starting to take its toll on him.

“You could try and sound happy to see her...” The other soldier who had been sitting in the visitor chair by his bed had stood up on seeing the Captain appear. Knowing that their friend wasn’t doing all that great with coping with what had happened as a result of the accident, there were a few of them trying to keep him company as much as the hospital rules and their duties would permit.

“It’s alright...?” Bernie looked at him expectantly, not yet having met him and wanting to be able
to call him by something other than his rank.

“Ronfort Ma’am. Billy Ronfort.”

“Would you like Billy to stay with you Mr Wolken?”

“Are you looking at me bits?”

“I hadn’t planned on,” assured Bernie amiably, knowing what was motivating the question. For a lot of the younger lads the indignity of the Army medical exam on enlistment was still quite fresh in their memory and unfortunately the delights of European nightlife usually meant a fair few of them had to bare all to the usually male Medical Officer at some point after their first weekend pass to get various STDs and urinary infections diagnosed and treated. To these lads, the fact that she was a trauma surgeon was a minor detail too subtle to be appreciated compared to being ‘a lady doctor’. “Unless you think there’s something not right?” From what she could tell from his Army Medical Record, he’d only been in Germany a fortnight, having completed his Parachute Regiment Basic Training and Jump Training in the UK first. Sheer bad luck had seen him be in the wrong place at the wrong time and end up in the middle of a road accident, bad luck that had then been compounded by having Tronboll do the surgery. But at least his luck had held as far as his records also indicated he’d managed to avoid any medical issues prior to the accident.

“Nah. An’ Billy can stay…” He was still fairly sleepy which on the whole Bernie considered a good thing as it meant he wasn’t feeling too much pain, but wasn’t completely zoned out. “…can you call me Greg?”

“Of course I can Greg.” She took a pen out of her pocket and made a note on his file. “I’m Captain Wolfe and I’m one of the surgeons here…” She’d spent three days trying to work out how to explain that she wasn’t the surgeon responsible for ending his paratrooper career but hadn’t yet come up with a plan she liked.

“You going to fix me?” He’d mumbled too quietly for her to hear, but not so quietly his friend hadn’t heard.

“He asked if you’re the one going to fix him?” repeated Billy, not doing a particularly good job at keeping his anger in check, though he hadn’t thrown Bernie into the wall like his Sergeant had.

“I…”
"Some other guy came by and said that another doctor was taking over Greg's recovery, that he wasn't the best guy to do the rest of what needed doing to fix him back up to jump status…"

Bernie kept a fixed, tight but friendly smile on her face while in her head she was shouting several swear words at the lazy bastard Tronboll who had been true to weasel form and saved himself in spite of what they'd agreed with Major Winsham. Still, it did mean she didn't need to worry about any explanation.

"Ah, he already told you." She closed the file and put it on the end of the bed, stepping closer so it would be easier to hear whatever her patient said next. "I am your new doctor Greg, and I promise that I am going to use everything I know to help get you back to being the best soldier you can be."

"Okay…” Greg was getting doppy again as he struggled to stay awake, the conversation tiring him out. "... What's your name?"

"Wolfe…” He'd interrupted her before she could repeat her rank and name, his battle with sleep being quickly lost.

"Thanks...Doc...Wolfe…”

"I think it was Billy, his friend that really started with the 'Doc Wolfe' though…” Bernie slowed her easy pace to a shuffle as they leveled with the back of the queue for boarding. "He spotted that I'd not said paratrooper and challenged me on it in the corridor."

"What happened?" As well as Alex knew her partner, there was still so much to learn about all Bernie's layers and experiences that, much like this story, only emerged by accident and usually because of meeting someone. For all her confidence with a scalpel in theatre, Bernie away from the hospitals and bases was quiet and shy, with a preference to learn about anyone or anything else before she talked about herself.

“Er, Captain Wolfe?”

“Yeah Billy?” It hadn't taken her very long to develop the necessary sixth sense to know when friends or family were going to follow her from a patient’s bedside to ask additional questions, but
experience was starting to guide her on when to move away from the patient quickly to avoid the questions and when, like now, to have left sufficiently slowly that they could catch up.

“You said you’d get him back to being the best soldier you could…” He looked at her with a mixture of confident challenge and worry, having spotted the deliberate ambiguity she’d allowed herself. “But he’s a paratrooper.”

“How much do you know about Greg’s injuries?” Having been away from the hospital for two days while she endured Major Winsham’s request that she rest her shoulder while they waited for confirmation that it was nothing more serious than bruising and deal with the admin that was now needed regarding Sergeant Boodon, Bernie wasn’t sure whether Billy was the ‘main friend’ that often took on the quasi-family role of keeping track of the medical updates or just ‘a friend’.

“The other doctor didn’t say much about them but the nurses keep fussing with his leg and shoulder mostly? Greg tried to get them to explain it to me but I’m not good at that sort of stuff.”

“That’s all you really need to know about for now Billy, and if Greg wants you to know more I’ll make sure you both understand it.” She stepped to the side of the corridor to let an orderly pushing a wheelchair get past them more easily, giving herself a split second or so to work out what she could say to help Billy understand as that would be the first step towards getting Greg to understand as well. “Right now I don’t know if I can fix his shoulder well enough to jump again…” She held up her hand to stop him interrupting her, relieved when he closed his mouth and looked at her in fierce concentration, waiting for her to continue. “...because I don’t yet know enough about what his shoulder is like right now or what the shoulder needs to cope with in order to see him return to jumping. But I will learn about both during the next few months and we will do the absolute best we can.”

“We? And months?”

“We being myself, Greg and you, and anyone else we need to solve this problem.” She decided not to mention the role Sergeant Boodon was going to have in that process. “And we have months to look into his shoulder because he can’t go anywhere near active duty until I’ve properly fixed his leg.” Watching his face she saw her words were starting to sink in and he was starting to understand the severity of his friend’s injuries.

“You don’t do bullshit, do you Doc?”

“Don’t see the point of it.”
“What don’t you see the point of Captain?”

“Bullshit Sir.” Bernie was relieved to see Major Winsham had a sense of humour, as it was only after she’d given the ‘bullshit free’ answer to his question that she realised she was maybe being a little too blunt even by Army standards.

“And where in this bullshit free conversation had you got to?”

“She was just helping me understand Greg, uh, Private Wolken’s injuries were going to take time and work from all of us to get him back on his leg Sir.” She’d been decent in giving him straight answers to his straight questions, and Billy Ronfort didn’t want her getting any grief for that from this other officer.

“I see.” Algie looked between the two of them, a faint smile on his face as he tried to picture how that ‘bullshit free’ conversation had gone. “There’s something I think she probably didn’t tell you though.”

“Sir?”

“She’s the best we’ve got.”

“Best here? In Germany?” asked Billy, liking the sound of this. He’d not wanted to say anything, but he’d not liked the other doctor much and had been pleased to discover that they were getting this lady doctor instead as she’d immediately seemed better.

“In the Army.” He’d read her record before he went off to get married and decided she was already shaping up to be a brilliant trauma surgeon, certainly better than him, but after making a couple of telephone calls back to the UK in the last couple of days, he’d discovered that the reality was even more impressive, with the consensus of opinion being that they were watching the development of someone who would, after a few more years experience, be comfortably amongst the world’s best, military or civilian. “So if she says it’s tough we all need to be ready for it to be really tough, but also know that what’s tough for her is impossible for lots of us.”

“Sounds like you’re our kind of Doc then Ma’am.”
“Our kind?”

“Paratroopers.”

Next day I was Doc Wolfe, and for the rest of the posting anytime one of the Paras got injured they asked if they could be treated by ‘Doc Wolfe’ and it just stuck,” shrugged Bernie, recalling how it was then adopted by Boodon when he was teaching her about parachute jumping, which was certainly easier on the ear than constantly being ‘Ma’am’.

“What did everyone else think?” Alex now understood why everyone had just accepted it when she heard it being used at Bastion - by her rough guess Bernie must have been ‘Doc Wolfe’ for around two decades by then, which explained why even the stuffiest of their colleagues like ‘the Ghost’ had just gone along with it. But Alex imagined it might not have been so easily accepted in the very beginning.

“No clue.” Bernie rubbed her neck with the hand not holding her ticket as she tried to think of a way of changing the subject away from herself again. “But Algie telling any injured Paras who came in requiring surgery they were going to be seen by Doc Wolfe set the tone I think.” Much to her relief, their conversational detour down memory lane ended with the gate staff waving them forwards to complete the boarding checks before going onto the aircraft. “…Hello yes..” She only briefly hesitated before remembering her current rank wasn’t Major. “...Colonel Wolfe and Captain Dawson, going to Mount Pleasant…”
“Mmph…” Bernie’s mumbled acknowledgement she’d been nudged as she woke up slowly caused Alex to freeze. “…hey you…” As Bernie tried to straighten her very stiff neck without wincing too much, she tried to work out why her lover was practically sat in her lap.

“I was trying not to wake you,” said Alex quietly, “though that didn’t work out so well,” she added as she looked down at the still not quite fully awake Bernie. “And yes, I am now stuck.”

Alex, sat in the window seat, had woken up a few minutes earlier and finally concluded that she was awake because her bladder wanted her to pay attention to it. With Bernie appearing to be sound asleep, her seat tilted back as far as the airline would allow and her legs stretched out in front of her, Alex had decided it was possible to climb over her lover without waking her. Unfortunately Alex’s plan had failed to take into account the overhead luggage lockers making it impossible for her to stand up properly, as well as quite how far back the seats in front of Bernie and her were tilted, meaning she’d ended up with one leg either side of Bernie’s, her shirt fabric probably brushing against her girlfriend’s nose or catching on her fringe since she was leaning forwards to avoid banging her head. Using her hands to steady herself on the chair’s headrest, it was a position she could have extricated herself from if she had some momentum to work with but when she realised Bernie was waking she’d frozen and now, she was stuck.

“It’s fine…” Now more awake, Bernie could work out what Alex had been trying to do and take a pretty good guess at what had gone wrong. “Want a nudge?”

“Please.” Alex risked a quick glance down the cabin and was relieved to see that for the next few rows everyone was either fast asleep or fully absorbed by whatever they were using headphones to listen to - so far her unsuccessful gymnastics contortion had only disturbed Bernie. She felt Bernie’s hands settle on her hips, providing her with a bit of extra stability and support which helped her have the confidence to shift her weight from her right leg onto her left leg and back again. This gave her the necessary momentum to be able to tilt her body far enough into the aisle for her to pull her right leg up and over Bernie’s lap without catching her in the face with her knee. “Thanks…” As she felt her right foot finally make contact with the floor in the aisle, she started to straighten up to her full height, anticipating feeling her partner’s hands fall away from her hips. Therefore, the firm tug on her trousers was unexpected and meant she fell backwards and ended up sitting down abruptly on Bernie’s lap, the backs of her thighs in contact with the very solid chair armrest and her toes only just in contact with the ground.

"Sorry…” Bernie had, seeing Alex’s tumble, moved her arms and caught her in a loose hug which not only kept her upright but also meant the need to hug Alex by way of apology post tumble was easily satisfied, with her relief that nothing more serious had happened conveyed with an
instinctive kiss of apology to Alex's shoulder. "... I'd only wanted to ask if you were okay?" This had become a frequent question during the UK summer months as they prepared for their autumnal move to the South Atlantic, with Bernie worrying that she'd somehow coerced or forced Alex into joining her. It was only through talking to Charlie and Ronnie about what they could remember about life with Marcus, their grandmother and Aunt that Alex had begun to understand where the normally calm Bernie's anxiety came from.

Over time and conversation, Bernie had come to genuinely understand that not only was Alex fully supportive and encouraging of Bernie's choice of posting, but she was not remotely begrudging the 'need' (as Bernie had been seeing it) to relocate to be with her. Instead, Alex had been the one worrying that Bernie had picked the South Atlantic posting because it was the option that Alex found the most intriguing, and had her own need to ask lots of questions and repeatedly double check.

“No.” Alex regretted her direct answer the moment she saw Bernie’s face cloud with doubt. “Right this second I mean.” “She leaned into Bernie and brushed a hopefully reassuring kiss on her amazingly strong yet so very fragile lover’s lips and cheek as she found her way to Bernie’s ear and whispered. “I need a wee!”

Opening the tiny aircraft toilet door, Alex was still smiling about Bernie’s reaction to her explanation for not wanting to linger in Bernie’s lap - while uncomfortable, the inconvenience of the armrest digging into the back of her thighs was minor and would have been easily ignorable if it was the only sensation competing with Bernie’s freely offered affection. If anyone doubted the physicality of trauma surgery, then they’d have been swiftly corrected when they saw the ease with which Bernie managed to shift Alex up from her lap and back onto her feet, much to Alex’s reluctant relief, as she’d once again managed to become ‘stuck’ and would have struggled to go anywhere without help. It was, however, highly amusing how quickly Bernie had reacted with an ‘ew’ and a kindly provided shove to get Alex out of her lap, especially when you considered what she was regularly in contact with during surgeries.

Stepping out into the aisle, Alex was about to turn towards her seat when she paused and her smile was replaced with a frown as she heard something that did not sound good. Taking a second to work out where the sound was coming from, she realised that it came from the galley area that was beyond the next, very short block of seats. Deciding it was better to have to owe an apology for being overly curious if her instinct proved to be wrong than worry she’d ignored something important, she walked through the quiet cabin, ignoring the mixture of snores and snuffles that were coming from the mostly sleeping passengers. She was still two rows from the galley space and beginning to wonder if she’d imagined the noise when she heard it again, and again…

“...it’s not worked!”
“Can I help?” asked Alex, parting the curtain in time to see the panicked sounding voice appeared to belong to a girl who looked to be a little bit younger than Charlotte, and ‘it’ looked very much like the arms of a soldier wrapped around a teenager’s abdomen, presumably in order to perform abdominal thrusts. “I’m a Doctor…” She locked eyes with the soldier who was stood behind the clearly asphyxiating teenager, trying to get him to focus on her and then move forwards with her to the evidently critical ‘plan B’. “…Captain Dawson, RAMC. Four thrusts?”

“Yes Ma’am…” He relaxed his hold, relieved his mental plea for reinforcements had been answered. “...I heard the lad choking…”

“I’m Alex…” She glanced at the girl, trying to reassure her with a quick smile before switching her attention to the ‘lad’. “...and we’re going to get you through this, okay?” She felt her own breathing ease when she saw his eyes manage to focus on her. “Lie him down…” she ordered, looking to the girl who she hoped was a friend of some sort, relying on the soldier to take most of his weight as she took care to support his head, her hands and body moving on auto-pilot as one of the cabin crew suddenly appeared. “Get Colonel Wolfe, row seven, and her rucksack.” Even if it hadn’t been fairly self-evident that it was an emergency, the whip of command in Alex’s voice was so crisp that they disappeared without any hesitation, not that Alex noticed, as she was already looking at the girl. “I know this is scary…” she began, her voice immediately softer, “…I’m a doctor…” Just because the soldier spoke acronym and could probably ‘read’ her uniform patches, didn’t mean the patient or his companion did. She looked back down at her newest patient and concentrated on getting his head into the right position, “I’m going to look in your mouth okay?”

She knew he was struggling to follow her as the toll of presumably several minutes of choking was taking its toll, but when she touched his chin she felt him relax just enough to show her he’d heard. And now she was looking properly at him she saw something that she’d probably never have noticed had she not spent so much time with Charlie and Ronnie. “Is he your brother?”

“Harry, he’s my twin.”

“And your name?”

Alex hadn’t seen Bernie arrive, as she’d been looking into Harry’s mouth, trying to work out what might be the real problem, as this was clearly not a straightforward choking. “Here…” While she waited for the patient’s twin sister to answer, Bernie leaned forwards and shone the bright white light of her phone’s camera flash into Harry’s now open mouth so Alex could have a better look.

“Lottie.”
“Well Lottie,” Bernie saw Alex’s face twitch before carefully becoming neutral again as she took Bernie’s phone from her so she was in control of the light. “My name’s Bernie and I’m another Doctor.” She swung the rucksack (which was technically Alex’s) down onto the floor and reached into side pocket which contained both Alex and her stethoscopes, as well as their pen lights and, since this was Alex’s rucksack, a handful of pens. “And we’re going to help Harry get breathing again more easily. Is there anything we need to know?” she asked as she straightened up, automatically settling her stethoscope around her neck. “Al…” she murmured quietly, leaning forwards and placing Alex’s over the back of her neck so it settled into place. “…light?” She turned a pen light on with her other hand and brought it up the side of her phone so Alex could grab the pen light and let go of the phone, all without interrupting the examination or her concentration as she listened to what Lottie was asking.

“Is he allergic to anything?” she prompted, not surprised the stress of the situation was making the teenager not understand her original open question. “Are you allergic to anything?”

As she listened to the answers, prodding for more information in a couple of places, she efficiently disassembled one of the pens she’d grabbed, putting aside most of the parts but keeping the now empty barrel section in her hand, having a pretty fair idea as to what the first step in Alex’s plan was going to need to be.

“Lottie, are you okay to go with…” Bernie glanced at the cabin crew member who’d rushed up to her less than a minute earlier.

“Sophya.”

“Sophya for a couple of minutes? We’re going to get Harry breathing better.”

“We’re getting the medical kits for you Colonel.” That had been Bernie’s barked order as she headed up the aircraft, demanding all the medical kits from all the crew stations on the aircraft. “And Jake’s here.”

In a single look Bernie managed to reassure Lottie enough that she stopped crying long enough to whisper ‘okay’ and be guided away by one member of the cabin crew as another stepped up to take her place. “Jake. What can I do?” He was wearing the little pin in his uniform that told anyone he was the cabin crew’s trained first aider, but given there was already an RAMC Captain and Colonel now kneeling by Harry, he decided that was not to be considered relevant.

“Al?”
“Airway obstruction but there’s also swelling.” Alex looked up at Bernie, having heard the medical history chat but not focusing on it. “Good kid?”

“Good kid,” confirmed Bernie, knowing what Alex was trying to determine. “Angioedema not overdose. You okay doing it?” ‘It’ was going to be an emergency tracheotomy to enable Harry to inhale and exhale via a tube using an incision in his windpipe below where they thought the obstruction was.

“Not with you here.” Alex shuffled around on her knees so there was more space for Bernie to get into the best available position to do the procedure. “Pen?” It was the ultimate cliche, beloved of blockbuster films and medical dramas on television, but the body of a ballpoint pen would keep the incision open wide enough.

“Here.” As Bernie handed over the section of pen she’d already prepared, she set about doing a very quick examination of the still struggling Harry’s neck and throat, automatically noting that Alex was now standing up and talking to the cabin crew, but the soldier was still stood quietly in the corner, ready to act if ordered.

“Medic?”

“Paratrooper, Corporal Anders Ma’am.” He’d heard the lad was coughing and tried to encourage him to cough up whatever was causing him to choke. “We’ve got combat medics with us too.” He’d been about to get one of them to come take over when it became clear what he had been taught wasn’t working.

“Tell Boodon Doc Wolfe wants him, his medics, Quartermaster and my jacket.”

“In that order Ma’am.” He had no idea how she knew his Staff-Sergeant’s name, nor why she wanted the Quartermaster and her jacket, but he also knew not to argue with a Colonel, so took her sharp nod as a dismissal, even though she was once again fully focused on the lad, and slipped out the galley space into the other aisle, so as to keep out of the other doctor’s way.

“Med kit’s here,” said Alex as she dropped to her knees at Bernie’s side, holding a sealed packet containing a sterile scalpel and another packet she’d just opened ready for Bernie to take the gloves from. “See what I mean?” She was already wearing gloves and holding a syringe primed with some injectable local anaesthetic that was on the aircraft in case of having to cope with an emergency birth - it wasn’t perfect for the procedure, but it was better than nothing.
“Yes…” Bernie took the gloves and pulled them on, deciding not to waste any more time, though she did let her patient know what was about to happen, given that his eyes were still open and had been following her as she moved around him, even if he was probably starting to feel some of the symptoms of oxygen deprivation at the very least. “Harry, that was some antiseptic we’ve just rubbed on your neck, you’re going to feel a sharp scratch…” He didn’t need to know that was Alex injecting the local anaesthetic into his neck to try and dull some of the sensation ahead of what she was about to do. “…and firm pressure…” As she spoke, she took the scalpel Alex now opened in her ungloved hand and in a single movement, refound the spot she’d already identified and made the necessary incision. A split second later, and with Alex’s intuitive assistance, the scalpel had been swapped for the pen piece and it was in Harry’s neck. “...and breathe.”

“There’s the rise and fall…” confirmed Alex, leaning forwards with her stethoscope already in her ears as she started to listen to his chest, wanting to check that they’d at least dealt with the most urgent aspect of Harry’s potentially critical condition.

“Harry?” Bernie waited until he was looking at her again, the shock of the impromptu field surgery fading. “I need you to trust me and not try to cough or swallow, and no talking!” His eyes widened and started to dart around as he started to, understandably, panic a bit. “Shh, it’s alright…” She leaned forward and took his hand, having first removed one of her gloves so he could feel her hand properly. “My name’s Bernie and I’m an Army doctor, like Alex. I’ve put a tube in your neck to help the air get in and out of your lungs when you breathe. Can you squeeze my hand?”

“Good lad!”

Leaving Bernie, Alex pushed back up onto her feet and headed back out to the aisle where it was starting to get rather crowded as Bernie’s various requests had been carried out swiftly by cabin crew and paratrooper alike.

“Lottie?” Ignoring the others for a moment, Alex crouched down in front of the no longer crying teenager and gave her knee a reassuring rub. “He’s breathing again.”

“Is he...awake?”

“He’s awake and understanding us when we talk to him. In a couple of minutes you can go and see him, but I need to explain a couple of things first, okay?”
“Okay…” Lottie took the tissues being offered to her by the cabin crew lady she couldn’t remember the name of and blew her nose, not wanting to look like she’d been crying when she saw her brother. “…I...don’t remember your name…”

“I’m Alex, and the other doctor with Harry is called Bernie.” Alex wasn’t surprised that names weren’t staying in Lottie’s memory at the moment - as field medicine went, having to stabilise Harry in a civilian aircraft with Bernie and no one shooting at them was at the calmer end of her experiences, but for Lottie and Harry this was far from ordinary or calm. “Harry’s lying down and when you see him, you’re going to see he has a tube in his neck here…” Alex gestured to her own throat to show Lottie where they’d done the emergency tracheotomy, deciding not to explain the origin of the ‘tube’. “…it’s letting the air get in and out of his lungs as he breathes, but it means he can’t talk right now.”

“Like in the films?”

“Like in the films,” confirmed Alex, deciding not to be a medical pedant and explain how the films got it wrong. “Excuse me a second…” Pushing herself to her feet, Alex ducked her head into the galley area to see how Bernie was doing, feeling the aisle was getting a little too crowded. “…you want me to take over? The cavalry’s arrived.”

“You mind?”

“No...hello Harry, I’m Alex, another Doctor.” Alex looked down at him, pleased to see he looked a much better colour than he had done even a couple of minutes ago, only to be surprised by a wink.

“We’ve got a code. Double blink is no, wink is yes or okay, isn’t it Harry?”

Despite everything, Alex couldn’t help but chuckle at Harry’s immediate wink - clearly he was quite the character when at his best, and had already managed to make friends with Bernie in spite of not being able to talk to her.

“Good to know.” Alex slid in next to Bernie on the floor at Harry’s side, dropping her voice several levels so she was almost whispering in Bernie’s ear. “Send me the medics and I’ll finish the dressing, then get them on Obs.”

“Will do. See you in a few minutes Harry, don’t laugh at Alex’s jokes while I’m gone.” As Harry
acknowledged Bernie’s request with another cheeky wink, Alex shuffled into the spot Bernie vacated and started to gently talk him through what she was doing as she began her own set of checks on him.

“Doc Wolfe? You wanted medics?”

“Yes…” Bernie instinctively sized up the two combat medics that had followed Staff-Sergeant Boodon to the galley area, realising that one was a bit more seasoned than the other but both looked rather too young to have been in any of her classes when she’d done her turn at teaching some years back. “Can you take the dressing packs…” She gestured to the various wound dressing supplies that had clearly been consolidated from the different types of medical kit the aircraft had. “... and assist Captain Dawson with our patient?”

"Ma'am.” Bernie couldn’t stop the half smile at the by-the-book response from the two soldiers.

“Don’t think they get many orders from Colonels Doc.”

“And here I thought it was my personality…” Bernie looked at her one time assaulter, though technically it was the wall that did the damage, and rubbed her neck as she automatically sifted through everything she was currently thinking about, picking somewhere to start. “...Can I still call you Boods?”

“Seems only fair Ma'am, since I’m still calling you Doc Wolfe.” It wasn’t where he’d expected her to start, given the message he’d received, but that was somehow exactly how he expected it to be - Doc Wolfe always somehow managed to be far enough ahead of everyone else that her beginning was everyone else’s halfway along, if not further. It was admittedly a while since he’d been called his old nickname, with few left in the Army who knew it, but if it was good enough for him as a Sergeant, there was nothing wrong with it now. “Your jacket.”

“Thanks.” Taking the jacket from him, she turned it around until she could find the front pockets in which she’d stuffed the various bits of paperwork relating to her and the cargo loads in the aircraft hold. “You got your Q?” It wasn’t just the Bond films that called the Quartermaster by the role’s initial, with Fleming having borrowed the practice from the military.

“Q?” Boods turned and called over his shoulder, “we were getting a bit cosy here Doc.”
“I see…” Bernie had her attention caught by the reappearing head of one of the medics. “…you ready for Lottie?”

“Yes Ma’am.” The rest of the medic appeared from behind the galley curtain and, moving carefully around Boods and the cabin crew first aider who was trying to stay out of the way in the corner while also keeping track of what was being claimed from the aircraft’s medical kits, introduced himself to Lottie. After a final burst of nose-blowing and face wiping, Ben, as Bernie now knew he was called, took her back into the galley along with Bernie’s jacket which she’d given him, knowing Alex would understand it should be used to make either Harry or Lottie more comfortable as required.

“Q?” Boods meanwhile had been joined by his fellow Staff Sergeant and, with the two medics and Lottie in the galley, there was now a bit more room for the Quartermaster, who Bernie suddenly realised was rather familiar.

“Wolken?”

“Hey Doc…” The face was older and the hair a bit greyer, but he was still Greg Wolken, her first paratrooper patient. “…you wanted a Quartermaster?” He’d been amazed to hear from his former Sergeant that they were going to have an unexpected familiar face in the Falklands during their posting, but hadn’t anticipated seeing her quite this soon, or under such unusual circumstances.

“Yes.” Bernie glanced down at the paperwork she was holding and then handed it over to him. “I’m going to need some help with some cargo.”

“Okay…” Confused, he took the papers from her and looked at the first page, relieved to recognise it as fairly standard military shipping paperwork that was not that different from the bundle he had in his pack covering the equipment he’d been responsible for overseeing onto the aircraft before the flight. “…what sort of help?”

“That rather depends on Harry.”

“Harry?”

“Our patient.” She tilted her head towards the galley, just at the same time as Alex slipped through the curtain.
“Colonel?” She recognised one of the soldiers with Bernie as the one who had hugged her, which meant he must be Boodon, but the other one was unknown.

“Be right back.” She turned away from Boods and Wolken and went over to where Alex was standing having a discreet stretch while she waited for Bernie to join her a few feet from where they’d be overheard. “How is he?”

“Breathing, but…” Alex’s shrug filled in much of the conversation without needing any words, vaguely aware of the soldiers all dispersing to do various things that would be helping Harry either directly or indirectly.

“Still no view of the cords?” Bernie had noticed what Alex had during her own exam, that whatever was causing Harry’s throat to be obstructed, was rather more than just a piece of in-flight snacking gone the wrong way.

“No.” Alex leaned back against the wall they’d stopped by and smiled crookedly at her girlfriend. “I heard the coughing on my way to the loo but didn’t think anything of it. Heard the abdominal thrusts count as I came out and went to see if I could help.”

“He’s lucky you did. What do you think we’ve got?” Bernie hadn’t spent as much time with Harry as Alex had, and while she had a fairly good idea of most of his more obvious symptoms, that wasn’t the same thing as forming a diagnosis.

“Angioedema in the throat for sure,” Alex started ticking off on her fingers what they knew, “…swelling’s obscured the cords and obstructed the airway, no history of anaphylaxis.”

“So did the choking cause the swelling or the swelling cause the choking?” Bernie’s question was a rhetorical one, but Alex chose to answer it anyway.

“The choking must have contributed to the swelling - he could breathe, talk and swallow twenty minutes ago according to him and his sister...anaphylaxis?” It was Alex’s turn to ask the rhetorical question.

“Mmm…what are his fingers like?”
“Fingers?” It took Alex a moment to follow Bernie’s logic, “oh, you’re thinking contact allergy? Makes sense if the obstruction is still in his airway...” If he’d been eating something with his fingers that he hadn’t known he was mildly allergic to if he came into contact with it, then his fingers might be showing slight swelling or a rash developing that could have also formed more rapidly in the much more sensitive tissues of the throat, and would be continuing to get worse if the allergen was still there. “Fast acting angioedema rather than slow anaphylaxis...” It was a long-shot, but given they were currently about 30,000 feet above a particularly wet part of the Atlantic Ocean, Alex would be glad if their luck did run to a long-shot. Either way, whichever it was, Harry’s next destination really needed to be a hospital. “What happens when we land?”

“We take off again.”

“And Harry?”

“Him too.”

"You have a plan.” For most people, Alex included, their current set of circumstances was a chaotic assortment of mismatched jigsaw pieces that had no way of fitting together to make a series of individual small pictures, nevermind a single big picture plan. But Bernie wasn't most people, and Alex knew that for her, everything had only ever looked like one large jigsaw ready to be assembled. "If we can't restore his airway then I'd prefer to stabilise the improvised tracheostomy tube and you replace with a surgical one for the next flight. But we don't have the kit."

From the very small amount of information she had been able to find out before they set off, while all the inhabited South Atlantic territories had some medical infrastructure, there was a lot of situations in which the patient was transferred to the UK or Chile for treatment and recovery. Either way, the Ascension Island hospital was not at the airfield they were going to be landing at, which meant that for Alex, she was struggling to see what they could do to help Harry other than requesting a medivac aircraft to meet them on the island and take him back to the UK. For all Bernie’s skills, she couldn't do a surgical procedure without the proper equipment and Alex was even more dependent on having the proper drugs and equipment to use her more specialist knowledge and skills.

"Yes we do." Bernie's face had transformed into a reassuringly confident smile as she got confirmation that, logistic practicalities aside, Alex was on the same wavelength medically speaking. "There's the Base's medical centre and enough of everything else is in the hold. May as well use it."

When Alex didn't say anything, Bernie’s expression shifted from smile to frown, finding her partner's expression unusually unreadable. "What? You know I wouldn't risk your patient..." Before she could continue her defense, she was silenced by a pair of lips pressed against her own.
While she was never going to say no to a kiss from Alex, in this instance it was helping increase her confusion, something that she couldn’t keep from her face as Alex pulled back..

"Being Colonel suits you." Alex’s expression was one Bernie definitely recognised and understood, though she was still somewhat muddled about how it was warranted in the current situation.

"You're not upset I'm taking over?" That worry had been nagging away at her since she'd found herself giving orders within seconds of reaching the galley. She was used to being 'the surgeon', summoned to size up a patient and cut and stitch her way through to a solution at a moment’s notice - that was a skill set based role and she’d spent decades honing her skills. But this? Scooping up a casualty in the field and finding a way to get them to the relative safety of a hospital was Alex's area of practical day-to-day expertise. Although Bernie taught the techniques and went ‘outside the wire’ occasionally, that was nothing like what Alex and the other MERT medics had done day in day out. "He's your patient…" She should have checked with Alex before she did anything after the emergency tracheotomy incision, not started to treat Alex like a med student.

"Our patient." Not having appreciated how much doubt Bernie was carrying around with her, Alex decided to take more drastic action, and pulled Bernie’s hips towards her, causing Bernie to tumble into her arms, their foreheads almost cracking against each other. "Just like old times..." Alex nudged Bernie’s nose with her own, knowing it made Bernie smile whenever she did it no matter how intense or emotional their conversation had been seconds before.

“Not exactly…” She nudged Alex’s nose right back, feeling some of the tension she hadn’t noticed she was carrying leave her.

“Oh?” Alex knew that there were a number of differences that meant this wasn’t literally like old times, with Bernie’s new rank and their current altitude and flight direction being two of the more obvious differences that sprang to mind.

Bernie, not one for excessively long speeches at the best of times, decided that actions were more efficient and effective and kissed Alex with a careful, loving tenderness that was at once wonderfully familiar and new all at the same time, with their previous kisses like that being very much behind closed doors or snatched in brief stolen moments when their senses were heightened due to fear of discovery. It lasted only a couple of seconds but it wasn’t the sort of kiss that’s significance was determined by length, but emotion.

“Still feels like old times...” teased Alex, inwardly rejoicing that Bernie hadn't lost the easy confidence she'd developed during her couple of years at Holby at being 'out' and affectionate in public. They were never going to be going too far away from the privacy of their own spaces, with neither having an exhibitionist streak. But a hug that lasted a bit longer and was a bit closer than
the sort exchanged between friends, and the occasional kiss that was romantic rather than friendly was 'them' when they'd met in Albie's after conflicting shift patterns, or when Bernie met Alex at the Depot after her reserve duty weekend had finished.

"Old times would see me leaping away when I heard Boods be asked where you were…" whispered Bernie, proving that her situational awareness was as sharp as ever. "... and definitely not kiss you with him stood behind us." Bernie leaned back enough for Alex to be able to look past her and see the large Staff-Sergeant standing quietly, looking pleased at something, which wasn't quite what Alex would have guessed the paratrooper's expression to be.

"That is different," agreed Alex, letting go of Bernie's hips so that she could talk to him. "I'm wanted?"

"Patch had a question, something about the lad's ribs?" ‘Patch’ was what they were calling the more experienced of the two combat medics on account of his first name also being Harry, while the other was being referred to by his first name, Ben.

"I'll go have a look, thanks."

As Alex disappeared behind the galley curtain, Bernie leaned against the wall and looked at him, wondering if he was going to volunteer his thoughts or if she would need to ask.

"Permission to make a personal remark Doc?" At her nod, he continued, only looking a little bit nervous. "I always thought your husband was a bit of a knobhead, when he wasn't being a total prick."

"I didn't realise you were that well acquainted with him," observed Bernie wryly, knowing he'd met Marcus more than once when he'd come to see her during the three weeks they were at the Jump School at RAF Brize Norton. “And he’s my ex-husband,” she added, somewhat redundantly but not prepared to allow any room for confusion.

“We exchanged words on occasion.” He had a feeling that the husband hadn’t shared with her what those words were at the time, and although he could remember most of them fairly clearly still after all this time, he wasn’t keen on sharing them with her now.

“I can imagine.” She could remember some odd remarks from Marcus about the ‘company she was keeping’ which at the time she’d thought meant he was implying an affair between her and
Boods which was so ridiculous she’d actually laughed until she had hiccups. “Actually I can’t.” It was one thing for him to have said things to her, but given their relative sizes, even twenty plus years ago Marcus had enough sense to know when not to pick a fight with the wrong person.

“Best leave it that way Doc,” he suggested amiably. “Have you spoken to the Captain yet?”

“About my ex-husband? She’s aware.”

“That’s good, but I meant the plane Captain.” He almost laughed when he saw her blush, thinking how rare it was to catch her out on anything, but he wasn’t prepared to risk commenting on it. “According to the cabin crew we’re still four hours plus to Ascension and since the lad’s not quite right yet they want you or the other Doctor to give the Captain a sit rep.”

“Fair enough.” Bernie knew she’d have to talk to the flight deck at some point, but had decided that she’d wait until the cabin crew were insisting rather than force the pace. But first she wanted to find out from Alex what the situation was with Harry and talk to Wolken about what she needed his help with.

“He’s lucky to have you Doc, the lad I mean....” Boobs’ faith in Bernie had, while slow to form, latterly been unshakable as she came through on everything she’d said she’d do, starting with learning exactly what a paratrooper’s shoulder had to be able to withstand. He’d not known too much about what she’d done surgically for Wolken, but it was clear from the snippets of conversation he’d picked up when he’d been able to visit him after completing his punishment duties that she’d also kept her promise medically, with the hospital buzzing with the new surgical techniques she was using, techniques that had apparently even impressed the Americans. And while he’d shifted to logistics during his rehab and then elected to stay there, it was because Wolken had discovered he liked it, with his jump status and place in the regiment confirmed with full active duty clearances once his leg and shoulder had been given the appropriate time to heal.

“It’s Captain Dawson he’s lucky to have Boods...” Without Alex’s sharp hearing and timely intervention, it was impossible to predict what would have happened, but the odds would have been even more against him than they currently were. “I’m just the back-up.” She pushed off the wall and, after checking she still had her stethoscope balanced around her neck, discreetly flexed both knees in preparation for once more kneeling alongside Harry. “Could you let the cabin crew know I’ll be ready to talk with the Captain in five minutes? Oh, and could Greg be there when I do please?”

“Sure thing Doc.” The rest of the flight might be long, but it was going to be a hell of a lot easier with her and the other Doctor on board, that Boodon was certain of. “You still drink rocket fuel coffee?”
“Maybe a bit of milk these days thanks Boods, same for the Captain.” And, with a flash of the grin he realised hadn’t changed at all in the intervening years, she disappeared through the curtain to check in with a very lucky lad, who didn’t yet know quite how lucky he was to have her in his corner, even if they were over 30,000 feet above an ocean.
“Here…” Alex held out the bottle of water for Bernie before sitting down on the bench next to her. “…top three, who do you want to shout at the most?” It was hard to keep track of what time it was, with her body clock wanting there to be some sort of time zone change to go with the hours on the aircraft, but local time was only one hour back from when they’d taken off, meaning that they could sit out in the bright sunshine of the early morning. What had been an early afternoon departure from Holby had become an early evening arrival at the airbase in the UK, a very late evening take-off and, after flying almost due south for eight hours, with the time zone change was now a very early Thursday morning in the northern part of the South Atlantic.

“Do I have to pick?”

“A short list? Yes but I’m not bothered about the order.”

“Dr Pompous Arse.”

"Think he's actually called Ponsbury-Arch," corrected Alex mildly, "and he's technically a Flight Lieutenant." Either way, whatever he was called, the Base Medical Officer had not made a good first impression with Bernie.

"He doesn't deserve it," groused Bernie, draining the rest of her water and crumpling the now empty bottle before settling back against Alex’s side, finding her more comfortable for her now very tired back than the wall she'd been using as a back rest..

"He did seem determined to dig his own grave," agreed Alex, knowing that he was given several lifelines from the Paratroopers who were with them as they helped to move Harry from the plane to the Base Medical Centre's emergency treatment bed. Despite all the emphatic use of Bernie’s rank and Alex's MERT status and experience, he'd continued to be uncooperative. "Though it was very funny when he claimed that his CO, the Senior Medical Officer would support him in this."

"That was quite funny…” agreed Bernie, starting to calm down about that particularly farcical moment. "... and did prove there's someone even worse than me at reading emails." Had he read his emails, he would have discovered that at that moment, the Senior Medical Officer for the South Atlantic Force was one Colonel B G Wolfe, which also meant she had the unfortunate duty of being his CO and now needing to do something about him.
"I don't think anyone minds you not reading emails while you are operating." Alex tried to picture how that could work. "Would you get to have a secretary scrub in to take dictation? Or would you have a screen like you have when using the cameras?"

“I just had the ‘Ghost’…” recalled Bernie, thinking back to her most recent postings to Afghanistan. “...he could be relied upon to follow me into theatre if I’d failed to reply to something he considered to be urgent, not that I often agreed with his prioritisation.”

“Did you ever agree with his prioritisation?” Alex had quite a different recollection to Bernie’s, with their long-suffering hospital administrator spending a good portion of every day in theatre with her, outside the sterile area, trying to get Bernie to spare a split second to answer a question that was deemed urgent by someone other than Bernie.

“He was very good at chasing me to sign off on things for you guys…” Lack of sleep was starting to catch up with her and her memory was failing her as to what the ‘things’ were, but she’d always been grateful for him chasing her down to ensure the team was properly looked after, even if everything else that the Army needed in triplicate was not high up her ‘must do’ list.

“And I’m sure we were suitably ignorant of your kindness.” Alex had meant her comment to be infused with humour but she found she actually meant it with total sincerity. Despite all the hours she spent in theatre and elsewhere with Bernie during those postings, all of which gave her a better than average understanding of what landed on Major Wolfe’s shoulders aside from the surgical expectations, she couldn’t once remember there being any ‘thank you’ to her, though she could certainly remember lots of small moments of ‘treats’ that would miraculously appear after an especially hard day. “How did I not know?”

“Mmm?” Bernie had been distracted watching a Land Rover pulling up to the building they were sitting outside the front of, wondering if whoever was in it was going to get cross with them for making the place look untidy. “About me being fairy godmother?”

“Santa Claus more like, and yes.”

“I was surprised you of all people never noticed actually…” Bernie failed in her battle to stifle a yawn, her body starting to realise how little sleep she’d managed to get in the last 48 hours with her plan to sleep her way south failing spectacularly. “...given that every time he came into theatre to ask for a ‘very urgent stores request’…”

“...’needs your personal clearance Ma’am’, I remember those!”
“Well then.”

“Well then what?”

“Didn’t you also notice that those generally happened right before the extra downtime or film night?” Bernie closed her eyes as she asked the question, wondering if she’d be able to get five minutes sleep - the combination of the morning sun, fresh air and Alex was making it hard to stay awake.

“That’s what those were?” Alex remembered he’d always been extra twitchy whenever he came into theatre to ask about those, which for the ‘Ghost’ meant the occasional shuffling from foot to foot while he waited for Bernie’s attention. “I always thought they were for the drugs or something…” Even as she said that she realised how little that made sense, with the hospital at Bastion having its own pharmacy who handled all of those sorts of requests. “Any idea who that is?” Alex nudged the very sleepy Bernie back into a slightly more alert state, having seen whoever was driving the Land Rover get out and veer towards them instead of going on into the building as they’d clearly intended.

“Rank?” Bernie wasn’t opening her eyes unless she had to.

“Air Force…Officer…” Alex squinted against the sun, looking for a hint as to the rank. “…three full rings?” It took her a moment to mentally translate that into an actual rank, being a bit out of practice at ‘thinking’ in Air Force ranks and insignia as well as Army. “Wing Commander? And they’re coming this way.” She’d got as far as remembering that Wing Commander was definitely more senior than her own Captain’s rank, meaning she should probably be at least able to get to her feet fairly promptly rather than being slouched against the wall, though her brain was failing to come through on whether being unable to stand to attention for a Wing Commander because a Colonel was using you as a back rest was a suitable defence.

“That’s the Base CO then…” muttered Bernie, reluctantly opening her eyes, having been given plenty of background reading about the various members of the Command structures from all three services who were posted to the various bases across the South Atlantic. “…and equivalent to a Lt…” She’d brushed up on her inter-service rank comparisons, which weren’t as rusty as she’d feared they would be, though she’d had to do a bit more of a refresher on the Navy ranks than the RAF. “…onel..” she finished, another yawn stealing the first part of ‘Colonel’.

“Then you best take their salute then, Colonel…” teased Alex, giving Bernie an unapologetically firm elbow in the ribs to get her to properly wake up, not overly surprised that her current rank was slipping her exhausted memory. “…and I’ll go check on our patient.”
“Chicken…” grumbled Bernie good-naturedly, coming properly awake and standing up, giving her uniform shirt a tug to get it vaguely back into some sort of good order, her thick jacket not needed in the tropical climate of Ascension so still inside with Harry.

“Wimp.” Alex wasn’t disagreeing with the chicken label, though they did need to see how Harry was doing after they’d replaced the improvised tracheostomy tube with one from a field emergency kit and given him some heavy doses of antihistamines, antibiotics and general pain relief. As she also got to her feet, she pushed Bernie to turn away from her and then brushed the brick dust that was clinging to the back of her clothes off her. “Brick dust.”

“Thanks.”

“Come find me?” Alex judged that if she set off now she would be able to avoid getting included in whatever the Base CO wanted with Bernie, which she hoped would make it easier for Bernie to escape.

“Always.” Resigning herself to having to make do with a wink rather than anything more affectionate, Bernie squared her shoulders and took a deep breath as she reminded herself to ‘play nice’ and then turned towards the approaching officer. “Wing Commander…” She returned his salute on auto-pilot, glad of her extra rank and making a mental note that maybe Algie wasn’t in her top three to shout at after all, “…good to meet you, I’m Colonel Wolfe…”

“Alex?” Lottie, Harry’s twin sister sounded younger than her seventeen years as she called out to attract the Doctor’s attention. “Could you talk to Mum?”

“Of course…” Alex was glad she’d got her yawning over with in the corridor, since sounding the sensible Doctor to a worried mother some three thousand miles away would be less effective if every other word was lost in a yawn. “…what’s her name?”

“Harriet. Harry’s named after her and I’m named after Dad.” Although not as terrified as she had been on the plane, Lottie’s lurching between nervous rambling and near silence was something Alex was keeping an eye on. Bernie’s kids were close, and while Ronnie had taken Charlie’s injury at the Armed Forces Day event quite well, they were both older than Harry and Lottie, who had the additional closeness of being twins.
“Thanks. Harriet? My name’s Alex Dawson...yes, I’m a doctor...no, there’s two of us. Colonel Wolfe is a trauma surgeon and I’m an anaesthetist ...” As Alex set about answering all of her questions about her and Bernie, presumably because the immediate ‘how’s Harry?’ worries had been handled by her daughter, she stuck her head into the treatment room to check that Patch and Ben were still alright keeping an eye on their patient. Getting a thumbs up from all three of them, Harry included, she slipped back out again and waited for her opportunity to turn the conversation back to Harry. “Yes Ma’am, that’s my hope, but I need to ask you a couple of questions?” Mouthing to Lottie that she’d be just outside talking to her mother, Alex pinched the bridge of her nose and mentally willed the mother to stop talking so she could get a word in, only to mentally chastise herself for being so unsympathetic in what must be an extremely stressful situation for Harriet. “According to Lottie, Harry was eating a bag of dried ‘tropical’ fruit mix when he started to cough...is there anything that you can think of which he might be allergic to in that sort of mix?”

It was a long shot, but talking to a couple of the other Falkland Islanders who were on the flight with them, there was a strong possibility that there was something in dried fruit mix Harry didn’t know he shouldn’t be eating. “Really?” Alex hoped she didn’t sound as surprised as she was. “Do they know this?” Trapping the phone against her shoulder with her head, she began searching through her pockets for a pen, only to remember that Bernie had claimed it before they’d taken off from the UK. “No, that’s extremely helpful and makes quite a lot of sense...yes, it could well also be something Lottie’s allergic to...of course, just a second.” Glad of a natural break in the conversation, Alex put the mouthpiece of the mobile phone against her shoulder and went back into the treatment room. “Lottie? Your Mum wants to talk to you again...”

“Is it ok?”

“It’s fine…” It took Alex a moment to work out what Lottie’s worried look was being caused by. “You’re not in trouble, she’s not mad. Just wants to talk to you some more now she’s answered my questions and I’ve answered most of hers…”

“Oh, cool…” Reassured, Lottie took her mobile phone back from Alex and went to sit down next to her brother again as she resumed her conversation with a hopefully calmer Harriet. “...Mum? Yes, she is nice...and so’s the other one…”

Tuning out Lottie’s conversation, Alex went over to the side of the treatment room where the medical supplies were and started to methodically sort through them, putting some to one side and occasionally stopping to read the details on the packets.

“Ma’am?” Patch, the more experienced of the two medics came over to Alex, wondering if there was an update after the phone call. “Can I help?”
“Did we bring the bag of dried fruit off the plane?”

“Yes, one of us has it…” He couldn’t remember if it had been picked up by the bosses (as he thought of Staff Sergeants Boodon and Wolken) or Ben. “…in a jacket pocket somewhere. You want me to get it Ma’am?”

“I just need you to see if it has Papaya listed in it please.”

“Papaya?” He thought for a moment, trying to picture the sort of dried fruit mix he had in cereal and the like. “Sort of squidgy orange lumps?”

“That’s the one,” agreed Alex, wondering when a familiarity with tropical fruit became standard soldier knowledge, before deciding it was probably about the same time they started eating avocado willingly.

“I’ll go find out Ma’am. Is that what his Mum says he’s allergic to then?”

“Not exactly…” Alex wasn’t sure when she’d learned this piece of random scientific knowledge, but was just glad she had, although Bernie would have probably known. “…but there’s a chance he’s allergic to latex.”

“Latex?” Suddenly her sorting of the various bits of medical equipment and supplies made some sort of sense to Patch. “Like in gloves and…things?” He couldn’t quite bring himself to say ‘condoms’ to her, even if she was a Doctor.

“Yes.” Fortunately the gloves they’d used from the aircraft’s medical kit hadn’t been latex ones and what they’d used since arriving at the medical centre had been, apart from some of the gloves, not been latex based. What little further contact (if any) that Harry had had with latex had been on his hands and arms, and had been after his first dose of antihistamine. “Don’t ask me how, but people with latex allergies can also be allergic to papaya.”

“I’ll find that fruit mix Ma’am.”

“Thanks…” Alex picked up a pair of latex-free gloves and headed towards Harry, deciding to
check on him while she tried to work out what this might mean for the ‘we take off again’ part of Bernie’s original plan. “...Harry? It’s Alex, you mind if I look at your throat?”
“Colonel Wolfe?”

“What happened to Doc?” asked Bernie slightly sharply, not really meaning for her frustration to be directed at Wolken. “Sorry Greg…” She waved him into the office she was borrowing and encouraged him to sit down and take his ease. “…that wasn’t what I meant. Meet…” Her mind was a total blank. “...I’m very sorry, I’ve completely forgotten your name Corporal…?

“John Smith.” He couldn’t help but smile when he saw both her and the Staff Sergeant’s double take. “Yes really and yes, I chose Personnel Support.” He actually enjoyed the gentle teasing he got from the combination of his ‘dull’ name and presumed ‘duller’ RAF career which many thought meant soldiering with a stapler. “And you haven’t forgotten Ma’am, we weren’t introduced.” He’d been out of the room when she’d been loaned the spare desk and computer, and she’d been on the phone when he’d returned.

“Right.” That made sense, which also meant she needed coffee if she was failing to realise she’d not been introduced at all, rather than just forgetting their names. “Think he counts as friendly now Greg.”

“You got it Doc.” Seeing her smile quickly disappear into a groan when the phone on the desk she was sitting at, he elected to catch the Corporal up on a couple of things he might have missed in a clear but quiet whisper. “To the Para she’s Doc Wolfe, to Captain Dawson she’s anything the Captain calls her, you’d do well to not mention the Base MO in their presence and, as far as I know, she’s not had any coffee since before we landed on this rock.”

“Hot and strong work Staff-Sergeant? I know where the really decent pot is.” The base grapevine was, for 8am on a Thursday morning, already running red hot as it wasn’t every day the Falklands’ Airbridge stop-over brought Paratroopers and a Colonel into the staff buildings, but he’d got through his RAF career so far by listening but not repeating, and he didn’t plan on changing his habits now. “And can bring two mugs back in less than a minute.”

“Carry on,” agreed Greg, not saying no to the offer of a mug of coffee though he’d not intended to get one for himself, just help the Doc out.

“....thanks. Yes, I’ll call direct from here.” Bernie put the phone down and tossed aside the pen she’d used to scribble down the number she’d been given before flopping back in the uncomfortable chair. “Scared him already?”
“Merely asked if this rock had any coffee on it for you Doc.”

“Thanks. How’s it looking?” The weather they’d been trying to avoid by leaving the UK early hadn’t entirely behaved as the weather forecasters had hoped, but there was now some confusion it seemed as to whether they were leaving as originally scheduled or at a different time.

“Squared away now. There’s…” He looked at his watch to check his estimates. “...45 minutes until all the checks and clearances are completed, or we go on our original departure time 90 minutes after that.”

“Who’s deciding?” Bernie caught her lower lip between her teeth as she weighed up the relative benefits of having another hour and a half on the ground with Harry in the Medical Centre versus being 90 minutes nearer to the end of his journey.

“Officially it’s the Base CO and new pilot.” While the aircraft and passengers were, with a couple of exceptions, continuing onto the Falklands, the cabin and flight crews were swapping over. He saw her thoughtful expression shift into the wry grin he was so familiar with from all those years ago when she was listening to his observations about the oddities of Army life he was noticing from his hospital bed. “We’re now following the pilot’s timeline,” which he knew she’d understand was code for there had been the officers’ equivalent of a punch up and the Base CO had lost.

“Which is?”

“That she’s flying a medical repatriation flight and asked me to let you and Captain Dawson know the operational window.” Again, he waited while she dutifully translated what he was supposed to say into what was actually meant, which had been a fairly blunt, ‘now I’ve dealt with that pissing contest, we’ll remember the Colonel outranks us all and it’s the doctors who have to look the lad’s mother in the eye when we land, so we take off when they say.’

“Sounds like my kind of lady.”

“Should I be jealous?” teased Alex, having heard what Bernie had said as she approached the open office door and could see it was just Bernie and Greg Wolken inside.

“New pilot for the flight - she’s not afraid of the boys’ club.”
“Oh?” Alex was about to sit down on the edge of the desk Bernie was sat at when she heard a cough behind her, causing her to spin out of the way. “Oh! Sorry…” She watched as the mug of steaming hot coffee that smelled rich and strong was handed across to Bernie.

“Captain Dawson I assume?” asked Corporal Smith, not finding it much of a difficult guess given he knew all the permanently stationed officers on the island and she fitted the Staff Sergeant’s description. “I can get you milk or sugar if you need it Ma’am?”

“Thanks and no…but I’ve taken your mug!” Alex tried to pass it back to Greg who shook his head firmly, not going to deprive her of the clearly welcome drink.

“I’ll be back with your mug in a moment Staff Sergeant, and Chefo’s compliments Ma’ams, would you like brown or red sauce on a bacon sandwich?” Initiative in the Armed Forces wasn’t always advisable, but sometimes it was a safe bet, and the safest bet of all was food based.

“Yes please!” Bernie’s stomach joined in loudly, only to be drowned out by another groan as the phone rang again. “Colonel Wolfe?”

“Ma’am?”

“Some of each would be wonderful Corporal…” Alex hadn’t been introduced to him but had managed to take a look at the office’s nameplates as she arrived, “…Smith,” and clearly her hunch had paid off. “Thank you, and to Chefo.”

“I think so…” Bernie put her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece and looked at Alex, “…can you see a fax machine?”

“Yup…” Putting down her coffee mug, Alex headed over to the cabinet by the wall and read out the number for Bernie to relay to whoever she was talking to.

“Would you like the chair Captain?”

“You’re fine thanks.” Alex resumed her original perch on the edge of the desk Bernie was using.
“She only uses furniture properly under duress,” teased Bernie after putting the phone down again. “Mmm, good coffee…” She was about to thank Corporal Smith when she realised he wasn’t back yet. “…sorry Greg, you never got to why you were looking for me.” She hadn’t forgotten about him, but Alex’s arrival prioritised the patient ahead of the cargo. “How’s Harry?”

“Having a nap with his sister, Patch and Ben are monitoring them both.” There was more to discuss with Bernie but Alex was happy to wait until there was more coffee and a bacon sandwich in her before launching into the intricacies of what they did next.

“Good.” Bernie was astute enough to spot what Alex was doing and was woman enough to admit she was grateful for the opportunity to have a few mouthfuls of coffee to help her recover from the pulling rank and banging heads she’d found herself having to do while Alex kept a close eye on Harry. “So how’s it…” The phone rang again, interrupting her once more, though before she could pick it up, Alex had leaned across her clearly somewhat frazzled partner and snatched the phone up.

“Captain Dawson...oh, good morning Sir....Yes Sir, I’m sorry Algie…” Trapping the phone against her shoulder she stood up and managed to turn Bernie’s chair so she was able to stand up if she would only take the hint. “Good morning Algie, yes, it’s just gone eight here, but you’re right…” Seeing Bernie needed some encouragement, Alex took hold of the hand that wasn’t holding the half drunk mug of coffee and gave a not overly gentle tug. “...I think it was about 3am but I’d prefer not to think about it.” She put her hand over the mouthpiece and made shooing sounds and movements at Bernie, prepared to give her a break from the phone calling for a few minutes but also guessing that Wolken had actually needed her to go and look at something outside given he had dropped a couple of hi-vis jackets and hard hats in the corridor before entering the office. “You’re wanted outside…I’ll send your breakfast out,” she whispered, hoping that if Algie did hear her, he’d be polite enough to pretend he didn’t.

“My hero,” whispered Bernie as she leapt, well, creaked to her feet and kissed Alex on the temple as she passed, Army be damned as they currently were owing them both more than one favour, before following a relieved looking Greg Wolken out into the corridor.

“...she’s outside with the aircraft, I think she was going to ring you when she’d spoken to the new flight crew.” It was a white lie and if he’d heard Bernie leaving, he was kind enough not to call Alex out on it. “We’ve been fortunate actually, turns out she knew some of the other passengers already, as I think you do…” Alex risked another gulp of coffee while she listened to Algie have much the same reaction as Bernie’s had been, with a comment about it being a ‘small Army’ then asking which bit it was this time. “...Parachute Regiment? Staff Sergeants Boodon and Wolken now, but they were…. yes, that’s the one…”
“Colonel?”

“What now?” muttered Bernie sufficiently quietly that only Wolken heard as she straightened up and turned in the direction of whoever it was that was calling her. “Oh, breakfast!” Her mood immediately improved when she saw Corporal Smith stood at the last possible point he could get to without the hi-vis jacket and hard hat she’d been given, holding a tray with what looked like mugs of coffee and paper bags which hopefully would smell of bacon. “Be with you in a moment!”

“Typical Rodney Pongo, getting waitress service…”

“Er…” Wolken looked at Bernie, not sure if she’d heard the less than flattering mutter from the nearby mechanics who clearly didn’t appreciate the acoustics of the aircraft’s cargo hold, only to see her grin: she’d heard it and understood it.

“That’s Colonel Rodney Pongo to you…” She clambered out from the aircraft hold where she’d been double-checking the cargo rearrangement that Greg had sorted out for her based on the paperwork she’d given earlier. “...and I’d wait on you if you’d started at…” It took her a moment to work out precisely when, local time, her alarm had woken her at the last time she’d been asleep in a bed. “.. 0400 two days ago.” It had been a long time since she’d been called a ‘Pongo’ in her earshot, probably not since she actually was a ‘Rodney’, or more accurately, a ‘Rupert’. Fortunately Algie was probably the last person in the Army that had personal experience of her occasional moment of ‘wet behind the ears’ junior officer naivety.

“Ma’am!” Two very terrified looking, barely old enough to shave mechanics had dropped their tools on hearing her voice and snapped to attention. The evil part of her was happy to let them stay like that while she went over to claim her coffee and sandwich.

“Thank you.” She took one of the paper bags from the tray and opened it, finally able to smell something other than jet fuel. “Any idea who those two geniuses are?”

“Umm…” He looked past her, squinting slightly as the sun reflected off the plane, rather glad to be on her good side, especially given she seemed to be taking it in rather better humour than the Staff Sergeant.

“Don’t worry…” She took another healthy bite of the very good sandwich and took care to chew and swallow it before continuing, “... I just wanted a yes or no.”
“Yes.” He knew who they were, and he now understood she didn’t want to.

“Then you can let their NCO know they’ve just used all their lifelines.” Taking care to finish her sandwich with brown sauce (meaning Alex had already snaffled the one with tomato ketchup), Bernie returned the paper bag to the tray with a smile of thanks and picked up her mug. “Back in a second,” she declared, before going over to chat to her two newest ‘friends’.

“Excellent scran, thank you.” Greg swallowed the last mouthful of his bacon sandwich, astute enough to know that he should be giving the appearance of looking in the other direction while the Doc demonstrated the difference between a wet-behind-the-ears junior officer and a grown-up. “And thank you for looking after her.” It was one thing to make space for a visiting officer, but another to actually make them feel welcome and while the welcome had been a bit hit and miss, this guy’d done a bang up job in Greg’s book.

“She’s on the lists as the new Medical Command?” He had looked her up as soon as word got round that there was a high rank medic coming off the Airbridge with a civilian patient, understanding sooner than many why she’d been singularly unimpressed to be told that she couldn’t treat a civilian in the med centre. But that hadn’t explained why she seemed to be under the sort of informal ‘protection’ of the Paras, which would have made marginally more sense if she’d been part of their deployment.

“Apparently so, you’re in good hands with the Doc.” He finished the last of his coffee and tidily put the scrunched up paper bags from his and her sandwiches into the mug so they didn’t blow away. “Don’t think the lad realises how lucky he’s been getting her and the other doctor looking after him.” He’d not really had much contact with Captain Dawson during the flight, but she was clearly someone the Doc rated and that was good enough for him. “Or how lucky those two dipsticks are...look sharp mate.”

“That was quick Staff.”

“Hardly, she’s just getting started.” As he spoke, he couldn’t help but instinctively stretch and roll his shoulder, still amazed after all these years at the miracle she’d worked for him, and for Boods too given what he’d done to her. In their own respective ways, it was almost entirely down to her that they’d been able to attain the rank of Staff Sergeant.

“Staff Sergeant Wolken?”
“Ma’am.”

“Could you let Captain Dawson know I’ll be delayed please? These two gentlemen are going to teach me about aircraft maintenance inspections.”

“Yes Ma’am.” He cleared his throat in an attempt to cover up his smile, finding her own good humour somewhat infectious. “Would I be able to join you in this education opportunity Colonel?” There was a part of him that would actually like to understand a bit more about what the inspection checks were that helped to keep the planes they jumped out of flying, but he also wanted to see what Boods had once described as a ‘bloodless surgical dismemberment of his bad attitude’ first hand, without being the one being dismembered.

“If Corporal Smith could find the time to be my messenger as well as my waitress, Corporal?”

“With pleasure Ma’am.” He turned and looked at the two rather terrified looking mechanics, the name of one of them finally coming back to him. “I’ll let your Sergeant know you’re redoing your inspections for the Colonel shall I Mayfield?”
“Comfortable Harry?”

Wink.

“Good lad. Just going to do a final listen if that’s alright?”

Wink. Eyeroll. Wink.

Smiling at his cheekiness, Alex tucked the ends of her stethoscope in her ears and began to listen to his chest while keeping a close eye on the outputs on the portable vitals monitor he was now connected up to. With Bernie being outside for longer than Alex had originally thought, she’d decided to get a headstart on preparing him for the next flight.

“Sounds good…” As she removed her stethoscope, she couldn’t help her nose from wrinkling at the smell of jet fuel that came into the room with Bernie. “...you smell like jet fuel.”

“Hello to you too…” Bernie smiled at Lottie and Harry before taking a sniff at her uniform. “...trust me, it’s better than it was when I still had the other jacket on.”

“I can imagine.” Alex could hardly complain really, with Bernie putting up with her covered in dust and smelling of cordite and aviation fuel when she came back from a MERT shift in Afghanistan, though then there had been the strong antiseptics of the hospital environment to mix in with the smells. “What happened? Smith didn’t say.”

“He wouldn’t know I don’t think. Two mechanics doing checks on the cargo door mechanisms saw him bring out my breakfast...called me a ‘Rodney Pongo’ and something about getting waitress service.”

“That’s RAF slang for a junior Army officer who’s a bit of an idiot,” explained Alex, aware that while Harry’s throat wasn’t working just now, his ears were sharp and since they’d reduced the pain meds, he was hanging onto every word said around him.
“Anyway, I pointed out it was Colonel Rodney Pongo and then stupidly remembered when I started my shift…” Proving her point, Bernie struggled to contain the jaw cracking yawn that snuck up on her, though she did manage to turn away from Harry so he wouldn’t be swept up in the inevitable contagiousness that always followed someone yawning. With his still blocked throat and the tracheostomy tube in place, a bout of yawning was not a good idea.

“Then made them redo their checks with you being an annoyingly attentive pupil?” guessed Alex, already having some idea of what had then detained Bernie based on Smith’s message, but also because she’d seen Bernie’s unique form of educational ‘punishment’ in action before.

“Something like that. One of them was called Mayfield…” Although Alex had never met Isaac Mayfield, she’d heard about him from Bernie both before and after she’d intervened, and had been only too happy to change their holiday plans at the last moment so that their flat was miraculously empty for Dom to ‘flat-sit’ for them while he adjusted to the idea of being free of him. “…just a coincidence.”

“But Greg Wolken was with you?” Alex hadn’t really given Bernie’s safety a second thought when she’d got the message, having a fairly well-placed faith in the good order and discipline of military life in such circumstances, but being reminded of what she knew of Isaac, she was glad the paratrooper had stayed with her partner.

“Yes. Think he found it surprisingly useful given all the time they spend waiting for aircraft…” Bernie went over to the sink and began giving her arms and hands a thorough scrubbing, the movements instinctive as her autopilot took over. “…and it was interesting.” And rather good fun - she'd always enjoyed the opportunity to investigate the more unusual or uniquely military pieces of equipment that she otherwise would never come across.

“But?”

“But I still prefer tanks. Much better at shooting back.”

"What happened to 'first do no harm'?” joked Alex, unable to disagree with Bernie's logic - it's why she'd always pick a Chinook helicopter over a Land Rover no matter how badly her knees protested.
"I'm a surgeon." She came back to the bed, stealing the stethoscope from around Alex’s neck as she passed, hers being she knew not where but certain it would turn up, it always did. "You wouldn't like me to use blunt scalpels would you?" It was one of their familiar teases, with Bernie's usual follow up going on to point out that 'first do no harm' was a 'Hollywood' fiction, based on a bit of Hippocrates that wasn't in the famous Oath. But instead she was frozen in place, her hands still on the end of the stethoscope which didn’t feel like Alex’s.

"Yes, that's yours." Alex had seen Bernie had left hers in Corporal Smith's office and picked it up when she came through to the medical centre. "And this..." she pulled hers out of her trouser pocket and dropped it round her own shoulders “....is mine...” before leaning over so she could stage whisper to Harry. "Did you spot when I switched them?"

Wink.

"Show off," grumbled Bernie good-naturedly, happy to be teased if it helped keep Harry's spirits up given his predicament.

Wink. He opened his mouth.

"For that young man…” Bernie shared a quick look with Alex, seeing she agreed with what she was thinking about him doing generally better than when they’d first met him, grateful for their ability to read each other so easily. "... I’d be tempted to look at your ears first.” She clicked her penlight on, long forgotten about uniform pockets being instinctively used for the tools of her trade once more. "But thank you, that’s wide enough."

"This…” sighed Bernie, dropping heavily into the desk chair in the borrowed office, "...was not part of the plan." 

"No plan ever survives contact with the enemy," reminded Alex mildly, coming round behind Bernie and with no warning other than a familiar tug on Bernie's shirt collar, applied firm pressure to the angrily tense muscles in her neck.

"The RAF are supposed to be on our side...mmm," Alex’s fingers were confident and strong, familiar with the muscles in Bernie’s neck from both an academic medical and practical
perspective, which meant that she continued to ignore the hums and groans until she found "... oh bugger..." the very specific angry corded scalene muscle that was causing Bernie's neck to ache and generally make everything feel a lot worse than the last few hours should have done.

"Better?" asked Alex a minute or so later when she could feel the muscle had been released from its spasm and she could now rub it rather than twang it like a guitar string.

"You're amazing." She reached up and squeezed Alex's hand before it disappeared from her neck, savouring the brief contact and wishing that part of her didn't give a damn about basic professionalism and therefore needing to maintain a ‘front’, as both a surgeon and an officer. But she was also realistic enough to know there were moments when it was prudent to restrict how many battlegrounds she was having to engage on, and right now, that meant getting to the Falklands, if only because then she could have a shower and a clean uniform.

“You’re pretty damn brilliant too,” declared Alex quietly, kissing the top of Bernie’s head as she withdrew her hands and moved back around so she could sit on the edge of the desk. “But you don’t want to do it here, do you?”

“No…” Bernie stretched her neck, a faint smile on her face when she could move it without starting to feel dizzy. “...I mean I did, because the sooner the better, but…” she glanced at the clock on the wall and did some quick mental arithmetic, “...we’d either be flying for the post-sedation or keeping him under, and I’m not asking you to even think about how you’d do that.” Bernie knew that if she asked, Alex would give it serious thought for her or any surgeon, but it wasn’t a fair question to ask under the circumstances and she already knew the answers. “...tomorrow’s going to be a hell of a first day.”

“Second day.”

“Hmm?”

“Technically tomorrow’s going to be your second day.” It was Alex’s turn to look at the clock and do some quick arithmetic. “And it will still be today when we land I think?”

“Pedant.” Bernie’s good humoured grin sobered as she looked at Alex, or rather looked in Alex’s direction but was actually running through all the possibilities in her mind. “How do you feel about light sedation?”
“For the surgeon or the patient?” Alex immediately became serious after her initial joke, following Bernie’s line of thinking. “I’m okay with that - he’s set up for standard monitoring and lines.” It hadn’t been an option on the previous flight, with their only monitoring equipment a blood pressure machine and their stethoscopes and a limited selection of drugs, but with a combination of ‘borrowing’ some equipment from the Ascension Base Medical Centre and promoting some of the Falklands bound medical equipment from cargo to cabin baggage, Alex could keep virtually as close an eye on Harry’s vitals on the plane as if he were on a standard hospital ward. “Stretcher?” It wasn’t an absolute essential, but given some of the complications Harry now had, it would be slightly more comfortable for him if he was able to spend the whole flight horizontal.

“Being sorted now. We’re relegated to spare crew seats to make it all work.” The plane was effectively full, so working out how they could create the extra empty seats to make room for the stretcher had taken a bit of lateral thought. Part of the solution had apparently involved claiming the two passenger seats Bernie and Alex were supposed to be sitting in which, combined with the seat Harry would have been sitting in ordinarily and the one empty seat on the flight, gave them the magic amount of space to set up the stretcher in.

“Will the Captain go for it?”

“It was her idea. Would you do all the sign offs?”

“So you can counter-sign as Command? Sure.” To Alex the request made perfect sense, with Harry needing a medical clearance as ‘fit to fly’ along with the appropriate notes and checks on all the equipment and medication he would need during the flight.

“That too.” Bernie rubbed her neck, more out of habit than current discomfort. “But I was actually thinking about you being better at it.” To Alex, Bernie knew that all the added complications that flying brought in terms oxygen supplies and the like was practically second nature given her specialty and additional skills, whereas for Bernie it was learned principles she had to logically work her way through each time. But Alex was also right that the pilot would need their own review and checks completed so as to have the assurance that the patient and the rest of the aircraft occupants including the flight and cabin crews were safe - for a conventional commercial airline that distinction was clear-cut and could take several days to achieve, but they weren’t flying with a conventional commercial airline.

“Quicker maybe.” Alex wasn’t going to debate Bernie’s point, but she didn’t have to unconditionally accept it. “Do we have the forms?” Both medicine and the military subscribed to the same administrative principal of paperwork in triplicate as often as possible.

“They should have been faxed…” It was then that Bernie remembered that she’d effectively missed a call from Algie right after she’d given HQ the fax number. “...I should call Algie back.”
“He said he’d understand if you waited until Mount Pleasant if you didn’t have time,” said Alex, naming the base in the Falklands that was Bernie’s official posting and their final destination on the next flight. “But also thought he’d have some more details by now for you about temporary posting options which you might want to mention to the Base CO as we leave.”

“Apart from you I hope?” It was selfish of her to want to exclude Alex from the list of possible temporary MOs for Ascension, but she didn’t want to end up with Alex three thousand miles away if she could help it. However, given she was sufficiently unimpressed with the current MO’s attitude and behaviour he was being relieved of duty as soon as she could find a spare moment to do so and, more crucially, a semi-spare MO to cover the post for however long until a replacement was found, she did have to acknowledge that Alex was technically a ‘spare’ MO in the South Atlantic who was more than qualified to act as locum.

“Apparently I’m his least favourite option.” Alex stood up, deciding that she probably needed to go and start preparing her and Bernie’s stuff for the flight. “But I made him promise to be the one to explain why.” She hoped that her phrasing would slip past Bernie’s protective streak rather than what Algie had actually said and that, once again, if he ever found out, he’d excuse her the small white lie.

“Thank you.” Alex, Bernie knew, understood that she wasn’t just referring to her talking to Algie earlier.

“Nothing to thank me for,” assured Alex easily, meaning it. “In fact I should be thanking you.” Alex didn’t really want to think about what it would have been like if she’d been on the flight on her own and having to stabilise Harry on her own. “How long until take off?”

“Pilot’s meeting us here at half past, if we’re ready we go then, otherwise we agree a new time.”

“We’ll be ready...” Alex paused at the door, carefully pulling her phone out so she could take a quick photo of ‘Colonel Wolfe’ in her less natural element of administrator. “...but you might want to encourage Algie to talk fast!”
Chapter 10

"What's wrong with Alex?"

"Good morning Grissy, why so grumpy?" Sat at his kitchen table, toast and marmalade half eaten and the dog already walked, Algie's day was going very much better than Bernie's, which was why he took her grouchiness in good humour.

"No one's called me that since Germany." Ire defused, Bernie leaned back in the desk chair and started to count the ceiling tiles.

"That's what old friends are for."

"She said she was your least favourite option for MO, but I know how you think, and you meant most disastrous." She’d not immediately noticed what was ‘wrong’ with Alex’s message, but as she waited for him to answer the phone, she’d realised that she hadn’t noticed anything off because it sounded like Alex, but if it was a message, it should have sounded like Algie, meaning Alex was paraphrasing...or he was being economical with the truth.

"True, but what is the one thing I actually get to claim credit for teaching you?" Algie was under no illusion - despite him having almost a decade’s more surgical experience when he first met her in Germany, she already had better hands than him when it came to actually wielding the scalpel. However, by then he was also discovering an appreciation for military strategic thinking he hadn’t expected to have, which ultimately led to him having a career that saw him gradually let go of his scalpel and instead pick up his pen, which he used to create the sort of environment that let the Bernies of the world do what they did best and save lives.

It might have been a lesson learned more than twenty years earlier, and not consciously thought of in over a decade, but it was now as ingrained in her as the first lessons in surgical stitching and therefore easy to recall. “To think like Wellington not Perceival.” Bernie had not, before meeting Algie, considered that a surgical patient could be analysed like a military campaign with a number of different battlefronts. Once she’d made the connection, she’d set out to learn more about the characteristics of successful military strategists, such as Wellington, and the ones that the Army preferred to have its current officers not emulate, such as Perceival. However, unlike Algie, who had been starting to apply those same principles to how and where they might best locate their medical resources, she started applying it to her surgeries.

“And since I now have both the medical degree and the General’s star…” His voice was warm and had the gentle humour of one old friend nudging another into seeing a situation from a different
perspective, rather than a senior officer correcting a subordinate. Plus, given how broadly he was
grinning, it would have been impossible for him to sound cross at her challenge, as inwardly he
was just delighted that she’d finally found someone who stirred her fierce protectiveness and
passionate commitment as a lover and partner rather than as a patient.

"Go on..." Bernie had a brief moment when she tried to picture Hanssen's reaction to her
willingness to listen to a non medical mindset. “...Wellington Winsham.” If he was calling her
Grumpy Grissy again, her name for him from back then was equally fair game, and she was now,
as then, genuinely interested in hearing his explanation.

“If I recall Alex to active duty and post her to Ascension I gain a happy Wing Commander.”

“Agreed.” So far, his assessment was no different to hers, though she was finding it harder to
ignore the very grumpy Colonel left in the Falklands, but she could manage for another two
minutes so long as he got to his point by then.

“But not only do I get a very grouchy Colonel, I also give that Colonel an unhappy Island
Administration because they’ve lost their new anaesthetist before she’s arrived.”

“One happy WingCo doesn’t justify the civilian impact of the decision...” She saw his point now,
but he’d missed another potential variable. “...and there’s the SAR impact too.” A part of Alex’s
role, the part that was possible because of her Reserves status, was to train and reassess the medics
on the Search and Rescue helicopters in the military medical evacuation treatment techniques that
had been developed and become standard practice following the experience gained in Afghanistan
and elsewhere. It meant she was technically outside of Bernie’s command as Senior Medical
Officer, with her orders coming from the overseers of the MERT training programme who were
back in the UK.

“Which gets me an unhappy SAR Command and a different bit of the Island Administration
unhappy, as well as Theatre Command on my case.”

“It would be easier to post me as interim Base MO…” mused Bernie, using herself as an alternative
to Alex in the same way she might compare two different surgical approaches to the same trauma.
Aviation medicine wasn’t her favourite aspect of military medicine and she certainly wouldn’t be
qualified to do the posting long term or at different sort of air station, but she knew enough to be
able to be an interim locum solution.

“Don’t tempt me.” He was rewarded with her unique laugh, letting him know she wasn’t grumpy
with him anymore now she understood he wasn’t undervaluing Alex’s professional expertise and
ability. “But I’m not sure I’d get a happy WingCo and I’d definitely have an intolerable Colonel and a less than impressed Theatre Command, though Island Administration and SAR Command would be unaffected.”

“I’m not sure Alex would still like you though.” She couldn’t fault his logic now she understood it.

“I’d hope not!” He decided not to ask her what Marcus’ reaction would be to have her suddenly posted away from him for a few weeks, because from what he remembered of the man, it would be a very different one to what he imagined Alex’s would be, even after only meeting her as briefly as he did. “So on balance, I think we’re agreed that there’s no situation when Captain Dawson’s the solution?”

“Agreed - I’d even tolerate the current MO for a couple of weeks if I had to.” She could always fly up a couple of times to keep him on his toes if necessary. “How long until I can have a new one?” She was posted on what was known as a ‘continuity tour’ that was a couple of years in length, but generally most were posted for somewhere between four and six months. If she was lucky, the planned successor was already on the way fairly soon.

“Thirty-two days, could be a couple less, plus handover.”

“Blast.” That was soon enough that there wasn’t any justification in finding a Medical Officer from another Command to transfer over, but not so soon that she was prepared to keep the current MO. So her only available option was that she had to conjure a ‘spare’ MO in her current compliment that… “…what if…no, it wouldn’t work.”

“Try me.”

“What if we did locum cover from the Falklands on a rotating basis.” She didn’t want to single out an individual MO to go to Ascension within hours of her arriving as the SMO, but she could let all of the appropriately experienced ones go for roughly a week-long deployment, adjusted for the Airbridge timetable.

“That would make you one down…” muttered Algie, trying to remember whether that then gave Bernie problems on the Falklands itself. “…and you’ve got a seniority and skills shortage there as it is.” He wasn’t seeing how she could make it work, not without running herself into the ground as she was already going to be taking more duty shifts as MO than they’d originally planned. It was one thing if this was for a week or two after she was established in post, but for the whole of her first month in the posting with the added workload of the redeployment, which saw a sizeable
proportion of their patients change.

“Not if we could also have Alex for a couple of weeks.” Having Alex would mean that there was another senior doctor to help share the regular clinic workload when Bernie was unavailable to cover the gap left by whichever MO found themselves on Ascension. “But that puts her in my Command...”

"I can deal with that.” He had no idea how, but he'd find a way. "Think she'd do it?"

"Finally!" Bernie, much to Algie's surprise, started laughing.

"What?"

"You've finally asked a stupid question." She sobered. "But thank you for not assuming she'd do it. I'll ask her, unless you want to?"

"You do the asking, I'll invent some paperwork for when she says yes."

"Alex?"

"Hi Char…” Realising her mistake, she corrected herself quickly. "I'm sorry, Lottie." She put down her pen, leaving the forms she was filling out for the moment so she could give the teenager her undivided attention. "My partner's daughter is also Charlotte, but she likes to be called Charlie."

"I've always been a Lottie, Harry started calling me that when we were little, never tried being anything else."

"Probably because it suits you," advised Alex, struggling to picture Bernie's daughter with her very strong Dunn genes, being called 'Lottie'. "And she suits Charlie and I suit Alex." Now was not the moment to explicitly connect Bernie, via Charlie, to Alex, though she was fairly certain Harry and Lottie had guessed about their relationship during the last few hours.
"What's Bernie short for?"

"Berenice," confirmed the name's owner, waving off Lottie's attempt to not look shocked or amused. "Berenice Griselda - quite useful when I was a med student taking patient histories."

"Oh?" This was not a story Alex had heard before, and she could see that it was helping to put Lottie at ease which was a double bonus.

"Some people are rather shy about an embarrassing or unusual middle name - I'd bet them it wasn't as unusual as mine… Amazing how competitive some people are, especially in the Army."

"How did you get it?" Lottie had surprised herself with the question but seeing the smile on the doctors' faces, she guessed she'd not offended but wanted to clarify something, "and I don't mean it's on your birth certificate."

"She's got your number," teased Alex, looking at Bernie in amused challenge, knowing that Bernie would have spotted the wordplay escape immediately, and liking that Lottie had picked up on that from their time together. It was a small confirmation that, despite the stress of her brother's situation, she was doing generally alright.

"My father picked it… He was a vicar who also loved anything to do with ancient tribes and cultures. So I got an Ancient Greek derived first name and old English derived middle name. I did not enjoy learning to write." Like many small children, she was encouraged to start by learning to write her name, only her name proved to be something akin to a calligraphic car crash as she tried to keep track of all the letters. "But I interrupted you, sorry." She'd just returned from the Base Commander's office where she had been outlining the plan for the Base MO cover which would start from the end of the week when she was going to be flying back to the island with one of the Falklands based MOs to start the locum cover and deliver the posting orders returning the current unsatisfactory MO to the UK.

"You had something you wanted to ask me?" prompted Alex, drawing Lottie’s attention back to her from Bernie.

“Will you explain it to me again please? About Harry?” Lottie bit her lip, looking nervous. “I know you’ve been telling me and I’ve been nodding but…” She took a deep breath, “…but Mum wants me to ring her when we’re about to get on the plane and I know she’ll ask lots of questions again…”
“Of course!” Alex glanced down at the paperwork she’d been filling out. “If you can give me a minute to finish this form so I can give it to the pilot, I’ll come and see you and Harry together and I’ll explain anything you want to know to both of you?”

Lottie’s relieved nod and smile was accompanied by a quietly whispered ‘thanks’ before she turned round and went back into the room where Harry was being kept company by the two medics from the Paras, Patch and Ben, and a third soldier friend of theirs who apparently supported the same sports team as Harry and was proving to be a useful source of stories and jokes to help keep the teenager in good humour.

“Sorry about the name thing…”

“It’s fine, really.” Bernie crossed over to the desk and, in a mirroring of their earlier moment’s peace in this same office, put her hands on Alex’s shoulders and began to rub away some of the inevitable knots and tension she was carrying. “What brought it on?”

“I called her Charlie…” Alex let her head drop to the side, wordlessly trying to encourage Bernie’s fingers to venture further into the collar of her shirt and get at the angry spasm in her shoulder. “...was she ever a Lottie?”

“No. Decided when she was, two or three, probably three, that calling her brother Ronnie meant the Char of her name was the important bit and declared herself Charlie.” Bernie took Alex’s hint and moved the position of her hands so she could be marginally more effective with the pressure she could apply. “Though I suspect that was covering up she really didn’t like the other Charlotte at her nursery group who was definitely a ‘Lottie’.” That, knew Alex from previous conversations, had been one of the times when Bernie had been posted in the UK and therefore been able to be ‘Mum’ despite the best efforts of her mother-and-sister-in-law who seemed to be specialists in slyly undermining any attempt Bernie had made to be around and involved in her children’s lives even then.

“Oh?”

“Pigtails, freckles and those stupid socks with lace ruffles. I was entirely with Charlie on that.” Bernie’s hands stilled, a total giveaway to Alex that there was an abrupt change of subject coming. “Are you sure you’re happy to be assigned to temporary duty as a Base MO?”

“Are you sure you’re happy to have me assigned to temporary duty as one of your Base MOs?”
“Of course! Why wouldn’t I be?” Bernie was confused by the question - she had really enjoyed working with Alex from their very first patient, and that hadn’t changed during the last couple of years at Holby.

“That’s settled then.” As much as Alex wanted to stay in Bernie’s company, enjoying the peace and calm that descended when it was just the two of them together even if they couldn’t fully let go of their ranks and responsibilities, she knew time was now rapidly running out for everything they needed to do.

“What is?” Bernie wasn’t generally easy to confuse, unless you were trying to get her to tell the difference between singers and anything else to do with popular culture from the last twenty years, but Alex had managed to totally bamboozle her.

“Me being your temporary extra MO. If you never had a moment’s doubt about the idea of me taking the duty, you can’t make me invent doubts I don’t have about accepting the duty.” Typically, just as Alex was having to recheck everything she’d just said to make sure she’d got her negatives lined up properly so she got her point across, Bernie was able to succinctly summarise everything.

“Shut up Wolfe and stop worrying?” Bernie took the sting out of her rhetorical question by dropping a quick kiss onto Alex’s head as she squeezed her shoulders one final time, knowing they had things they needed to do in order to be ready to leave the island at the time they’d agreed with the pilot.

“Or just stop forgetting I love you back?”

“That I can do.” Decorum be damned, Bernie leaned down until she could find her lover’s lips with her own and give her a careful, love-filled kiss, their lips and tongues exchanging all the heartfelt expressions of emotion that words just didn’t quite capture. At this precise moment, Alex wasn’t in her Command and she was supposed to be in transit to her posting not part way through a marathon shift that was going to stretch with barely any break from Holby to Port Stanley and see her back here in just under a week.

“Mmm…” breaking apart, Alex leaned back in the chair and looked at Bernie, studying her face carefully, taking in the hints of sleepiness that lingered even after the adrenalin surge of their kiss.

“I love you, and I promise to try not to forget you love me back.”
“I promise I’ll keep reminding you.”

“I look forward to it…” After a final, brief brush of her lips against Alex’s, Bernie straightened up again, unable to ignore her beyond tired back any longer as much as she might have wanted to. “...is that the last piece of paperwork?”

“Yes, I just need to sign it.” Leaning forward, Alex picked up her discarded pen and scrawled her name and signature in the relevant box. “He’s ready to go, I just need to push the final meds when you give the okay to the pilot. Until then I’ll go make sure they don’t have any more questions.” Alex stood up, knowing Bernie would join her in a few minutes after she’d completed most of her paperwork to double check Alex’s paperwork against the equipment and drugs they were going to be boarding Harry with before finally giving her authorisation that he was fit to fly that the pilot needed to accept him onto the plane.

“I’ll not be long…” Bernie sat down in the chair Alex had just vacated and picked up the pen Alex had just put down, only to almost immediately stop writing and quietly swear while reaching for another blank copy of the form.

“Mistake already?”

“Bloody rank, I wrote Major!”
“What’s in the notebook?” asked Bernie, resting her head against the headrest that was part of the jumpseat she was sitting in for take-off.

“Lottie made notes of everything she thought to ask me about.” Alex turned and looked at Bernie, glad that they’d at least managed to be relegated to adjacent jump seats so they could have a few minutes of quiet conversation while they waited for the cabin crew to give them permission to go back nearer to their patient once they’d taken off. “And not my idea, Patch suggested it. Apparently it’s the back section of his medic field manual.”

“Ah.” Bernie grinned when she made eye contact with Alex, having turned her head when she realised Alex was looking towards her. “Are you supposed to sweet talk me into issuing him a new one?”

“I could...figured I’d just let him know when I was doing Sick Parade and sneak him one then,” said Alex, referencing the regular drop-in clinics that was a military medical routine across all the Service branches and when any personnel not feeling fit for duty on waking up had to report.

“I like it…” Seeing Alex’s eyebrow arch, Bernie’s grin turned to a smirk and she stage whispered, “...gets me out of the paperwork.”

“Think you’re allowed to just order an MO to issue one…” Alex knew Bernie was joking about encouraging the rule bending purely for the sake of avoiding the paperwork, but she did also want to double check whether her lover had also remembered the more conventional way she could avoid the paperwork: the delegating associated with Command was rather different to the stepping back but remaining to hand if needed of a Consultant in a teaching hospital like Holby had been.

“Or that,” agreed Bernie, nudging Alex’s knee with her own in unspoken appreciation for the timely reminder - she’d like to think it was just the double effect of barely any sleep on the journey so far and first day forgetfulness, but it didn’t matter with Alex. “I like that option more.”

“Have a nap.”

“No.”
“Bern…”

“…because then I’ll be in a foul mood with you when you wake me up in five minutes.”

“I was going to give you at least six minutes.”

“Think she’ll sleep?” asked Bernie, nodding in the direction of where Lottie was sat, although based on the angles she couldn’t see her from her seat, though Alex could if she leaned fully forward, which she was now doing, only to sit back up, smiling.

“She already is...Ben looks terrified.”

“Oh?” Ben was the other, more inexperienced medic and was sitting next to Lottie. They’d also discovered he was only a year older than the twins, having enlisted as a combat medic technician as soon as he was old enough and this was his first deployment now he’d completed his initial training in both medical and parachute disciplines.

“She’s using him as a pillow.”

“Smart girl.” Bernie had been impressed with the both medics, but when she’d learned from Boods how new Ben was, she was doubly impressed with how he’d handled himself and, true to form, had said as much to the Staff Sergeant. Before she could say anything else, they both heard the pitch of the engines change and then felt the seatbelt shoulder straps press against them as the plane accelerated down the runway and, moments later saw them climbing rapidly.

Looking out of the tiny window by their seats, they watched the island quickly become a small speck that they soon lost sight of as they pushed through the patchy cloud layer and, high above the Atlantic Ocean, turned to the south west and headed for the Falklands.

“Colonel?”

“Yes?” Bernie looked up from the paperwork she’d been trying to go through before they landed
to find one of the cabin crew hovering, holding a cup of coffee.

“MPC is on the radio for you, and we thought you’d like this.” The coffee was held out for her to take, enabling her to see and smell that it was the sort of coffee she’d make for herself if she had the time - strong coffee but with lots of milk as well.

“Thank you.” She took the coffee with relief and started to try and stack the paperwork up one handed so she could stand, assuming she’d have to go through to the flight deck to talk to whoever it was that was radioing via Air Traffic from the Mount Pleasant base.

“No need to move Colonel.” The crew handset on the wall next to the seat’s headrest was lifted and passed to her, stopping the flashing light and occasional low ‘bing’ sound she realised she’d been ignoring for the last couple of minutes. “They can be switched through here. Just let the Captain know you’re there.”

“Oh, thanks.” Taking a sip of the too perfect coffee, Bernie lifted the handset, only to pause when she hadn’t quite got the mouthpiece in range of her mouth. “And thank you to you and Captain Dawson for the coffee.”

“Of course Ma’am.” Heading back down the aisle to her service area, the cabin crew member shook her head in disbelief - Captain Dawson had told her she didn’t need to mention the coffee was her idea, saying the Colonel would know and she’d been right.

“Hello? Colonel Wolfe here…” She took another sip of the coffee that was helping to wake her up again and moisten her mouth and throat, dry from breathing aircraft’s recirculated air for the last six hours or so, waiting obediently while the radio channels were switched over so she could speak to whoever was radioing for her. “…Yes, this is Colonel Wolfe.”

“Colonel? Captain Sam Fung here.” She’d never heard his voice before, but she’d read his file and was relieved it was him that was acting as spokesperson for the Medical Centre staff, as he was by all accounts a fairly capable and pragmatic MO given his experience so far as a newly promoted Captain.

“Captain, you calling for a sit rep?”

“We’d like to be prepared to assist you and Captain Dawson with the casualty Ma’am. We’re getting clearance for the apron and will be ready to transfer directly to the Med Centre.”
“Tip top.” He wasn’t to know yet that a ‘tip top’ crisp approval was hard to earn from her, but he sensed from her tone that he’d so far managed to show just the right amount of initiative.

“Should we prepare for a general?” They had everything they needed on the Base to do it, but it wasn’t something the current team had done on a teenager ever, and not the sort of procedure they did everyday either, making them understandably cautious. He’d felt a lot better when they’d learned that ‘Captain Dawson’ and the new anaesthetist in Port Stanley were the same person. “We’ve got the scopes ready, expecting a laryngoscopy but are prepared for a bronchoscopy as well.”

“Captain Dawson’s confident we can go with sedation.” As they’d monitored Harry as they flew to Ascension, Alex been uncertain as to whether a sedation would be sufficient, or whether the more involved general anaesthesia would be the better solution. However, since he’d started responding to the anti-histamines, while his throat was still obstructed, it was significantly less swollen, making it probable that the intervention to clear his airway would be fairly straightforward and hopefully then maintainable without intubation. “But we need to be prepared that airway management is required after the obstruction has cleared.”

“Understood.” He’d never served with the Colonel before, nor had anyone else in the Med Centre with her apparently being on a mixture of medical leave and civilian secondment for the last two years, but emails from friends serving elsewhere had led him to expect a surgeon who was calm under fire and knew her stuff and then some. And so far, he wasn’t being disappointed. “We’ve managed to obtain his civilian health record. No drug allergies.”

“Anything querying a latex allergy?”

“No. Is that confirmed?”

“No, it’s a working theory Captain. Mother confirmed the father has it and the obstruction is most probably papaya.” Bernie waited a second, sensing the radio silence was being accompanied by a frown, so decided to help him out. “Latex-fruit syndrome - many fruits contain the same protein emulsions as the natural rubber in latex.” Clearly he hadn’t done a Gynie rotation during his training, otherwise he’d have known about the papaya-latex connection being particularly potent in the unripe fruit and therefore a big pregnancy no-no, but Bernie wasn’t going to mark him down for that. “So check the equipment and make sure you’ve got the latex-free gloves. Family?”

“Are coming to the Base, Welfare are supporting.” There were specialist community liaison and welfare personnel posted to the Base and, while not prepared for a situation exactly like this, had stepped up and helped ensure that his parents were being looked after while they waited for their
son and daughter to arrive and then have what would hopefully be a very short medical procedure and recovery overnight on base.

“Good. Who’s doing the scoping?”

“Ma’am?” That was not a question he was prepped for. “We assumed…” Now he thought about it, they all just assumed that she or Captain Dawson would be doing it when they landed.

“...that I’d do it?” Bernie drank some of her coffee while she heard him mumble something about respecting the patient was hers and Alex’s. “Consider this your opportunity to learn a new skill Captain.” His file had told her that his chosen specialty was general practice which would serve him well in his Army career as a Medical Officer, but, just like in civilian surgeries, the military medical centre was starting to take on more small scale investigative procedures of which this was a variant. “I’ll be right next to you,” she added kindly, wanting to be clear right from the outset that she wasn’t doing this to set him up to fail. “But I want you to try.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

They’d been told she was coming for an extra-long continuity tour (rather than the usual six month rotation) and that one of her tasks was to oversee a skillset expansion and general increase in on-base and on-island capabilities as the 30 hour transit back to the UK was both expensive and uncomfortable for patients, civilian or military. Given that many of them were already past halfway in their postings, they’d rather feared she’d be not that interested in either them or the current running of the Med Centre, not least because of her seniority. But as word had leaked out around the Base and through the RAMC grapevine as to who was coming next and what their orders were, so too did the anecdotes and stories start to surface, featuring friends and even a few of the current personnel, stories about lives and careers saved thanks to the efforts of Captain and Major Wolfe. Based on this radio call, it sounded like being promoted to Colonel Wolfe wasn’t making her any different.

“Thank you Captain, that’s all I think.” After the necessary final brief pleasantries, the radio connection with the Base was terminated and Bernie had a brief exchange with the pilot who, in deference to the patient, had ensured the conversation between the two medics had not been heard by the flight deck. Finally, and just as she’d reached the bottom of her coffee, Bernie could replace the handset in its cradle and stretch her neck, trying to shift the knots that had once again announced themselves loudly.

“That looks satisfying.”
“Mmm?” Turning on the seat, Bernie smiled when she saw Alex, looking tired but still, somehow, radiating an energy that Bernie had always found infectious. “Not very…” She scooped up her lapful of paperwork and carefully shoved it back into the cardboard file Corporal Smith had found for her back on Ascension. “...actually it’s just made me more aware of how stiff I am.” Twisting around, just about managing to not wince, she put the folder on the nearest counter in the small galley space she was sat by and stood up. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine.” Alex’s easy dismissal of Bernie’s concern saw her on the receiving end of the infamous Wolfe raised eyebrow. “Compared to the last flight, I’m feeling fine.” She did an exaggerated knee bend then stepped a little nearer to Bernie so she wasn’t blocking the aisle. “Not having to kneel makes anything else bearable.” She’d previously joked that she obviously had the wrong shaped knees for military field medicine, with her knees often in agony after only a couple of minutes of kneeling by a patient. Rather than then becoming accustomed to being knelt on, Alex was convinced that the rest of her had just become accustomed to ignoring her knees’ objections, which in turn became increasingly loud. It had been one of the reasons she’d switched to the Reserves when she’d completed her twelve years - as much as she enjoyed all the aspects of her service, and she was still medically fit enough to do all the roles she was qualified for, she knew her body’s tolerance was finite. That and the horribly complicated situation she’d found herself in with regard to her feelings for Bernie after the explosion and her apparent return to Marcus had made staying full time in the Army difficult. But that was all firmly in the past now and not something, or someone in the case of Bernie’s ex-husband, that she cared to dwell on. “It’s you I’m more worried about.”

“Me?” Bernie rubbed her neck as she tried to understand what was causing Alex to worry about her. “Why?”

“Because...” Realising that where she and Bernie stood was practically walled off from the rest of the aircraft based on how the cabin was partitioned, she took another couple of steps forwards so she was able to catch hold of Bernie’s uniform belt-loops and tangle her fingers in them. “...I love you Colonel Wolfe.” That wasn’t what Alex had intended to say, but when she realised what she’d said she grinned, then quietly repeated it. “I love you Colonel Wolfe.” The added emphasis on the new rank clued Bernie in.

“Not too intimidating?” Bernie tucked a stray strand of hair behind Alex’s ear so it was no longer in danger of tickling her nose. “I mean we’ve not had much time to get used to it.” Not that there had ever been much adjustment time given Algie waiting until she was being posted to tell her, though she understood why he’d left it that late as she’d have tried to refuse if there’d been any time to debate it. “I hadn’t intended to need to actually be a Colonel until at least tomorrow afternoon...” Their original plan, even without the added surprise of Bernie’s new rank, had been to have twenty-four hours after they’d landed to complete all the various ‘welcome to a new Base’ processes and procedures that every soldier was familiar with and, for Alex, also complete the additional ‘civilian on Base’ admin given that was necessary as for much of Bernie’s posting she’d be living on the Base with Bernie as a civilian. “...or be leaving again.”
“Promise me you’ll sleep? On the plane?”

“We land in just over an hour…” Bernie had thought at one point she might try and have a quick nap, but she found that the jumpseat was comfortable enough to sit on but lacked enough support to be able to nod off. Rather than continue to try and snatch bursts of sleep in between parts of her body cramping and general crew movement waking her every few minutes, she’d ended up using much of the flight to work her way through the rather large stack of paperwork she’d acquired by email in Ascension, interrupted by the odd few minutes here and there when Alex wanted her opinion on something to do with Harry or she’d needed to stretch her legs. “...so I’ll just have to survive on the coffee you had them make for me.” She leaned forward just enough to rub the tip of Alex’s nose with her own. “Thank you for that.”

“I meant tomorrow’s flight,” corrected Alex patiently, not certain if her lover was trying to distract her with deliberate silliness or whether she was actually that tired.

“It is tomorrow, isn’t it?” Bernie hadn’t forgotten that she was effectively straight back to Ascension, albeit for just long enough to ensure that Flight Lt Ponsbury-Arch understood he was being posted back to the UK with immediate effect and help set up the temporary locum rotation with one of the Falklands-based MOs who would have flown up with her. Rather, she’d just failed to appreciate that the next flight to Ascension was tomorrow lunchtime, meaning she’d have been in the Falklands for less than 24 hours before she left again, and less than twelve outside the airport terminal if she had to do the lengthy check-in.

“The crew are giving you an emergency exit row seat, unless they find it’s a quiet flight - then they said they’re going to give you a whole row so you can sleep, both ways.” It was Alex’s turn to initiate a nose rub, before adding, “...and they now know how to make your second favourite coffee.” Bernie’s favourite version of the milky strong coffee needed a cappuccino style milk froth which was more than the aircraft galleys could muster.

“You’re spoiling me…” Bernie was under no illusion - this level of care and thought being put into her last minute return trip across the South Atlantic was entirely thanks to Alex taking care of her, even when she wasn’t going to be there.

“Not spoiling, loving.”

“I don’t feel like I’ve done much of that lately for you…” Bernie understood it wasn’t a competition, knew that their relationship wasn’t about keeping score, but she did have an ever-present worry about appearing to take it for granted, of taking Alex’s love for granted. “...and the minute we land I’m going away again.”
“Sshh…”

Alex had wondered when this would come up, now understanding why Bernie had always been so ‘present’ in Afghanistan, with apparently no days of quiet reflective distance or distraction that was so often how individual moments of homesickness surfaced, triggered by a missed birthday or milestone. She’d been so effectively taught by Marcus’ family into believing she wasn’t missed, with her presence so barely tolerated by them when she was there that she’d never really had any of the positive memories they all drew on when they knew there was something special happening at home. During the last couple of years, Bernie had come to appreciate and understand that she was missed, by her children and by Alex; that when she wasn’t around them, she was allowed to be ‘homesick’ or missing their company. But she’d also come to understand that there was a difference between having a daily life physically somewhere else while still being a part of that life and being completely shut out.

With Ronnie and Charlie now sharing a flat together in London while they worked on starting their chosen careers, they’d no longer seen them as much as when they’d been all together in Holby, but the texts, emails and calls had kept the three of them together as a family in a way they’d never before had. It had been the beginning of a new phase of Bernie’s relationship with her children, a relationship that included Alex and her brother as well, and had helped Bernie to accept that their encouragement for her to take this posting was genuine and not just the latest way for her to be exiled and ignored. And while Alex was most definitely not Marcus or the kids, clearly Bernie’s worries were at least partially still with her.

“But…” Before Bernie could get any further in her articulating her concerns, Alex used her most effective technique at both calming an agitated Bernie and stopping her from rambling - she kissed her, quickly pressing her lips against her lover’s, stilling them with the unexpected contact.

“Nope.” Alex moved her hands from the belt loops at the front of Bernie’s uniform to her hips, holding her close as she leaned her head forwards so their foreheads were touching. “No doubts Bern…” Alex moved one hand from Bernie’s hip to her neck, instinctively seeking out that spot just below the neatly tidied bun, which had such a remarkable effect on Bernie when Alex stroked it, defusing some of the tension and diverting energy away from fight or flight. “...not when we’re here, together…” Alex sensed her words were starting to reach the logical part of Bernie when she felt a hand reach out and catch hold of her trouser pocket edge. “...and I’m so proud of you for meeting that bully head on.”

She didn’t know, quite correctly, what else had happened during that other doctor’s posting as, bad it as it was with him trying to bully Bernie out of the Medical Centre when they were wanting to treat Harry there, that wouldn’t have been enough to get him recalled on its own. But whatever else had happened, Bernie had found out about it quickly enough to have a plan in place that ultimately would serve the medical needs of the island far, far better in both the short and long run.
“And you’re not abandoning me by going back there tomorrow…” She felt Bernie’s other hand settle on her hip, further confirmation that her words were helping the old memories that had fuelled her initial nervous reaction be banished once again. “...you’re refusing to abandon those men and women on that tiny island in the middle of the ocean by making sure they get the proper level of care.” She tilted her head, lips brushing over what felt like a damp cheek, but didn’t comment on it. “That’s the woman I fell in love with, the woman I want to be with.” Another kiss, this time on the tip of Bernie’s nose which twitched at the contact, experience telling Alex she was smiling. “And the woman who’ll be coming back a few days later…” Alex lifted her head back up, putting a small amount of distance between their faces again as she made eye contact with a much steadier Bernie, “...to discover I’ve claimed the best knickers drawer.” The rapid change of subject caught Bernie off guard and made her laugh.

“I have given you the first choice, haven’t I?”

“Mmm, and I get first dibs on the good mug.”

Bernie, as a result of a combination of her posting length, role, rank and declaring Alex as her civilian partner, had been allocated to one of the houses in the same grouping as the Force Commander and Chief of Staff. Due to the logistics associated with such a remote posting, the house would already be fully furnished, though a few supplementary personal items were being shipped by sea to help turn it into a home. And, while all the crockery and utensils were no doubt originally identical, there would be an obviously ‘good’ mug left by previous occupants that made that first cup of tea or coffee feel that little bit more restorative than when drunk from one of the others.

“I’d expect nothing less,” decided Bernie, thinking she’d started to understand Alex’s point - Bernie had seen needing to immediately leave again as abandoning Alex in a strange place, whereas Alex was seeing being given the opportunity to take the first steps in establishing their joint life on base together as one of trust. “You’re a much better first impression than I am.”

“You just hate introductions…” teased Alex, remembering how often Bernie had managed to be effectively introduced to new members of the Bastion team when she wasn’t actually present. By the time she did then cross paths with them, she just carried on as if they’d already worked together for months and, by the end of surgery or meeting, it just felt too ridiculous to go back and try and perform an introduction for the new person’s benefit. “Will you have time to register at the NAAFI?” The two golden rules when newly posted to a Base was to register with the on-base shops and facilities that provided key components of on-base life, and to register with the Medical Centre. The second rule was somewhat less significant when you were one of the Medical Officers assigned to the Medical Centre, so Alex’s sole focus was making sure they registered with the NAAFI.

“I’ll make sure I do...what about you?” Bernie wasn’t sure how she’d do this, but recognised the
importance of it as forgetting to do so only created awkward issues the minute you realised you didn’t have anything to eat or anything to wash your uniform with.

“What about me?”

“Are you going to register with me?”

“No.” Alex raised her eyebrow when she saw Bernie immediately frown and be about to interrupt. “I mean, yes, I’ll go along with you when you register, but not as Captain Dawson. I’m a civilian remember?” It was a rather incongruous statement given she was stood directly in front of Bernie in uniform, and earned her a rather sceptical look from Bernie, followed by a small nod when she remembered the bureaucracy minefield Alex had needed to navigate to get everything untangled.

Having been regularly away on reserve duty consistently during the last year or so in the UK, Alex had already completed her annual requirements and wasn’t scheduled to need to do another duty stint for a few months. Not only did this ensure she fitted into the Search and Rescue Teams’ training programme, which had already scheduled the training she was qualified to give for several months in the future, but it also gave her a chance to adapt first to life in the Falklands generally (otherwise known as having a holiday), then to starting her new job as a doctor at the island’s civilian hospital in Port Stanley. However, such was the Army’s approach to bureaucracy that she’d had to fly as ‘active’ so when her duty orders were processed as taking place in the South Atlantic, the computer didn’t have a meltdown because she’d last been ‘seen’ by it in the South West of England.

“They’re probably expecting a man…” They’d not had masses of experience as an ‘out’ couple in Holby, with much of their socialising involving groups of friends rather than on their own, but they had been away for a few long weekends and short breaks at which they’d experienced a few confused hotel check-ins as they’d overcome the ‘two women one bed is deliberate’ hurdle.

“Or a wife.” As far as Alex was concerned, that was the more likely initial inaccurate assumption she’d come across, though Bernie’s rather shocked expression suggested they weren’t on the same wavelength yet. “No, I’m not proposing.” She wasn’t offended by Bernie becoming visibly more relaxed - she understood Bernie’s complicated relationship with the word ‘marriage’ due to her late father’s role as a vicar and her recent history with Marcus. She also understood, thanks to Bernie being Bernie and addressing the matter head on, that in Bernie’s mind, her relationship with the word ‘marriage’ and what it represented in terms of procedure was completely independent of her commitment to a life with Alex, and had argued most effectively with the Army on that point when it had been almost suggested Alex didn’t meet the definition of ‘spouse’. “But wondering how many female Colonels they’ve had assigned.”

“Oh.” Bernie hadn’t thought about people expecting her to be a man, though it was a reasonable
assumption she supposed, since she was apparently part of the 8% of Army Colonels who were female. “Good point.”

“We’ll be okay.”

“Yes,” agreed Bernie, it suddenly sinking in that in less than an hour they’d have landed and definitely be well on the way to starting their next adventure. “Our happy bubble’s going to have penguins in it.”

“But no tanks.” As non-sequiturs went, it was utterly random and yet, for these two, it was entirely right, and caused Bernie to smile brightly despite her disappointment that yes, there were no tanks on the Falklands.

“I can live with that,” declared Bernie contentedly, finding herself feeling clear-sighted and able to tackle anything she was faced with, including 6,000 mile round trips to deal with unacceptable doctors, “I can live with anything as long as I’m living with you.”

“Sap.” Alex wasn’t complaining, she was in total agreement with Bernie, but their way had always been love with gentle teasing.

“Yes, but I’m your sap.”

Just as they were about to have their lips touch in a kiss, they heard a throat clear.

“What does Boods want Wolken?” asked Bernie, not looking past Alex or moving any further than she needed to call out to the hovering Paratrooper.

“How do you know it’s that?” asked Alex, not doubting Bernie’s identification, but curious as to how she’d come to her conclusion, though she did step back from Bernie and turn around so they could both look at the grinning Wolken.

“Am I right Greg?”

“Sap Doc. It’s about your cargo.”
“Yes?”

“I explained to the Staff Sergeant that you’d be needing me to supervise the off-load as you’d be going with the lad to straight to Medical.”

“Correct.” So far, Bernie wasn’t seeing what was requiring a question from Boodon. “And thank you Greg.”

“Of course Doc, happy to help. But since you’ll be in medical, and I can’t clear it from the apron it needs securing during movement…” He paused, not sure to what extent she was familiar with the security protocols for some of her cargo, or to what extent the Captain knew about the cargo contents.

“Ah.” Bernie chewed on her lip a moment, trying to see what the conclusion was that Boods and Wolken had formed, and therefore what Boods was going to be asking. “Thank him for the offer, which I accept, will you? And obviously thank you as well, I’d be very grateful for the help as it means we don’t have to delay sorting out Harry.”

(Of course Doc, the lads have taken a shine to him. We’ll sort it out.”

“Thank you Greg.”

“Ma’am.” Smiling as he acknowledged her dismissal, he was held back by her call. “Doc?”

“Please relay to the Staff Sergeant that I forgave him a long time ago for that particular moment, though I still reserve the right to call him Trooper Chicken.”

“Ma’am?”

“He’ll know what it means Greg.”

“Understood Ma’am.”
He really didn’t, but clearly she expected his fellow NCO would, further proof of the long history they shared. Even to this day he really didn’t know that much about, other than it costing the then Sergeant enough punishment they’d both made it to Staff Sergeant within weeks of each other despite Boodon already being a Sergeant when Wolken enlisted. Now he just had to wonder how much beer he’d need to get his friend to explain the Chicken reference….
“Gently…give it a turn…no, the other way…that’s it…” Bernie kept glancing between the screen showing what the inside of Harry’s throat was looking like, Alex to check she was happy with his status and Sam Fung who was doing quite well for his first ever camera procedure. “…dish please?” Bernie held out a gloved hand and felt the metal dish being passed to her. “Thanks…here, put it in this.” She held it out so it was under the end of the ‘scope, knowing from experience that the minute the end was outside the body, a first-timer often forgot to keep up the grasp on the object they’d just retrieved. “Well done.” Pausing to check that he was alright and not about to drop a very expensive piece of medical equipment, she exchanged a glance with Alex that confirmed Harry was still doing fine, then looked down at the soggy blob that had been causing so much grief. “Well it looks like it could be papaya…” She angled the dish so it was catching more of the light that was shining down on their patient. “…it’s definitely not a nut at least.”

“Are you going to send it to the UK for testing?” asked Captain Fung, no longer holding the camera and ‘scope, and so starting to take an interest in the object he’d just managed to extract from the depths of the patient’s throat, with Colonel Wolfe’s calm guidance.

“We could, but I have a different plan. For now, could we get that labeled and frozen.” She’d sort out formally resolving the mystery of what it was later, when they didn’t have a sedated teenager on the table in front of them and when she wasn’t acutely aware of having another plane to catch in a matter of hours. “How’s he doing Al?” If anyone noticed the new Colonel’s extremely informal way of addressing Captain Dawson, everyone was too focused on not messing up in front of the new boss to react to it.

“Looking good, still maintaining his own airflow.”

“What did you think of the throat?”

“Much better than I was expecting. Angioedema seems to have responded to antihistamines and it looked like the airway is now clear.”

“Agreed. Second scoping?”

“Don’t need the camera I don’t think…” Alex checked her notes of the drugs she’d given him when, as well as his readings. “…he’s still under…” She looked up at Bernie. “…you want me to?”
“Please.” It was slightly unconventional of Alex to be checking that Harry’s throat was now clear and looking like he was no longer in need of the tracheostomy tube to breathe on his own, but as far as Bernie was concerned, he was Alex’s patient, not hers or Captain Fung’s. Plus, she was absolutely certain that of the three of them, Alex had looked at more throats whose owners were sedated or anaesthetised than her and Fung combined. “First rule of surgery Sam, only operate with an anaesthetist you trust.”

“Yes Colonel.”

“First rule of anaesthesia Colonel?” asked Alex conversationally as she carefully looked at Harry’s throat, first with just her penlight as they had done on the aircraft, and then with the laryngoscope, which gave her a nice clear view all the way down past where the obstruction had been.

“Educate me?” Bernie had absolutely no idea what Alex’s answer was going to be, having never had that particular follow-up comment from her before.

“Never sedate a patient if you don’t trust the surgeon.” She put aside the laryngoscope and, after a reflex check of Harry’s vitals, looked up at an amused Bernie. “Nothing requiring any attention there, the throat looks good all things considered.” She moved slightly to the side, offering her penlight to Captain Fung. “Care to take a look?”

“Sure…” Shining the light in Harry’s mouth, he decided to risk asking a question of them both. “…do we take the tracheostomy tube out now too?”

“What do you think Al?” This was something Bernie had been debating with herself while Fung had been working to retrieve the obstruction. In a straight-forward foreign body obstruction situation, once the obstruction was removed, the airway remains clear and the tracheostomy is an unhelpful complication to recovering normal breathing and speech. But this hadn’t been entirely straightforward, with the airway obstruction being a combination of foreign object and swelling. “You and Fung are doing the discharge.” They’d already agreed before they started that, no matter what happened, Harry would be staying the night in the Med Centre while his parents and sister stayed in guest accommodation on the Base. By the time he’d be recovered from the sedation and could be checked over again to make sure his ears didn’t require any follow-up treatment, the flight to Ascension with Bernie on it would have taken off.

“Out now I think, saves another sedation tomorrow. We can keep him on the antihistamines and O2 overnight as well.” Everything they’d seen during the flights was suggesting that the swelling was caused by the reaction to the papaya - now he no longer had a piece of it stuck in his throat, and with the small amount he’d managed to ingest before the swelling caused him to choke long since broken down by his body, there should be nothing to generate any new swelling, so his already clear airway should remain that way. But the extra dose of allergy medication and
increased oxygen were prudent additional measures they could take. Plus, while she’d been impressed with how Captain Fung had done with his first camera guided procedure, she preferred to have Bernie around to help him with the tube removal than have to either help him or do it herself while also managing the sedation.

“Will this be another first for you Sam?”

“Yes Colonel.”

“Alright then, we best start with an x-ray…” And, like she had done it one hundred times before (which, realised Bernie later, she probably had, as it was usually the first procedure she had to teach doctors new to trauma), she began to calmly guide and nudge him through the steps leading up to and then removing the tracheostomy tube from Harry’s throat.

“How’s the rise and fall Sam?” she asked finally, already knowing the answer from her own read of Harry’s chest but also Alex’s expression as she’d done the first listen.

“Sounding good Colonel.”

“Excellent.” Bernie glanced at the clock on the wall, wincing slightly when she realised the time. “Can I leave you to finish up? I need to finish arriving before there’s bloodshed.”

“Go...” encouraged Alex, forgetting about the surrounding military and just thinking about what Bernie was alluding to. “...we’ll be alright.”

“Thanks.” And, with a nod and a wink, Bernie was already halfway out of the room, pulling off her gown, gloves and mask as she went.

“Bloodshed?”

“On the apron, between the RAF and the Paras.”

“Oh.” He opened his mouth to ask another question then shut it again, only to take a gamble and say something else instead. “I’d say the RAF stood no chance against the Paras usually…”
“But?” asked Alex curiously, thinking he seemed like a decent guy she could be friendly with, especially as he seemed to do alright in Bernie’s opinion, based on how she had been encouraging and guiding him through the various procedures. Alex had watched Bernie teach these procedures to enough doctors to know when she was teaching someone she thought was better than average and when it was a doctor who was merely ‘safe’.

“But I don’t think either of them stand a chance against the Colonel.”

“No argument from me,” agreed Alex, continuing to monitor Harry as Sam and a nurse she’d not yet caught the name of cleaned and dressed the opening in Harry’s throat where they’d done the emergency tracheotomy. “By the way, the Paras call her Doc Wolfe.”

The ‘but we don’t’ was unspoken, but everyone heard it anyway.

“What do we call you Ma’am?” asked the nurse that had been helping Captain Fung with the dressing, reminding Alex that they’d not exactly stopped for introductions when they’d arrived with Harry straight from the aircraft.

“Alex Dawson, I’m going to be working at the hospital in Port Stanley.”

“Not here Ma’am?” The nurse had noticed the Captain’s rank on her uniform as she’d come in with the patient, so to hear her say she was working at the King Edward rather than on Base was unexpected.

“I’m Army Reserve now, my duty days will be with the SAR teams but not until the New Year.” Base life meant everyone knowing everything about everyone, so there was no point trying to keep too many secrets, plus she’d seen enough people have their first surgery with Bernie to know when she was in the company of the newest members of the Bernie Wolfe fan club. “So I might be around here a bit with them, but I’ve not been posted here, to South Atlantic Medical.” She gave in to the yawn she’d been trying to ignore for the last ten minutes or so.

“That’s...unusual,” said Captain Fung finally, not quite sure what else to say, and not feeling like he was in a position to outright ask why she wasn’t in a more conventional posting, though it had been bothering him a bit since he’d first learned she was on the plane with the Colonel.

“It is and it isn’t.” Alex was interrupted by another yawn. “Sorry, been a long day and not much
sleep on the flights.” She still hadn’t properly worked out how little sleep she’d actually had, but experience was telling her it couldn’t have been more than a couple of hours on the first flight. Either way, over the last three days she’d had significantly more rest than Bernie so wasn’t prepared to entertain any self-pity. “And I’m not meaning to be so cryptic sounding, just tired,” she admitted honestly, making a note on Harry’s record. “I’m working at the hospital because I can’t be in the Colonel’s Command, which is why my reserve duty is with SAR for their advanced medical training.” She made another note on Harry’s record then turned to the tray next to her where she’d set out the various drugs she would need during the procedure to clear Harry’s throat, checking the one she needed to reverse the sedation was already prepared. “I’ll reverse the sedation when we’ve got him into a regular bed and are set up with standard obs.”

As someone disappeared to go and check the bed was ready for Harry, Captain Fung checked he was following what she was saying. “So you’ll be training the SAR teams in advanced medical procedures? You’re MERT qualified as well as an anaesthetist?” He’d just missed having a tour to Afghanistan, but had met people who’d been out there as MERT and couldn’t begin to fathom what it must have been like, trying to perform such critical life-saving care in such a dangerous combat environment.

“Yes.” Alex took a deep breath, knowing that this moment was going to have arrived sooner or later and at least this way, she was telling people who had ‘met’ Bernie and her in a medical context first, rather than the grapevine getting there ahead of them. “Colonel Wolfe’s posted for a continuity tour as your Senior Medical Officer,” said Alex, seeing from the nods and expressions on various people’s faces that this wasn’t news to them, even if it was different to the norm. “I’m her partner.”

“Which is why you’re not in her command.” Captain Fung, no longer masked, was smiling at the final piece of the jigsaw sloting into place, glad to have the mystery so straightforwardly solved. “You weren’t forced into the Reserves because of that were you?” he asked, suddenly concerned in case she was being forced to compromise her career in the Army to be with her partner and therefore this whole situation was making her uncomfortable.

“No, I was already in the Reserves when she was offered this posting. I couldn’t say no to penguins.”

“Not many can,” he agreed, glad that she wasn’t offended by their curiosity but grateful that they could understand the situation before there was any time for the grapevine to get inventive. “Are you ready for us Sandy?” he asked, seeing the nurse return from checking the bed and receiving a nod. “We should let Dr Dawson go as soon as she’s ready to entrust us with Harry’s care - she’s not even had a chance to complete the arrivals process and collect her luggage.”

“I’d forgotten about that…” Alex found another yawn rush up and catch her unawares. “…at least the queue for immigration should have cleared by now.”
“Ma’am?”

“Mmm?” Alex blinked sleepily, the quiet of the wherever it was that she was sat helping her lose her battle with wakefulness. “Yes?”

“Would you like some tea Ma’am?”

“Thank you.” Blinking fully awake, Alex took the mug of tea from the proffered tray and wrapped her fingers around it. Next to her was a vast mountain of baggage that, to her surprise, Bernie had managed to find a moment to claim and sign for so all Alex had to do was have her own IDs checked and processed. “Is it raining?” There was a wet pattern starting to form on the windows, making it hard for her to see how things were progressing outside.

“Still snowing Ma’am, but the wind direction’s changed.”

“Please call me Alex…” She saw the look of disbelief on the Flight Sergeant’s face and was reminded of her rank. “Or Dr Dawson if you must…” She reached down to her chest and took her rank slide off and put it in the pocket of her jacket. “…can we just pretend I’m wearing my partner’s jacket to keep out the cold?” She knew, deep down, that she was being a little petty in her refusal to be treated like an officer rather than a civilian, but it had been a very long journey that had culminated in her not being able to quietly arrive and blend into the background while Bernie established herself. “Actually, can you check if my partner’s actually wearing her jacket please?” Alex was getting more awake now, and could all too easily picture Bernie continuing to be at work outside without ever having reclaimed her heavyweight insulated coat from wherever it had ended up and be out in the snow in her shirtsleeves.

“Colonel Wolfe’s got her jacket on,” confirmed the Sergeant, putting the tray down on a nearby low table, clearly at a slight loss as to what she was supposed to do next - making conversation with Captain, no Dr Dawson, hadn’t been part of the plan, but it felt rude to just walk away. “And they’re nearly finished I think - though the snow arriving early has meant a change of plans.”

“Oh?” Alex hadn’t really got much of an idea as to what exactly the large cargo consignment that Bernie had been overseeing moved down to Ascension and the Falklands actually contained, but she’d picked up enough during the flight to understand it was quite complicated. “And I thought we were past the snow season?” Alex had tried to get her head around the weather in the Falklands, first by making sure she remembered to think in the Southern Hemisphere seasons (when December/January was summer), then by understanding that while not that much closer to the
polar region than the UK, the climate was much more ‘northerly’ in character. She’d been rather
too focused on Harry as they left the aircraft, so hadn’t really noticed the cold wetness hitting her
face was snow rather than rain.

“It’s too warm to settle, but we can still get the occasional snow storm. Cold front’s come in on a
southerly wind.” Weather was always a topic of conversation, especially amongst the soldiers
whose roles were almost entirely outside. “You’re lucky really, we don’t get them that often.”

Alex had to smile at that observation, not sure she entirely agreed with the Sergeant’s definition of
‘luck’, though she was glad they’d followed the advice of some old hands at HQ and traveled with
all their ‘temperate’ uniform layers on or in Alex’s rucksack that they’d had with them in the plane.

“With the weather like it is, the only way back to Stanley this evening is by helicopter.” The
Sergeant had started to stand at ease, slipping into default ‘brief an Officer’ mode when the Doctor
had waved an exasperated hand in her direction which had clearly meant ‘sit down’, so she’d sat on
one of the seats opposite her. “Last I heard they were working out whether there was enough
storage here for the civilian supplies or whether we needed to fly it over to them this evening.”

“Take it the original plan was for everything to be unloaded before the snow came?” Clearly this
cold front was the weather they’d been trying to avoid by leaving the UK early.

“In theory yes, but welcome to weather in the Falklands, it’s always up for a change of plan.
Though the medical emergency also made things, uh, complicated.” Her smile and hesitation gave
Alex a clue that there was a good story to extract from her.

“What happened? Come on, I can’t miss out on the story just because I was too busy being the
reason things got complicated.”

“There was a bit of a to-do with the unloading...you know what us on the ‘ramp’ are like, flinging
bags and boxes everywhere?”

“Yes, I’ve learned to pack with lots of padding,” joked Alex, eyeing up the large Army issue
holdalls that generally provided no protection for anything remotely fragile in them, which is why
the additional suitcases they’d also brought with their civilian possessions in them were hard sided
and very, very durable. The RAF were excellent in their range of destinations and willingness to
fly in the most marginal of situations, but their baggage handling approach was rather more robust
than even Heathrow or Gatwick generally encouraged.
“The Colonel’s loads are all marked up medical as well as fragile, so we moved those extra carefully.” The logic went you never knew which box contained the irreplaceable drug or piece of equipment that would save your life and it wasn’t a risk anyone was prepared to take. “And we were passing the individual boxes off when we started to find the secure ones that needed the Colonel’s authorisation for off-load and transfer.” All cargo on a military plane was strictly classified and categorised so that nothing went missing or ended up in the wrong hands, but while most people presumed that the most secure cargo would always be the weapons technology and ammunition, Alex knew that a lot of their medical supplies could end up with very tight security.

“Let me guess, the Paras announced they were helping?” Alex recalled the rather cryptic chat between Wolken and Bernie, not long before they landed, when Bernie had clearly agreed to whatever plan Wolken and Boodon had suggested. She now had a bit of a better idea as to what that offer of help might have been.

“Staff Sergeant Wolken had the Colonel’s loading papers, so we knew where it was all going once it was off the plane, but only the Colonel could release it, especially the nuclear stuff.” She looked suitably impressed at the complexity of the cargo they’d been unloading, though it was taking Alex a moment longer than usual to realise that the ‘nuclear stuff’ she was referring to was probably the radioactive isotopes used as tracers in imaging like x-rays to help see things with greater contrast. In theory, she supposed they could also be taking the opportunity to bring out some new x-ray generators for either the hospital or base machines. “Though there’s lots of drugs to secure as well, they’re actually the bigger problem I think.” They’d manage to agree that Wolken had enough authority to have the Colonel’s cargo off-loaded from the aircraft, enabling the ground crews to ensure it was properly secured and prepared for tomorrow’s flight, but without the Colonel herself there was no further processing of the cargo, so it had stayed on the pallets on the ground next to the aircraft.

“Temperature controlled?” guessed Alex, knowing that while lots of medicine had a fairly robust ability to cope with how it was stored, there were plenty of medications that had to be far more delicately handled. She could well-believe that the Base medical storage, probably resupplied to fully stocked as part of this shipment anyway, was going to struggle to hold the civilian hospital’s stock too. Alex hadn’t read anything to suggest there was much of either a crime or substance abuse problem here, but over the years the security around large shipments of lots of the drugs they used for pain management, anaesthesia and day-to-day management of patient conditions had been dramatically increased as they began to have a street or black market value.

“Yes. We’re more used to not mixing up the ammo crates with the ice cream here.” Her honest assessment of their more usual cargo caused Alex to laugh, able to picture the situation if they did send the ice cream to the armoury and the ammo to the freezers far too easily.

“That happened in Bastion once or twice, though I think it was the ice cream and tea bags that got muddled up.” Ammo rarely got misplaced, sadly because it rarely made it to main stores, being too often needed to be immediately sent on to forward operating bases and other units who were running low. “Though there was something about some meat accidentally getting too near the dog
section I think…” She’d just meant to make idle conversation with the half remembered bit of Base gossip, but the Sergeant’s blush suggested she’d actually hit on something that was rather more substantial than a rumour. “...not an accident?”

“It was an accident...the labels had shifted and we were doing the unload in the dark, you know how it was?” Her tacit acceptance that Alex had also been there, also knew what it was like on those nights when it was pitch black save for the bright flashes of the explosions and the aircraft lights as they tried to get everyone and everything safely in and out of the airbase, gave rise to the question, seeking confirmation that they both knew and didn’t need to explain.

“Yes…” She felt a shiver go through her and knew it had nothing to do with the cold that had swept in with the snow. “...I had to do some casualty calls on those sorts of nights.”

“Helicopter? Or the ‘Rovers?’” She’d thought the medics had the cushy postings when she’d first gone out there, seeing them working in their air-conditioned hospital blocks that looked swankier than the crumbling NHS hospital her sister had had her kids in, but that all changed the first time she saw them heading outside the wire to go and rescue the wounded. At first she’d thought the helicopters looked so vulnerable, so slow moving and such big targets that could be heard long before they actually made it to their destination, but then she’d seen them going out in the Land Rovers, and realised that each was just differently vulnerable.

“Both. Can’t say I miss being blown up.” She didn’t talk about it then, or now really, nor did Bernie, but just occasionally it was referenced, one seasoned soldier to another, never prying or trying to out-do each other, but just acknowledging they each understood the other’s service.

“Or shot at,” agreed the Sergeant, before returning to the story that had started them on that particular recollection. “Anyways, we were doing the unload and this visiting VIP, some political sort from one of the other countries, had some stuff they were really particular about getting first, which wasn’t how the plane was loaded. Kept getting in the way and being a nuisance…”

“Just what you wanted?” Alex could see now how it happened. “It wasn’t around November time was it?”

“Might have been.”

“If you’d asked me before I’d have said it was sausages that accidentally got sent to the dog section while their kibble went elsewhere...” Alex drank some more of her tea, looking at her as she tried to do a very good impression of a poker-faced new recruit. “...but now I think about it, weren’t they turkeys?”
“What were turkeys?” Of course, this was the moment that Bernie came in from outside, snow caught on her beret and hair, her cheeks red with the cold. While they’d left the UK in early Autumn, they were arriving in the Falklands at the end of their winter and today at least, spring was being a little shy and letting the snows and winds from the Antarctic take the spotlight.

“Remember when the Thanksgiving turkeys were dry dog biscuits?”

“In Bastion?” Bernie gratefully took the half drunk mug of tea Alex was holding out for her to take and wrapped her fingers round it. “Yes.”

“We were just discussing how easy it is for cargo to get mixed up during an unload and how they’d been very careful with your cargo even before the Paras decided to help them concentrate,” summarised Alex, including the Sergeant in their conversation.

“They didn’t get in your way did they?” asked Bernie, concerned. She’d thought only Wolken would be actually involved in the unload, but had been grateful that Boodon had made some men available to ensure that everything didn’t get tidied away to who knew where before she could actually finish confirming its arrival to the Base and handing over the supplies she’d been escorting for the civilian hospital.

“No Ma’am, just very helpful once everything was off the aircraft,” confirmed the Sergeant, knowing that the Colonel had been very considerate in organising for the Quartermaster from the Parachute Regiment to at least permit the offload, as that meant the aircraft could be checked and closed up before the snow arrived. “Would you like another brew Ma’am?”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” Bernie drained the last of the mug and gave it back to the Sergeant. “Any idea what we’re supposed to do next?” she asked, looking at their mountain of luggage and then at Alex, who shrugged.

“Transport should be on its way for you both Colonel, but I’ll go and double check they know you’re waiting.”

“Thanks…” Both Alex and Bernie watched as the Sergeant left through the door Bernie had just come through, seeing the snow was still swirling hard. “...sorry I was so long. How’s Harry?”

“Doing well, parents and sister are with him. He woke up for a bit…” Alex unzipped her jacket
and picked up Bernie’s frozen hands, guiding them onto her hips. “...warm up please.” She instructed firmly, making it clear that she wanted Bernie’s hands to continue thawing with the help of Alex’s body heat. “Apparently he really liked the ‘orange squidgy bits as they made his throat tingle when he sucked them.’”

“So he picked out all of the bits of papaya from the mixture and ate them one after the other?” guessed Bernie, initially reluctant to chill Alex with her cold hands but knowing from experience what that particular look would turn into if she tried to be overly stoic, so she obediently slid her hands between Alex’s t-shirt and outer shirt and rested her hands on her partner’s upper back, coaxing her into a hug in the process. “Typical teenage boy.” Bernie might have missed out on much of her own son’s teenager antics, but she'd been in the Army long enough to understand them.

“Pretty much.” As cold as Bernie’s hands were, it was nice to finally be able to have a hug from her, and to hug her back. “How much trouble are you in?”

“Trouble?” Bernie’s attempt at brushing Alex’s concern off was short-lived, when she saw how tired and concerned she was. “Significantly less than I might have been if Harry’s father wasn’t a somebody, and the MO in Ascension hadn’t been a liability.”

“Oh?”

“Technically we should have diverted or turned back, and it’s very against the rules to fly casualties away from the UK rather than towards it…” That had been a good five minutes of her first ‘conversation’ with the Base Commander. “...but had we done that then Harry wouldn’t be with his parents right now.”

“Which they’re very happy about.” Alex knew this first hand, having been on the receiving end of his mother’s hugs and thanks. “As presumably his father pointed out?”

“Repeatedly. And that MO would have probably got back to the UK without being picked up on if we hadn’t landed there...” As much as she’d like to think she would have discovered his sub-standard work anyway, Bernie was a sufficient enough realist to know that she’d probably not have got up to Ascension to visit him before his posting ended in a month, meaning he could have slipped through the cracks in the system again.

“But now there’s just questions about why it wasn’t picked up sooner?”
“Something like that…” agreed Bernie, rubbing her cold nose against Alex’s much warmer one. “…which Algie had already dealt with so I wasn’t supposed to be getting yelled at for that.“ Technically she’d just been on the end of some ferocious muttering. “...Mostly his nose was out of joint when the Paras were being stubborn.”

“How stubborn?” Alex knew she shouldn’t be smiling as really, Bernie had had quite a horrific hour or so since leaving the medical centre, but she was telling it in a way that was making Alex smile.

“Refusing to permit anyone near the offloaded cargo without my authority in writing or hearing a verbal order from me stubborn.”

“Great first impression…” sighed Alex, knowing that unfortunately things like that could develop into much bigger battlegrounds without too much encouragement. “...especially with the snow.”

“He’s Navy, goes home in a week.” Bernie understood Alex’s concern, and would have shared it except for the fact that she had already been told by Algie weeks earlier that she was rotating into theatre one week before her CO changed over, with a Navy Commodore being replaced by an Army Brigadier General. “And Nathan’s a good guy.”

“Nathan?” Alex leaned her head back just enough to study Bernie’s not quite as rosy-cheeked face. “Is this another small Army moment?”

“Sort of.” Bernie ran her hands up and down Alex’s back, partly to help get the stiffness out of her fingers and partly just because she could. “His kids are the triplets I delivered in Germany.”

“Oh.” Alex tried to place the story from what Bernie had told her previously. “You’re their godmother? Those triplets?”

“Those triplets.” She’d put her foot down and refused to let her role in their safe arrival be marked by them being lumbered with variants of her first names, though she had been amused when they’d all had a small husky-type ‘wolf’ soft toy as their first ‘teddy-bear’. “How about you?” Bernie had noticed Alex had removed her rank slide from her jacket, but waited to see what her reasoning was, rather than jumping to conclusions. “I hadn’t meant to leave you in the med centre with Harry.”

“Good job you did otherwise you’d probably be a Captain again…” teased Alex, rubbing her hands together then putting them gently against Bernie’s very red and cold ears. “...took them a bit to
understand why I wasn’t in your Command but they were calling me Dr Dawson by the time I left.”

“You okay?” Bernie tightened her hold, pulling Alex closer to her so their foreheads were almost touching. “I hadn’t meant for you to have to do that on your own.”

“Yeah, they were really sweet actually…”

“Oh?”

“Worried you’d forced me into the Reserves so I could come out here and keep house for you…”

“Did you tell them I do your ironing? Or polished your belt?” Despite teasing Alex when she’d been leaving for her last shift at Holby that she’d left hers to be cleaned, Bernie had polished up Alex’s belt as well as her own.

“Yes.” Alex moved her hands from Bernie’s now warmer ears to around her neck. “And that I’d only ever do your ironing if I was mad with you.” While Bernie had naturally mastered the Army’s preference for anything pressable to be sharply creased in all the right places and anything polishable be gleaming so you could see your face in it, she was hopeless at being generally tidy as a matter of routine. Alex in contrast, was very good at putting everything in its ‘proper’ place which meant she looked squared away from a distance, but unfold her shirts and the creases would be worse if she’d ironed it than let it dry on the hanger. “And that I was already in the Reserves before you were offered this posting.”

“What did that do to Fung’s hero worship?”

“You noticed that?”

“Mmm…” Bernie had just managed to brush her lips against Alex’s when they heard the sound of the door opening and a throat clearing. “...I should have tried kissing you the moment I arrived,” grumbled Bernie good-naturedly, removing her now warm hands from inside Alex’s shirt and putting just enough distance between her and Alex so they could both see who the intruder was.

“Why didn’t you?”
“Couldn’t feel my face,” admitted Bernie honestly, knowing she wasn’t anywhere near injury from the cold, but definitely noticing that the wind had come from the Antarctic and she’d been turned into it for much of the time she’d been outside. “Are you the one with our house keys?” As far as Bernie was concerned, if they were involved in them moving into the house she’d been assigned to, then they could jolly well cope with her continuing to hold Alex as she spoke to them.

“Yes Colonel, transport’s outside and I just need two signatures while your bags are loaded.”

“Good.” As Bernie set about signing and initialing the documents as requested, Alex realised she had a very important question.

“Is there hot water?”

“Yes Doctor. Luce…” Seeing her blank look, the aide backtracked, “...The Colonel’s Assistant, Corporal Lucinda Mathers, made sure everything was ready when we learned you were arriving with a medical emergency. I’m to tell you there’s pizza in the freezer, milk in the fridge and cereal and tea in the cupboard.” The aide had no idea what the rest of the message meant, but when a General’s message is relayed via you to a Colonel, you just pass it on. “And I’m also to tell you that the pizzas are Hawaiian as the NAAFI doesn’t do any goat ones, with General Winsham’s compliments.” His frown at the message got even more marked when the Colonel started to make a very strange noise.

“That?” said Alex, pointing to Bernie who had finally lost the battle with her lack of sleep, 8,000 plus miles of travel from temperate UK via tropical Ascension to the currently snow-storm experiencing Falklands. “She’s laughing. You’ll get used to it.”

“Looking forward to it Ma’am.” He still had no idea what the message meant, but he understood their reaction to it to mean it was a good thing. “Welcome to the Falklands.” He’d lost count of how many arrivals he’d done for officers, be they arriving for four months or a continuity tour like the Colonel was, but this was certainly the latest and most unusual he’d done, but somehow, it felt like one of the better ones. “Your home’s just a short drive away.” It was a line he was practically scripted to say, but as he waited while the Captain and Colonel, who’d clearly forgotten that they were holding hands, instinctively put their berets on and zipped up their jackets, ready to follow him outside and into the Land Rover, he realised that this time he actually meant it.
“That’s a big pile of unpacking.”

“Forget about the unpacking.”

“But…” Bernie was interrupted by Alex kissing her firmly on the lips.

“Forget…” Alex followed her first kiss with another, this one soft and gentle. “…about the unpacking…” Sticking with her proven negotiating strategy, Alex’s next kiss was just as soft and just as gentle as her previous one, but twice as slow, lasting as long as she needed to unzip and shrug out of her bulky uniform jacket. “…and your packing…” This time, when her lips sought out her lover’s, she instead found Bernie’s open mouth and tongue, having cut her off mid word. Smiling at her ability to anticipate Bernie’s protests, and preferring to deal with them with kisses than debate, Alex deepened their kiss and soon found she had a co-operative Bernie who didn’t resist when Alex pushed her own bulky jacket from her shoulders. Unfortunately the resultant groan that rumbled up from Bernie’s throat was more accurately described as a growl of pain rather than a moan of pleasure, breaking their kiss.

“Back?”

“Yes.” Bernie started to lift a hand to rub her neck when she felt Alex beat her there with her own hand and start a soothing stroking motion that, in her exhausted state, made Bernie sway on her feet. Her instinctive reaction was to wrap her arms around Alex, which in turn brought a smile to Alex’s lips and another slow, lazy kiss to Bernie’s.

“Do you think the oven can warm up and cook a pizza faster than the shower can drain the hot water tank?” asked Alex when she felt Bernie sway in spite of using Alex as an anchor and was reminded how early they were starting again tomorrow.

“No idea.” Despite her general tiredness, Bernie frowned as she tried to force herself to work through Alex’s apparent riddle.

“Go stand under the shower and I’ll get the pizzas in the oven.”

“What about you?”
“What about me?” Alex found tiredly confused Bernie especially loveable and might even go as far as to think of her as ‘cute’ though she’d never actually admit that aloud, mostly because when Bernie reached that point, she also managed to confuse Alex unless she stayed focused on their conversation.

“How are you showering if I’m using all the hot water?” Bernie liked the idea of a hot shower and food, and she liked the idea of not having to postpone the shower until after the food or worse, wait for the food to cook after she’d had a shower. But she didn’t like the idea of denying Alex her own hot shower or worse, condemning her to a cold one.

“I’ll come wash your hair once the pizza’s in the oven.” Alex let go of Bernie and gave her a gentle nudge in the direction of the main bedroom that had an en-suite bathroom. “Just go stand under the hot water and wait for me.”

“But…” Bernie was liking the sound of Alex’s plan but not liking what was sounding like a massively unfair division of labour.

“Go on…” Alex gave Bernie another gentle nudge, trying to get her to start moving down the hall towards the door they’d been told was into the main bedroom. “…sooner you start the shower the sooner you get your pizza.” Alex knew from experience that when Bernie reached this level of sleepiness, the only thing that really got her moving was the promise of food, but then she’d never seen Bernie this tired when they’d been together in Holby, and in Afghanistan food had been her only safe incentive.

“And get you?” mumbled Bernie, finding the other problem with Alex’s plan - she was no longer able to hug her as she’d moved too far away.

“And me.” That, knew Alex, was the main reason she’d only been able to use food as a motivator when Bernie got this tired in Afghanistan - Bernie’s mental filter also broke down when she got like this, which back then would have been courting potential disaster on too many fronts.

“Good.” Bernie’s lopsided smile at this nearly had Alex completely abandoning her plan and following the surgeon straight into the shower then and there, but she managed to stand firm as she watched her almost asleep on her feet partner set off up the hallway, already working at undoing the buttons on her uniform shirt. “Love you even more than goat pizza…”

“I know you do.” Chuckling at her lover’s rather random yet completely sincere assertion, Alex
managed to drag her own feet into the kitchen to turn on the oven, before returning to the hallway to consider their massive heap of luggage. Bernie hadn’t been wrong, it was a big pile of unpacking, most of which she was now planning on tackling after she’d seen Bernie off again tomorrow. Knowing she had a few minutes while she waited for the oven to get up to temperature, she decided to make a tiny start on the task by at least finding their toiletries and enough bits of clean uniform for Bernie to wear tomorrow, or better yet, enough to also take with her for short stay away.

“Come on Dawson…” she muttered to herself as she rolled her shoulders and bent her knees slightly, “….remember to lift with your legs…” Grabbing the handles of one of the identical black kit bags that would contain either her or Bernie’s uniforms, she tried not to groan too loudly as she picked up the heavy bag. “...I could lift this yesterday…” she reminded herself as she staggered into the front room and dumped the bag onto the large couch. “Oh thank God…” To her relief, she saw from the label that it was Bernie’s bag she’d picked up first, which meant that she could find the necessary clean clothes for Bernie right now and take them through to the bedroom ready for whatever early time they’d have to set an alarm for after she’d put the pizzas in the oven.

Heading back into the hallway, she ignored the other Army-issued kit bags, content to leave them where they were until at least tomorrow. “Thank you wheels…” was her next muttered commentary as she picked the nearest of the heavy-duty suitcases they’d packed their civilian clothes into and, pulling it behind her, went back into the living room which she was now designating her unpacking hub. As she got the case up on the other couch, she heard the sound of a toilet flushing and, moments later the distinctive sound of Bernie yelping as the initial burst of cold water from the shower hit her. Hearing no more yelps or swearing, Alex decided that the vagaries of the taps must have been successfully mastered by Bernie and the water was now running nice and hot.

With a renewed energy, Alex set about unlocking and opening the suitcase, glad that she’d repacked a bit after Bernie had left for her shift as now, in this particular suitcase that still had the luggage label on it that denoted it was a case belonging to one of the flying hospital’s medics, she knew there was a Falklands climate compatible civilian outfit she could wear tomorrow, some clean underwear for Bernie she could take with her to Ascension and their toiletries. She’d worry about moving and unpacking the rest of the suitcases tomorrow sometime, when she wasn’t yawning every two minutes.

By the time the oven was pinging to announcing it had reached the temperature Alex had set it to, she had managed to find everything they would need for the morning and unpack her rucksack so Bernie could use it to take what she needed for her Ascension trip. Putting one pizza in the oven once she’d realised how big it was, being once again very glad she wasn’t someone who took exception to pineapple on pizza, she set the timer on her phone so it wouldn’t be burnt to a crisp. So far so good...

...as long as she hadn’t underestimated the size of the hot water tank....
Resting her forehead against the tiled wall of the shower, Bernie let out a long, slow, steady deep breath.

This was good.

Feeling her stiff shoulders start to warm up, but not prepared to risk the agonies of protesting muscles and joints assaulting her in stereo, she carefully experimented with a slow rolling of her right shoulder.

She let out the breath she hadn’t realised she was holding in an almost happy sounding sigh when she didn’t get an in-brain fireworks display from the movement, and in a moment of bravery that might have been better described as recklessness, rotated her right shoulder again and let her left shoulder join in.

One in-brain firework, like a single rocket shooting up and exploding in a burst of bright light and noise, almost made her freeze after barely rotating her left shoulder for half a circle, but curiosity saw her keep going until she’d completed a second full circle.

No more in-brain fireworks.

This was better than good.

She hadn’t realised she’d not stopped rolling her shoulders until what was her fifth rotation, which was starting to feel like hard work again as muscles, only slightly looser, started to protest that they were still completely worn out and not prepared to participate in frivolous movement anymore. Giving permission to herself to slump, her forehead still resting against the slightly cool tile, she moved her focus to hands and elbows, letting the hot water hitting her back and neck placate her shoulders.

With her eyes now closed, Bernie again started with just her right arm and cautiously bent and straightened her arm at the elbow a couple of times, feeling the creaks and strain in her forearm as she then added in a gentle rotation of her wrist. It was funny how only a few hours of pen-wielding paperwork could leave her hand and arm feeling like it usually did after twice or even three times as long in theatre operating. Except that it wasn’t funny, reminded the annoying part of her that
always sounded exactly like one of her lecturers from Med School, because...she tuned that part of her out and started stretching her left arm.

This was a really great idea, the right sort of satisfying stretch and pull that felt like it could be energising if she just did enough of it.

This was...she frowned, mentally correcting her intended thought before she’d finished it....not perfect.

This was missing something.

“I brought shampoo.” Alex had spent a few seconds just outside the shower watching Bernie lost in thought about something, wondering whether she was going to spot the two rather fundamental omissions to her shower.

“Oh.” Bernie hadn’t noticed Alex’s arrival until she felt the warm air be momentarily disturbed with colder air as Alex stepped into the bath and joined Bernie under the spray, holding the bottle of shampoo. “I forgot about that too.”

“I noticed.” Alex put the shampoo and separate shower gel down on the end of the bath and then stepped closer to Bernie, trying to get under the warm spray - it wasn’t cold in the house, with the heating having been turned on well in advance of their arrival, but it hadn’t made it so warm she wouldn’t prefer to have some benefit from the warm water. “And I found some towels.” Alex had come into the bedroom that would become ‘theirs’ to find Bernie had taken Alex’s encouragement to go get in the shower quite literally, with her uniform in a heap on the floor and the towels, provided for them as part of the house, still sitting on the bed.

“Them too…” Bernie was almost asleep on her feet, her head holding her upright with the help of the tiled wall. “...forgot about them.”

"That’s alright." Alex stepped up close behind her lover, suddenly feeling very awake compared to Bernie, and wrapped her arms around her. "You just remembered you had me." Alex kissed the side of Bernie's neck, for once taking great care to avoid the spot she usually aimed for, not wanting to end up with an even fuzzier version of extra-loveable Bernie as they'd probably end up in a heap of bruised and bashed limbs on the bathroom floor.

"'cept I didn't…" Bernie could go for hours without either food or sleep, days if there was coffee or
the adrenalin rush of trauma surgeries to tackle. But the cumulative effect of the last few days of too little sleep, not much food, far too much coffee and no trauma surgery fueled adrenaline spike left her running on fumes that had almost run out. "... have you, here..." Bernie lifted her head and carefully turned around in the bath, using the tiled walls to steady herself as she took care not to knock into Alex. "... I missed you."

It took Alex a moment to catch up with Bernie's sleepy logic, but she smiled when she realised what Bernie was thinking about. It had become a bit of a game between them, in the small flat in Holby which had only a tiny hot water tank and a disappointingly low thermostat temperature, to see how quickly one could catch the other up. Alex had become amazingly quick in Bernie’s opinion at getting into the shower when she’d been on the ‘catch up' side, with the anaesthetist usually in the shower with Bernie before the surgeon had finished with the shampoo.

"I had to work out the oven.” Alex kissed Bernie’s nose as she leaned forwards, getting the hot water to soak her hair. “And didn’t know if the curtains were closed.”

“Curtains?” Bernie’s distraction with the apparently random comment about the curtains gave Alex the opportunity to grab the shampoo bottle and squirt some into first Bernie’s hand then her own. “I hadn’t closed them...” Automatically, Bernie started to lather her own hair then her arms got tired and her shoulders were protesting too loudly for her to ignore, causing her to stop and lean against the wall again.

“No, so I was slower sorting everything out,” explained Alex patiently as, her own hair lathered and being washed clean by the spray she was stood under, she carried on finishing lathering Bernie’s, taking a few extra moments to massage some of the tension that had worked its way up into Bernie’s scalp away, with her new position keeping her out of the water’s spray. “But I’ll get quicker...”

Alex had finally let on, after teasing Bernie about it for several months, what her ‘secret’ was for consistently managing to put their dinner in the oven once it had got to temperature and join Bernie in the shower faster than Bernie ever did. Her ‘secret’ had been using the time while the oven got up to temperature to make sure the curtains in their bedroom and the blinds in the kitchen were closed. That way, she could carry on getting out of whatever clothes she’d been wearing that day, be it uniform or whatever she’d worn to the hospital, and put them in the laundry or away while waiting for the oven to announce it was at temperature. A quick detour back to the kitchen to put their dinner in the oven and she was in the shower seconds later with Bernie. But only if the curtains and blinds were closed so she didn’t give the neighbours a free show.

“...rinse,” she prompted, tapping Bernie on the nose with her soapy finger, their familiar routine unchanged despite this shower being eight thousand odd miles from their previous one.
“I’ll start closing the curtains…” mumbled Bernie, obediently moving away from the wall and ducking her head back under the full force of the still hot spray until her hair was soap free. “…or just never open them,” she joked, opening her eyes when she judged her eyes were probably safe from the suds, feeling a little more alert and awake again now she had Alex talking to her and was starting to feel clean again. “Thank you.”

Alex passed Bernie the shower gel so she could begin to wash the parts of her that she could reach without her shoulders and neck protesting as she tried to work out what exactly she was being thanked for.

“Glad to.” Alex turned her back to Bernie and leaned back slightly, meaning she could wash the soap from her own hair without elbowing Bernie in the eye. “What have I done?”

“Be you.” Bernie squirted some shower gel into her hands and, biting her lip so she didn’t groan as she moved her arms and shoulders, leaned forwards and began to give Alex a mixture of a shoulder rub and back wash. “Love me.”

“You’re very loveable.”

“Be here.”

Alex turned round, her own shower technically completed now she was both dirt and soap free. Plus, while the water was still coming through hot, her inner clock was telling her it would only be a few minutes until the pizza was ready and the timer she’d set on her mobile would be going off.

“That was never in doubt.” She kissed Bernie softly, finding enough willpower to put her hands on the tiles rather than on Bernie - love right now meant feeding Bernie pizza not making love to her, as much as she might want to. “And anyway, you promised me penguins.”

“I did…” Bernie tried for another kiss only to frown when Alex managed to stay just out of range.

“And I promised you pizza.” Alex could hear her mobile phone alarm going off. “Rinse off and I’ll go sort dinner.” Although she’d managed to find the freezer and work out how to work the oven, plates and something to cut the pizza with was still on her to find list. “Tea alright?”

“Perfect.” Bernie was forcing herself to wake up more so she could actually eat some food but also...
do a better job of thanking Alex for everything she’d done. “Kitchen?” She had a vague recollection from the information she’d received in the UK that the kitchen had a sort of sit at counter bit that would do for eating food without undue ceremony or fuss.

“No rush.” Alex was reasonably confident that Bernie was now too awake to actually fall asleep on her feet in the shower, though if she was wrong then the shock of the shower turning cold would wake her up.

“You’re very loveable too.” Bernie wasn’t happy with how that sounded, so tried again. “I love you.”

“Even if I burn your pizza?” Although she’d set her phone alarm five minutes before the pizza would actually be cooked so she had time to get out of the shower and get dry, at this rate she was going to be getting to the kitchen in time to take burnt pizza out of the oven.

“Always.” Bernie was now awake enough to recognise a hint and started to turn away from Alex so she was fully under the still hot spray. “I’m rinsing.”

“Goof.” Amused, Alex got out of the shower and, wrapping herself in a towel while taking another one to dry her hair with, headed out of the bathroom to go and rescue their pizza.

“Gmph…” Alex tried to turn away from the noise of an alarm, wanting to snuggle into Bernie and sleep some more. But there was no Bernie.

“Are you awake?” asked Bernie as she put a mug of coffee down besides Alex’s watch and mobile phone on the bedside table, kindly also turning off the klaxon sound that Alex used as her ‘really, really must wake up’ alarm.

“No…” Alex tried to find a way to get back to sleep again, her usual early morning grumpiness starting to surface, but she was now aware of two things: the bed was cold, suggesting Bernie had been up for quite a while already and she could smell coffee.

“I made you coffee.” Bernie trailed her fingers down her lover’s cheek and along her jaw, before tapping her affectionately on the nose, exactly like she’d done on their last morning in their flat in
Holby together however many days ago it now was. “And transport’s here in twenty minutes.”

“I’m awake…” grumbled Alex, forcing herself to sit up as she rubbed her eyes.

“Staying awake?” asked Bernie, knowing Alex was rather adept at going back to sleep again if given the chance, unlike Bernie.

“Mmm…” Alex blinked her eyes a couple of times as she finished waking up. “…bed’s cold.” Now properly awake, her eyes adjusted enough to the early morning light that was coming in through a small gap in the curtains, she reached for her watch and properly looked at Bernie. “Obviously.” She was already fully dressed in her uniform which helped explain the cold bed - she’d clearly been up for a while. “And you made coffee.”

“And I need to go make sure I’ve not missed anything.” Bernie managed to sneak a brief ‘good morning’ kiss in between Alex’s first sips of the still too hot coffee drunk almost on auto-pilot. “Thanks for sorting everything last night.” Bernie had a vague memory of Alex telling her that she’d done enough unpacking for Bernie to be able to leave for her short trip this morning, but hadn’t fully appreciated quite how much Alex had managed to do in such a short time. “Can I borrow from your field kit?”

“Sure…” Alex’s brain had registered she wasn’t doing a MERT shift while Bernie was away and therefore didn’t need her field kit before she’d really noticed the question. “...wait, what?” Bernie was supposed to be going back to Ascension in order to sort out the Base situation, taking one of the Falklands based MOs with her.

“I’m not planning on doing a MERT duty shift,” promised Bernie, knowing what Alex was confused by. “I want to borrow your obs cards.”

“Help yourself.” Alex yawned, starting to be properly awake, now found Bernie’s question making more sense. “How long since you’ve taken a history?” The observation cards that field medics carried were laminated cards that could be written on with a marker and attached to a patient for transfer. They were a comprehensive and structured patient history, capturing everything from personal details through the initial triaging and early monitoring, with the Medical Emergency Response Team versions continuing further into patient care, with cards for recording anaesthesia and surgical procedures. Alex’s kit had more than one set of both versions.

“On my own and not counting triage in the field?” Bernie chewed her lip as she tried to work it out before deciding that in itself was a good enough answer. “Med student.”
“Typical surgeon,” teased Alex, now fully awake and sitting up properly next to Bernie, ready to stand up and get ready. “Relying on us little people to do the triage.” She took the sting out of her words with a kiss, knowing that Bernie would be absolutely fine when confronted with her first patient, but understanding why she was being overly diligent in her preparation. “You can take a history in your sleep,” she promised, kissing Bernie once more before standing up. “I’ll be ready in a minute.” She headed for the bathroom, only to pause and look back at Bernie, trying to place what was ‘off’.

“I can’t have jam on me, I’ve not eaten my toast yet.”

“It’s not that.” Alex came back over and looked at Bernie more closely. “You’ve demoted yourself.” She gave the rank slide on Bernie’s combat patterned shirt a gentle tug. “Remember you’ve only got one set at the moment.” She made a mental note to see if she could order Bernie another set or two so she didn’t have to continually remember to transfer them between her different uniform layers if she was wearing something different two days running.

“I knew that.” Bernie went over to the wardrobe where she’d created the beginnings of a laundry heap and searched for the heavier weight shirt she’d been wearing when she’d left England. “Hopefully there will be some more for me in Ascension,” she said when she’d found the rank slide and fixed it into place on her shirt.

“Oh?” Alex re-emerged from the bathroom and started getting dressed in the clothes she’d sorted out yesterday. “You ordered more?”

“Asked Corporal Smith to see if he could find someone to get some posted out to me. Think they’re addressed to me here but I’m hoping someone will notice I’m there if they arrive on this flight.” Bernie had, in between her locum shifts at Holby, been studying everything she could find out about her new posting, from the service records of her medical staff to the Air Bridge timetables. In theory, if her request for another couple of sets of rank slides made it to the next Air Bridge flight departure from the UK, she should be on Ascension when the postbag was. “You’re wearing civvies?”

“Haven’t any orders yet.” Alex’s voice was muffled as she pulled on the dark grey jumper she was going to wear over the grey and black shirt she’d already put on. “So for the moment I’m Dr Dawson…”

“That’s my jumper.”
“Mmm.” Alex had forgotten to fasten the cuff buttons on the shirt, so had ended up with the sleeves caught up uncomfortably in the jumper, with the quickest way of sorting it out being to take the jumper off and do up the cuff buttons, which she set about doing.

“And my shirt.” Bernie glanced at her watch, seeing they still had a few minutes until the doorbell would be ringing to let them know their lift back to the medical centre had arrived.

“Yes.” Alex had finally extracted herself from her self-inflicted clothing tangle and was about to start fastening the cuff buttons herself when Bernie beat her to it. “You mind?” This was hardly the first time Alex had worn one of Bernie’s shirts or jumpers, so when Alex had found them before her own clothes she’d decided they’d do perfectly as clothes for her for today.

“No!” Bernie kissed Alex, catching her off-guard with the intensity of the kiss. “You look…” Alex watched Bernie’s eyes dart about, admiring and studying her like she was a precious object, showing her Bernie’s love…and so also saw the moment when her eyes clouded, lust and want shifting into concern. “You hate the cliche…”

It was Alex’s turn to catch Bernie off guard with the extent of the emotion she managed to convey with her kiss, her arms wrapping around Bernie and holding her tight as her fingers tangled in soft hair that never stayed in the regulation bun and her tongue coaxed Bernie’s frozen lips back into life. Unlike last night, Alex had no problem following her lover’s leaps of logic, instead understanding with an intuition that further confirmed their connection.

“They were the clothes on the top of the case I opened last night,” Finally, when there was enough space between their lips for a whisper to pass, Alex began to explain. “And I do hate the cliche of girlfriends wearing each others’ clothes but I didn’t want to change when I realised just now.” She’d half paused as she was about to button up the shirt, her genuine loathing of the cliche that women in a relationship always wore the others’ clothes tempered by the sight of Bernie wearing her lighter weight uniform, packed specifically for when she had to spend any length of time in the tropical latitudes on Ascension. “And then I remembered you’re going away and maybe I saw it as cliche because it’s actually true?” She kissed a still somewhat confused looking Bernie. “I’m trying to say I’m going to miss you goof!”

“But they were the clothes on the top of the case I opened last night.” Finally, when there was enough space between their lips for a whisper to pass, Alex began to explain. “And I do hate the cliche of girlfriends wearing each other’s clothes but I didn’t want to change when I realised just now.” She’d half paused as she was about to button up the shirt, her genuine loathing of the cliche that women in a relationship always wore the others’ clothes tempered by the sight of Bernie wearing her lighter weight uniform, packed specifically for when she had to spend any length of time in the tropical latitudes on Ascension. “And then I remembered you’re going away and maybe I saw it as cliche because it’s actually true?” She kissed a still somewhat confused looking Bernie. “I’m trying to say I’m going to miss you goof!”

“Ah!” Bernie’s frown quickly morphed into the familiar crooked grin of wry, kind amusement that Alex had fallen in love with the first time she’d seen it directed at her. “You know I’m going to miss you too?”

“Oh Bern…” Alex hadn’t meant for her admission to open up all of her lover’s fears and worries and let them come to the surface again, not now, not when they’d carefully relocated their rebuilt happy bubble and overcome so much. “I know… I’ve always known…”
“It’s strange….” mused Bernie thoughtfully as she leaned against the doorframe of her, no their bedroom.

“What is?” Alex stopped at the bed and put down the neat stack of folded t-shirts in Army bland, ready to pack them into her Bergen.

“Watching you pack.”

“Oh?” Alex turned and looked at her girlfriend, picking up a slowness in her words that Alex had come to associate with her second guessing herself. “Is this where you show me a great packing secret not in any of the training manuals?”

“The only ones I was ever told were about what to leave out so you could fit in the whisky and cigarettes.” Bernie shrugged when she saw Alex’s look of surprise. “I was never entirely sure if the whisky was supposed to be for me or the locals.”

“Bribes?” It wasn’t unheard of, with ‘hearts and minds’ sometimes meaning playing a quick game of pick-up soccer or cricket with the children while sharing some sweets, and sometimes meaning something rather more material, though never in Alex’s experience had they involved alcohol.

“Goodwill…” Bernie rubbed her hands up and down her arms as she hugged herself, suddenly feeling the memory of the cold. “...prudent medication against hypothermia? I never asked....or told.” There had been several occasions when she’d been glad during her career that she was ‘just the MO’, tasked with repairing broken bodies, often retrieving them in the midst of hastily negotiated and extremely fragile ceasefires on the condition that she deliver some enemy Commander’s grandchild or treat their mother. What was transferred from rucksack to rucksack to secure some of those moments of peace that enabled her to stitch and set, to repair and recover she didn’t want to know about. “It all...feels so long ago now.”

“Germany?” Alex wasn’t entirely sure what ‘it’ was, or where exactly Bernie was thinking about, but like always she was fascinated to learn more tiny details about her complex lover who presented such a straightforward exterior so much of the time.

“Definitely...” With anyone else she’d have accepted the suggestion as the truth and changed the
subject, but Alex wasn’t anyone else and she was determined to never brush aside Alex’s interest or concerns. “...it just feels like it happened to someone else?”

“Like what happened?”

“Red crosses and blue berets.” Bernie came fully into the room and sat down next to the neat pile of folded uniform that Alex was about to pack. “I never thought I’d miss mud…”

“The Balkans?” Alex had been in medical school when the majority of the Army’s deployments were on UN Peacekeeping Duties to one of the many parts of the former Yugoslavia and its neighbours, but knew from Bernie’s ribbons that she’d seen on her dress uniform that was hanging in the wardrobe, that she’d done multiple tours there as part of various UN and NATO peacekeeping operations.

“Mmm, and further away.” She smoothed out a wrinkle in a t-shirt with her index finger, sorting through various memories. “The tropics can be very muddy.” She’d been to so many places over the years, saved so many lives but perhaps also seen more than her share of horrors. “And I don’t think I ever really appreciated quite how much of the planet was covered in sand.”

“Fortunately Salisbury Plain confines itself to mud for most of the year.”

“Is that where you’re going?” The quiet question saw the pieces of the jigsaw fall into place for Alex - this wasn’t so much about Bernie remembering the places she’d been, but her always being the one going away. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked...I always hated it when Mar…”

“I’m not him.” Alex wrapped her hands around Bernie’s, pulling them into her lap as she sat down on the bed next to her girlfriend. “And I can’t imagine ever hating you wanting to know where I’m going.” She kissed Bernie’s knuckle. “And yes, I’ve got three days of casualty recovery drills, which given the rain in the last month means I probably need twice as much clean underwear as usual.”

“They’re getting soft if you’re getting a chance to change your underwear…” teased Bernie, remembering some truly hellish overnight camp-out drills at various UK bases and facilities during her career. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”
“Being clingy.” Alex was about to open her mouth to protest that Bernie had an unusually strict definition of clingy if expressing curiosity as to where her Reserve Duty was taking her and sharing a tiny glimpse of her past postings counted as being ‘clingy’. “I guess this is the first time I’m not the one going away…” Bastion didn’t count, with trips outside the wire for Alex in theory lasting minutes, a couple of hours at most as the whole MERT ethos was getting to the casualty as fast as possible so that they could be brought back to the hospital environment just as fast.

“Do you mind?”

“You going? Of course not!” Bernie was horrified at the thought she was in any way resistant to Alex continuing to maintain her Reserve Duty commitments.

“I meant about you not going…” Alex nudged Bernie with her shoulder, one of their old shorthands for when they were out of sight of prying eyes but not necessarily out of range of overhearing ears and a teasing joke or dig was unwise. “…though thanks for being supportive, I know you don’t want to be in the Reserves if you can’t be in the Regulars.”

“Am I envious of you spending three days doing casualty evac drills in the Wiltshire mud? Not in the least…” It was Bernie’s turn to emphasise her comment with a kiss, only she aimed for her girlfriend’s lips. “…not even slightly,” she admitted honestly. “I think I’ve done my share of those for a little while yet…” She closed her eyes briefly and squashed away the memories of ditches and hillsides in all weathers and climates, with casualties that were civilian and military, ally and enemy. “...but I’ve never been the one waiting at home.” She looked around their bedroom, automatically cataloguing everything that was Alex’s that would, after this afternoon, not move until she came home again.

“I’ve never had anyone keeping a space somewhere for me to go back to.” Her brother didn’t count, as by the time she was being posted rather than going away to Med School he was a teenager who tried to ignore his big half-sister as often as possible - by the time he was through that phase, he was a Marine and being deployed himself and she’d long stopped going to see her mother. “Not exactly had a home if I’m honest.” She turned so she could look at Bernie properly, the reality of what she was saying and how it impacted her girlfriend starting to hit. “And you’ve not really had one for a long time either, have you?”

“I’ve never felt like I’m someone’s ‘home’.” Alex had meant ‘home’ in the sense of a place that was familiar, was where possessions and memories were stored and people whose lives you were a part of gravitated to in your absence to keep you in their lives in spite of your absence. But Bernie had spent so long unable to put down her roots somewhere in which her memories and possessions would be treasured and respected that she’d stopped even looking for a place to call home. She did still remember having hugs and kisses from her children when she returned from overseas, even if she never recognised their bedrooms and hadn’t been the one to give them their current favourite teddy bear, and she liked the idea of being the one who kept watch over the space that Alex was
“Then I need to do a better job…” Alex kissed Bernie gently, trying not to think about the latest reasons she could put on the ‘kill bloody Marcus’ list. “…because you’ve been my ‘home’ for a long time already…”

..., it doesn’t matter who’s doing the travelling and who’s doing the staying, the missing is the same,” reminded Alex, running her thumbs across Bernie’s cheeks so she caught the tiny droplets that had escaped from her lover’s eyes, no doubt something her own eyes were also guilty of.

“I’m out of practice at being the travelling one.”

“Says the Colonel who flew over 8,000 miles yesterday,” teased Alex, conscious they’d be collected fairly soon and Bernie wasn’t quite ready yet.

“Yes, well…” Bernie wasn’t quite sure how to answer that given she recognised Alex had deliberately misunderstood her.

“Two bits of advice?”

“Can I afford them? I’ve already rung up quite a large bill on the journey down here…”

“These ones are free.” Alex smoothed Bernie’s uniform collar so it was lying flat across the back of her neck and managed to tuck the stray bits of hair back into her bun at the same time. “Pack your hairbrush.” Alex had spotted it on the side in the bathroom and knew Bernie’s hair would in no way make itself ‘regulation’ without it.

“That I can do.” Bernie appreciated the tip off - it would be annoying to have to buy another one in the NAAFI when she discovered she’d left her one behind. “And the other piece of advice?”

“Tie your bootlaces.” Alex kissed the tip of Bernie’s nose before she could finish reacting to what Alex had said, then sidestepped out of range of Bernie’s arms and headed for the kitchen, pulling on her borrowed jumper as she went.
“Now who’s a goof…” grumbled Bernie good-naturedly, obediently bending down and doing up her bootlaces which she had actually forgotten were still untied, not that she’d admit that to Alex. “I’ll get you for this!” she called out, hearing Alex’s laughter from the kitchen as she quickly made some toast for them both to eat in the last moments before their transport arrived.

They might have only arrived yesterday, and she might not yet have seen the house in daylight, but it was already ‘home’, and she was already looking forward to coming back.
“...and introduce Dr Alex Dawson.” Bernie tilted her head towards Alex who had been leaning against the edge of the counter at the back of the room, prompting everyone in the meeting to twist around in their chairs to look at her. “Some of you met her yesterday as Captain Dawson.” Everyone turned back to Bernie as she continued talking, various heads nodding though quite a few still looked a bit confused. “Show of hands, honestly, who was expecting Colonel Wolfe to be a bloke?” Bernie grinned at the look of shock on her new Staff’s faces. “Don’t worry, I probably would have been too.”

She caught Alex’s eye at that point and her grin shifted from one of amusement to a smile of thanks as, in a moment of what Bernie considered to be genius level brilliance, Alex had done some internet research for her while they were waiting to board the plane in the UK.

“Apparently I’m one of the 8% of Colonels who aren’t male.” She took a deep breath, not remotely fazed about what she was about to say next, but utterly unable to predict how the news was going to be received, although yesterday’s reaction by Captain Fung and the couple of others helping Alex and her with Harry gave her some confidence. Still, she’d have preferred to not feeling like she was outing both herself and Alex and then running, especially given it meant leaving Alex alone to cope with whatever the reaction might be.

“And I’m also one of the 17% of the Army who have declared their sexual orientation.” She took a sip of her coffee while she watched the room to see who was adding those two statements together and correctly making the connection with Alex. Putting down her coffee she glanced back at Alex to check how she was doing, and was rewarded with a confident nod and reassuring smile. “Just as the Captain is one of the 5% of the Army Reserves to have done so, but then we didn’t really have a choice once she very kindly agreed to move down here with me for my tour.” Bernie took a moment to let everyone who hadn’t already caught on to what she was saying, catch up, before making what she was saying completely unambiguous. “This makes her your new favourite person by the way, as you do not want to imagine what I’d be like if I’d moved down here on my own having just been dumped by my partner.” Bernie took a sip of her coffee while she watched the room to see who was adding those two statements together and correctly making the connection with Alex. Putting down her coffee she glanced back at Alex to check how she was doing, and was rewarded with a confident nod and reassuring smile. “Just as the Captain is one of the 5% of the Army Reserves to have done so, but then we didn’t really have a choice once she very kindly agreed to move down here with me for my tour.” Bernie took a moment to let everyone who hadn’t already caught on to what she was saying, catch up, before making what she was saying completely unambiguous. “This makes her your new favourite person by the way, as you do not want to imagine what I’d be like if I’d moved down here on my own having just been dumped by my partner.” She looked at Alex who was struggling not to laugh - Bernie did genuinely prefer it if introductions happened when she wasn’t in the room, but had begrudgingly agreed when Alex had declared that there was no way of avoiding introducing herself this time. It was however, going to be a uniquely ‘Bernie’ style of introduction.

“Alex is going to be working at the hospital in Port Stanley and we’ll see her around the medical centre occasionally as Captain Dawson when she does her Reserve Duty with the SAR teams. As an anaesthetist, she was in the operating theatres at Camp Bastion but also part of MERT, and it is those skills and techniques that see her posted to the SAR teams.”

“Aren’t the SAR teams are outside your Command Colonel?” Alex had no idea, looking at the backs of everyone’s heads, who it was that had asked the question, but she wasn’t interested in
moving to a different vantage point.

“Yes.” Seeing her answer hadn’t actually answered the question, she continued. “Our relationship combined with my position here means that Dr Dawson, despite being an excellent doctor, anaesthetist and officer, cannot as a general rule be assigned to my Command. So our colleagues on SAR get the benefit of Captain Dawson’s expertise and the Islanders get the benefit of Dr Dawson at the hospital in Port Stanley.” Bernie rubbed her neck and glanced at the clock, seeing they still had half an hour before they had to be ready for the first of the day’s Sick Parades.

“Now, I don’t know how my predecessor did this, but I’d like a run down of who we’ve got and what’s on the schedule for clinics and so on for the next four days.” Bernie was inwardly amused at the blinks of surprise from various people who clearly hadn’t done a ‘rounds’ type update for quite some time. “You’ve got five minutes to gather up anything you need to do this. Dismissed.”

There was a loud clatter of chairs as everyone stood up, their individual urges to immediately scatter to grab laptops and files seemingly being held back by not wanting to be the first one to show any signs of panic in front of the new SMO. Amused by their paralysis, Alex decided to help out a couple of them nearest to her by asking if they could point her in the direction of the coffee pot, which helped to get the room moving a little bit quicker. She decided not to mention that next week Bernie wouldn’t be giving them five minutes warning whenever she wanted to know exactly what the ward situation was - they could learn that the hard way, just like the rest of them had.

Bernie had been trying not to look too amused by the antics, finding it the same at the start of every posting as she found out who on the team was on top of their work and who was hoping for others to be on top of it for them, but as they started moving she called out to one of them. “Flight Lt Turry?”

“Yes Colonel.” Surprised to be singled out for a conversation, the tall female officer easily moved between the chairs until she was stood in front of Bernie. She’d missed the Colonel’s arrival yesterday having just had two days of down-time which had kept her out of the Medical Centre.

“Sorry to spring this on you, but I need you to go pack for a week off island please.”

“Ma’am?” It wasn’t her place to say no, and she didn’t want to say no either, being somewhat intrigued by the new Colonel who, it was fair to say, had absolutely nothing in common with her predecessor. But it did mean she also had absolutely no clue as to what she was being asked to do.

“The rest are going to find out in a minute, but I’m on the flight back to Ascension in three hours and I’d like you to come with me. The Base MO is being recalled to the UK - he’s going to find
out when I land, and will be on the next flight. We’ll be doing locum cover from here on a one week rotating basis and I’d like you to be the first locum.”

“Yes Colonel.” That was not what she’d been expecting, though she also wasn’t surprised - on the odd occasion her path had crossed with that particular medic she’d been left with a rather low opinion of him as both a medic and a fellow RAF officer. “Now?”

“Stay for the rest of this briefing. I assume you’re down as a duty MO today?”

“Yes Ma’am. Sick Parades but no speciality clinic. A couple of follow ups from the families.”

“I’ll sort out someone else to do the Sick Parades, and use your judgement to either reschedule the follow ups or…” Bernie mentally reviewed everyone’s record to remind her what their specialities and interests were, helping her to realise what Algie had already hinted at - they didn’t have enough overlaps to make it easy to be one medic down. “…ask Alex to see them.”

“Dr Dawson?” She liked the sensible suggestion, as she generally got the follow-ups that either requested a female doctor or were to do with the routine management of long-term health conditions that it sounded like she’d be more than capable at dealing with.

“General Winsham assures me that by the time we take off there will be temporary orders and Captain Dawson will be our locum MO here to enable you, Captain Fung and Lieutenant Hythe to cover Ascension on rotation.”

“I’ll take her through my clinic notes and she can use my office Ma’am.”

“Let’s all meet there at…” Bernie looked at her watch, mentally tallying up everything else she and Alex needed to get done before the flight. “...0930.” Seeing Turry’s face show a split second reaction to the news that she was going to be there also, Bernie elected to share her reasoning. “After this we’ve got to both go do the NAAFI registration.” Without completing that, since Alex, as a civilian, couldn’t eat in the Base Messes without Bernie, she wouldn’t be easily able to buy food or anything else for stocking their house with either from the Base shops. “And I was hoping you could also then register us both? Turns out we’re the only people I can’t register…” It was the golden rule of a new posting, make sure you were registered with both the NAAFI and the Med Centre, with Bernie not really able to leave the island again without first doing these vital things. But the Med Centre registration was something of a bureaucratic irritant given everything else she had to get through in not much time this morning.
“I can definitely do that Ma’am.” Reassured that she wasn’t automatically expecting to sit in on the handover chat she was going to have with Dr Dawson, Turry was quickly working through her own logistics. “If I’m able to go back to my Quarters during Sick Parade to pack, I can have made a start on the registrations by the time you arrive Colonel.”

“Excellent.” Pleased that there was now a plan that helped her solve the first few items on her to do list, and that the rest of the Staff appeared to understand that when she said they had ‘five minutes’ it was a good idea to be back after four minutes, she nodded in thanks to the Flight Lieutenant then looked about for Alex. “Al?”

“Yes Colonel?” Alex had always managed to find the right balance between formal and friendly, and now was no difference, though she hadn’t quite managed to suppress the proud smile she got everytime she was reminded of Bernie’s reinstatement and promotion.

“Victoria Turry’s agreed to do the first week’s cover and our registrations.”

“Great. I’ll give her the paperwork.” Alex had, at the last minute as Bernie was talking to their transport’s driver about where the house actually was on the base and who their neighbours were, doubled back into the house and grabbed their basic information documentation which she’d remembered they’d need to make for a straightforward registration. “Am I also covering her clinics today?” Alex was prepared to do that if she had to, but was rather hoping she might have just one day to do a little bit more unpacking and find her way about a little bit.

“She was just down for Sick Parades, so you’re let off that. After I’ve listened to what we’ve got I thought we’d get over to the NAAFI and sort that out?”

“Perfect, thank you.” Alex hadn’t wanted to insist on Bernie prioritising the NAAFI registration given how busy she was going to be with the flight later in the morning, but it was wonderful that she was. “And here.” She passed over the mug she was holding. “Fresh for you.”

“Thanks…” And, with a fresh mug of hot coffee now in hand, four and a half minutes after she’d given them a five minute break, Bernie resumed her spot leaning against the front edge of the table and cleared her throat. “Right, before we go into the details of what the next four days brings, you should know that Flt Lt Turry and I will be flying to Ascension on this morning’s flight…”
“Yes?” Bernie had just made it into her own office as the phone rang, causing her to reach and snatch for it given that she’d just asked her new administrative assistant to go find some files for her.

“Run ragged already are you?” came the teasing voice of General Winsham, clearly enjoying catching her almost off guard.

“Only because I was being a good Colonel and not registering myself with Medical.” She’d refused to indulge in any short-cuts, despite the occasional offer, feeling that it was setting a thoroughly bad example, especially when she knew she could rely on the incoming Base Commander to be of the same mind. “Having first been a good partner and made sure I was properly registered with the NAAFI so Alex doesn’t starve while I’m away. I think I’m at one-all in the relationship good books, but at some point I really need to find a penguin.” She still wasn’t entirely comfortable with just accepting Alex’s good natured acceptance of her immediate turnaround, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it.

“Well done, I always forgot about NAAFI registration, drove Meg mad.” He had no idea what her penguin comment meant, but decided it was probably best not explored given the time she didn’t have.

“I remember.” Bernie thought back fondly to the times she’d found him knocking on her door with a sheepish expression on his face, wondering if she was able to help him get out of his domestic pickle, or more amusingly, when his wife was the one now in a domestic pickle because Algie had gone on exercise without first doing something. “It’s why I knew I had to make sure I did it.” Bernie looked at the clock on the wall of her office and winced - it was already after 10 and she’d been firmly informed that there was no way she could be on the flight if she wasn’t checked in one hour before take-off. “Though I’m now going to be very punctual for catching the flight.” Despite their decades of friendship, she wasn’t quite prepared to order him to get to his reason for calling.

“I’ll get to the point then - there’s a package on the next UK flight for you to collect in Ascension.”

“Oh?”

“It’s from Meg. Apparently I should have given you more than one set of rank slides.” There were some other bits and pieces in the parcel that his wife was putting together, but he’d let Meg’s note explain them and give Bernie the chance to discover them for herself.

“She’s a wonderful woman.” Bernie looked up at the pointedly cleared throat in time to see that Alex had arrived in sufficient time to hear her say that. “Meg, your wife, that is,” clarified Bernie,
trying to also mouth to an increasingly amused looking Alex that she was on the phone with Algie.

“Alex just walk in?”

“Yes Sir. Would you like to speak to her?”

“No need, just wanted to let you know that her posting orders should be with Captain Roeburn any minute and no doubt he’ll follow my advice and come find her wherever Harry is.”

“Captain Roeburn?” Bernie frowned, not recognising the name from any of the base personnel she’d been reading up about ahead of the posting, nor anyone from the Search and Rescue teams. “Who’s that?”

“Her temporary CO - Boodon’s Company Commander. 6 weeks attachment as their MO, to be based at the MPC Medical Centre. He fully understands they’re not to get too attached to her and as far as the troopers will know, they’re just to see any of the duty MOs if they have an issue.”

“That’s highly…” Bernie was struggling to find the word to describe the solution Algie had found. “Unusual?”

“The Captain isn’t stupid and asked Boodon how you knew each other. Turns out he knows Alex and you from Afghanistan, and is delighted to have the favours he considered he owed you both used in this way.”

“I didn’t know he thought he owed us favours, I don’t remember the man.”

“Go with it Bernie - I’m sure Alex will be able to tell you the whole story once you’re back.” He was still ‘Algie’, with the rhythms of his speech unchanged, but it was clearly more than just a friendly encouragement.

“Yes Sir. Thank you Sir.”

“Good luck with your trip, Peter’s going to be part of Ponsbury-Arch’s welcoming committee when he gets back to the UK.”
“Parker?”

“Yes. It’s mostly an RAF matter obviously, but we’re helping. He’s already met with your predecessor.” There was something in his tone that made Bernie decide not to ask how that went. “We’ve been liaising with Corporals Mathers and Smith and between them you’ll have all the files you need at the relevant points.” It took Bernie a second to work out that he was talking about her new administrative assistant who she’d got as far as remembering to call ‘Luce’ not ‘Lucinda’ as that was her preference, though she did remember that Corporal Smith was the very obliging office-sharer she’d met yesterday on Ascension.

“What did we do before email?” wondered Bernie, thinking back to their time in Germany when they hadn’t got many computers yet.

“Get behind on our paperwork.” He like her knew what time the flight was, and therefore how little time she had left. “Who are you taking as locum?”

“Victoria Turry.”

“RAF?” The advantage of the Joint Service Command was that it gave plenty of opportunity to work with the other branches of the Services, but it did make it harder as a new arrival to keep track of everyone, and prior to yesterday Algie hadn’t known anything much about who was on Bernie’s Staff.

“Yes. Seemed sensible.” In theory they were all much of a muchness when it came to the medical aspect of their military careers, though the RAF’s use of oxygen when flying a large number of their aircraft meant they had some additional specialties that were uniquely theirs. “I didn’t pick up on any problems with the aviation medicine side of things but since she was with a fast jet squadron before here I’d like her opinion on that.”

“Sounds like you’ve got everything under control, good to have you back Bernie.”

“I’d say it’s good to be back, but it’s only day…” Bernie saw Alex hold up two fingers. Earning her a smile of gratitude. “...two and for a CT I’m on the move quite a lot.” She really did need to hang up now. “Was there anything else that can’t wait Sir?” As hints went, it wasn’t exactly subtle, but as Algie wished her goodbye and put down the phone he had to chuckle - by Bernies standards that was positively indirect!
“That was Algie.”

“I guessed.” Alex was hovering by the edge of Bernie’s desk, not quite sure whether to sit on its edge.

“Oh for heavens’ sake, I’m a Colonel not the Queen, sit on the damn desk edge!” Despite the slight bark to her words, Bernie’s grin was instantly recognisable to Alex as an attempt at not laughing.

“Better?”

“Much.” Bernie moved her chair closer to Alex, enabling her to pick up her hand and start tracing patterns over her knuckles with her thumb. “You okay?”

“Yeah…” Alex reached up and brushed a strand of Bernie’s hair away from her nose, tucking it behind her ear. “…Tory seems nice, and her clinic notes are nice and logical.”

“Tory?” Bernie tried to work out who Alex was talking about. “Tory Turry?”

“By her own admission Vic Turry sounded even worse when she was eight.” Alex tapped Bernie on the end of the nose to stop her smile becoming an uncontrollable smirk. “I told her what you’d told me about Charlie refusing to be called Lottie...hope that was okay?”

“Of course…” Bernie stood up and took Alex into a gentle hug, their bodies shifting instinctively so they fit together, Bernie standing in between Alex’s legs. “...she’s your Charlie too.” Bernie had tried very carefully to not force the relationship she had been rebuilding with her children, but she’d also tried to be equally careful in not forcing the relationship they’d built with Alex. She had, however, been both relieved and delighted to watch as they’d forged a friendship that wasn’t parental (Alex outright refused to go anywhere near pseudo-step-mother or fake-Aunt territory, which had Bernie’s total support) but equally wasn’t trying to pretend that their connection to Alex wasn’t through their mother. It was impossible for her to label succinctly, but it was wonderful to see and, as Charlie herself had put it, labels were for luggage. “And she would have told you that story herself if you’d known to ask her about it.”

“What did your mother think about your name?” At the time Bernie was telling Lottie about how
she’d acquired her name, Alex hadn’t noticed the absence of any mention about her mother’s reaction, but since then she now realised it had been worrying away at the back of her mind and, now she thought about it, she didn’t think she could ever remember Bernie mentioning her mother, ever.

“Given that Dad wasn’t struck down by a bolt of lightning after he’d registered me she was probably fine with it.” Bernie kissed Alex’s neck, knowing this was probably not the time or the place to tell her this next part of her life story, but also knowing she couldn’t not tell Alex now it had come up. “She died having me. Dad registered me on the last day before it becomes technically illegal to have not registered a birth.”

“I…” Alex’s instinct had been to say ‘I’m sorry’, but she stopped herself just in time, knowing that Bernie wouldn’t welcome it. “…imagine that must have been very difficult for him.”

“Mmm.” Bernie wasn’t interested in talking about a part of the past she had no way of remembering, not when the clock was telling her she had only a few minutes before she had to go over to the check-in building. “That’s the part of the story I left out yesterday.”

“Oh?” Alex tried to remember what Bernie had told Lottie. “What does it mean? Your name?” She’d never really paid too much attention to the whole ‘meaning’ of names, but clearly Bernie’s had some sort of significance to her father, and to how he coped with his wife’s death judging from Bernie bringing it up now. “You never said yesterday.”

“Berenice means ‘bearer of victory’ and Griselda is thought to derive from the Old English for ‘dark battle’.” Bernie smiled as she looked at Alex, remembering something she’d heard her grandmother say when she’d been very young. “Took me years to understand why Gran used to ask him why he couldn’t just have called me ‘Helen’.”

“What does Helen mean?”

“Apparently ray of sunshine.” Bernie laughed at Alex’s expression. “I quite agree, it doesn’t suit me does it? But from Gran’s perspective she had a point - it’s what he always called me when I was little.”

“Helen?”

“Ray of sunshine.” He’d not coped well with his wife’s death, something Bernie could come to
understand years later when having to break the news to the families of patients that didn’t survive their injuries, though he’d always been there for her and she’d loved him dearly.

“What was her name?” Alex had a sudden feeling she already knew the answer to that question, even as she asked it.

“Charlotte.”

“Does Charlie know?”

“No.” Bernie caught the moisture she could see on Alex’s cheek with her thumb. “Nor does Marcus. You’re the first person I’ve told in almost twenty years.”

Alex did some quick mental arithmetic. “Algie?”

“Yes.” Bernie kissed Alex’s forehead, knowing there wasn’t any more time, hating even more that she had to go. “He’s sorted out some orders for you.”

“Oh?” Alex appreciated how important the topic change was for Bernie, knowing she had to go soon, so blinked away the final drops of moisture she could feel trying to gather in her eyes and went with the subject change without protest. “That was fast.”

“Captain Roeburn’s getting them - he’s the Paras’ Company Commander and you’re being attached to them as their MO, based here at the MPC for six weeks effective immediately.”

“Weren’t they all using the Base MOs anyway?”

“Yes. He’s getting the orders this morning and will come find you via Harry later. Ring Algie…” Bernie picked up a pen and scribbled his number on a piece of paper that was lying on her desk, hoping it wasn’t something critical only to discover it was the standard fact sheet all newly registered patients got about Clinic times and contact numbers. “…can I call you tonight?”

“I’d call you if I knew the number.” While they both had their UK mobile phones with them still, Alex didn’t want to begin to try and work out how expensive the call charges would be, with one of the items on their combined to do list looking at getting some local mobiles. Fortunately, Bernie
was going to be staying on the Base there, so making landline calls wasn’t going to be too difficult.

“I’ll call the house…” Bernie caught her lip in her teeth, suddenly realising she was assuming that the phone was already connected and that she had some way of finding out the number.

“I’m sure that with the help of Corporals Smith and Mathers I can work out how to get the number to you.” Alex had a feeling that if Bernie’s new aide had managed to get their heating and hot water on in advance of their arrival, as well as getting the pizzas and breakfast supplies into the house, she probably had the telephone already set up and knew the number.

“I think you’re right.” Bernie wrapped Alex into a tight hug, hating goodbyes even more than she hated introductions, though with Alex she was increasingly finding that her usual technique of just avoiding them completely wasn’t actually all that satisfying.

“Just because no one’s shooting at you and you out-rank everyone, doesn’t mean you can forget to be safe.” Alex didn’t like the idea of saying goodbye to Bernie, and had somehow managed to avoid ever saying it once they’d got back together after the divorce was done. She had no idea if Bernie had noticed, but wasn’t going to ask now.

“I promise.” Bernie tightened her hug for a split second before letting her hold relax slightly, enabling her to find Alex’s ear and murmur to her in a quiet voice. “Don’t take any nonsense from anyone.”

“Not even Algie?”

“Especially not him.” Bernie kissed Alex’s jaw, then lips then again, the kiss deepening as both understood that this was the point at which they really did need to go continue their days entirely independently.

“Oh!”

The surprised sound from the doorway brought them back to the reality of their situation, though Bernie didn’t jump away from Alex, but instead straightened up to her full height and stepped back from Alex’s embrace calmly.

“I’m…”
“Don’t worry about it Luce.” Bernie looked between Alex and her new aide, realising they hadn’t yet met but fairly confident that for Luce at least, Alex needed no introduction. “Has check-in launched a search party for me yet?”

“Almost, but I promised them you’d be there ASAP after I’d found you Ma’am. Lt Turry’s just gone over to check in now - she promised to stall them too.”

“Right then.” Bernie looked around for where she’d put Alex’s rucksack down when they’d arrived just after 0700, spotting it finally under her heavyweight jacket that she’d definitely need to get the short distance across the Base to check-in. “Did you find those files?”

“Yes, they’re in your briefcase Colonel.” Luce held up the briefcase Bernie had given her to fill with the files she wanted copies of when she’d met her in the office between the end of the staff meeting she’d called and meeting Alex at the NAAFI. “And some pens and a pad Ma’am.”

“Have you two met before?” asked Bernie, looking at Alex in suspicion as she pulled on her jacket and fastened it.

“Ma’am?” Luce looked at Alex to double check the Captain wasn’t suddenly familiar to her, though it was clear from her very bad attempt at keeping from laughing at the Colonel that she wasn’t recognising Luce either. “No Ma’am. Corporal Smith emailed me yesterday suggesting I should make sure I gave you pen and paper with any files.”

“They already know you so well Ma’am,” teased Alex, discovering she had accidentally sat on Bernie’s beret. “And sorry.” She held out the beret for Bernie to take.

“They’re designed to be squashed,” shrugged Bernie, not remotely bothered that Alex had sat on it as she fastened the rucksack and slipped it onto her back. “Will I do?” Still not yet fully back in the uniform groove, Bernie pulled on her beret and waited for feedback from Alex.

“Can’t see anything an over-keen NCO could pull you up on.” Alex understood where Bernie’s nervousness was coming from - it was one thing to be back in uniform day-in and day-out having not worn it very much over the last couple of years, but having to immediately go travelling to a different Base in a different climate was not making it easy to get back into the routine. “Just remember they’re warm weather.”
“And layering was supposed to make this less complicated…” grumbled Bernie, suddenly feeling nostalgic for the days when the Army hadn’t yet discovered modern fabrics and every season and climate had its own unique uniform. It meant trips like the one she was about to do were always either with lots of luggage or the knowledge that you were going to stick out as a ‘visitor’ for being in a different uniform to everyone else. While neither solution was ideal, right now it felt better than having to remember whether sleeves were rolled up or down and whether or not shirts were tucked in.

“You could enforce everyone must be bare below the elbow Ma’am.” Luce had been following their conversation, since she hadn’t been dismissed, and was deciding that John’s message had been about right - they seemed to be nice individually and together, though she didn’t quite have his confidence to think of a Colonel as ‘sweet’ just yet. “What with this being the Medical Centre.”

“Excellent suggestion Luce, I’d forgotten about that.” It had been their solution in the hospital at Bastion, with the order being sensibly based in the NHS guidelines they were also ensuring they followed, which required patient contacting staff to be bare below the elbow. It immediately meant that the medics didn’t have to worry about it if they were called to see a patient before they’d changed into scrub tops and was an excellent defense if challenged by someone away from the hospital. “Spread the word will you?” Now she thought about it, there had been a bit of a mixture of covered and exposed forearms on display at the meeting she’d called at 0700. “And if you think I need to make it more official, I can do it by email after I’ve landed or when I get back.”

“Yes Colonel.” Before Luce could say anything else, the phone on Bernie’s desk rang again, however before Bernie could reach for it, Luce had smartly stepped forward and answered it, having a pretty good idea who would be calling. “SMO’s office, Corporal Mathers speaking…. you’ve just missed her…” Luce turned and looked at the Colonel who clearly understood who she was talking to and gave her a sharp nod and a wink before rather sweetly kissing the Captain’s cheek and then, without saying a word, picked up her briefcase and left her office, heading for the check-in desk. “...I’m sure she’ll be with you very soon, but I’ll go double check in case one of the Officers needed her for a medical emergency.” She made eye contact with the smiling Captain, giving her reassurance that she wasn’t in any trouble for using her initiative on this. “If you’re sure…. Goodbye.”

“She in trouble?” asked Alex, deciding it was probably a good moment to find out their new home phone number from Luce and anything else that the clearly very switched on and efficient aide thought would be good for her to know.

“Check-in trying to give her the hurry-up.” Luce’ tone clearly suggested to Alex that this wasn’t an unusual occurrence.

“They tried to do the same in the UK.” Alex stuck out her hand, deciding now was as good a time
as any to do some introductions. “Alex Dawson, please only call me Captain if I’m on duty.”

“Of course Dr Dawson…” Alex groaned at Luce’ formality, though was pleased to see she seemed to be using her civilian title in good humour rather than in a pointed way as they shook hands. “Alex. I’m Luce - only my sister calls me Lucinda.”

“Good to meet you Luce, thanks for sorting out the house for us, and for the pizza.”

“Did I get the right one?” She frowned as she tried to recall the message she’d been sent via General Winsham’s office. “The goat was some sort of joke right?”

“Actually no, her favourite pizza really is one with goat meat, but she’s otherwise very happy with a Hawaiian pizza.”

“How do you find out your favourite pizza is a goat meat pizza?”

“You start by discovering you like goat meat.” Alex laughed, suddenly realising she was becoming as bad as Bernie was at telling stories. “She was posted somewhere, can’t remember where exactly, and the nearest alternative to the Mess was a pizza place just outside the Base. Apparently they made really great pizza bases but since the majority of their business was with the locals, they used the ingredients they were familiar with as the toppings.” Privately, Alex thought that some of Bernie’s affection for goat pizza was now because of the memories she had of that little pizza place in some far flung corner of the world where she was treated as ‘Bernie’ and got to escape whatever difficulties her posting or home life were causing her, but she’d never asked. “She also hates pepperoni of any sort.” Alex unfortunately had a much clearer understanding of what drove that particular food preference, and since she liked Luce, wasn’t going to enlighten her.

“No pepperoni in Hawaiian pizzas…” Luce was starting to see the logic in the Colonel’s pizza preference. “But pineapple?” Luce’ face told Alex she was clearly someone who considered it had no place on a pizza.

“She’ll be pleased to hear you don’t approve, makes you less likely to steal her pizza.”

“I’ll bear that in mind the next time we have a team social.” She made a mental note to check the calendar and see who was tasked with organising the next one - they’d not had a pizza night for a while and by the sounds of it, the Colonel could probably be persuaded to come, especially if word went out to order her a Hawaiian pizza and make sure everyone knew not to nick it first.
“Sounds good.” Alex struggled to contain a yawn, her body struggling with the four hour time zone change, the alarm going at 0530 and only being dropped off at their new home after 2200 last night. She’d probably also have good reason for feeling half dead on her feet if she also stopped to work out how much sleep she’d had since Bernie had brought her coffee in bed before her last Holby shift, but since that was silly o’clock Tuesday and it was now, in the UK at least, early afternoon on Friday, she just looked down at her empty coffee mug.

“Did you get any breakfast this morning?” Just because she’d taken over milk, bread, cereal and teabags as well as coffee and pizza didn’t mean they’d made use of them.

“Umm…” Alex thought back to Bernie waking her with coffee and a kiss, remembering something about toast. “...I made us toast...but Bernie ate it all.” Alex had made the toast and was halfway through buttering both pieces when she went to find the documents they’d need for the medical registration. By the time she’d gathered them up from where she’d put them when she unpacked last night, Bernie had finished making their toast and had eaten her piece. “In her defence if she hadn’t eaten my piece it would still be on the kitchen counter now.”

“Scrambled egg, with some more coffee?”

“Sounds perfect.” Alex knew better than to ask how this particular miracle was going to be achieved, but she was very grateful. “Thank you.”

“Would the Colonel like some do you think?” Some aides might have decided that it was a bit early in the posting for all their tricks and tradable favours to be revealed to their new CO, and that it was far too soon to be showing special treatment to the new SMO, but the one thing faster than a supersonic fighter plane in the RAF was Base gossip, and Luce had already heard how busy the Colonel had been last night and again this morning before she started the Staff meeting at 0700.

“Always.” Alex decided now was the right time to offer up her own secret or two, only hers would be about how to cope with Bernie’s more unique administrative habits. “She’s going to probably drive you mad with how messy her office gets but it’s got its own unique order that I’ll show you once the pattern’s established.” Alex had already spotted that this new office had all three of Bernie’s traditional ‘emergency water stash’ locations (compared to just the one in the office she shared with Serena in Holby). “And you already know she regularly arrives somewhere without a pen, no matter how often she starts out with one.” Alex saw Luce smile at this, having been tipped off by John Smith who’d met Bernie yesterday that she should get some spares ready. “But she is also very, very good at saying thank you and then eating or drinking anything that’s put in front of her.” Alex hadn’t decided if Bernie’s obedience at eating whatever was put in front of her, whether she’d asked for it or not, was a result of childhood or years of Army life, but it certainly made getting food in her when her stomach started growling much easier.
“As long as it’s not pepperoni, got it.”
“Ow!” Rubbing her hip as she muttered to herself, Alex picked up the ringing phone. “Hello?”

“Hi.” Hearing Alex’s voice, even though it was just one word, helped Bernie’s shoulders to relax and her head dropped back as she rested it against the chair back.

“Hi.” Grinning, Alex headed for the sitting room, taking care to go around the end of the kitchen worktop this time, rather than bouncing off it with her hip. “You’ve managed to get email access sorted then?”

“Yes.” Bernie closed her eyes, trying to ignore how many thousands of miles she was from where she wanted to be. “Were our Corporals always this efficient or is the RAF just showing off?”

“Yes. Scrambled egg, toast and coffee.” Bernie had been sat in what passed for the ‘departure lounge’, trying not to get too frustrated at having had to hurry through the check-in and security in order to then have to sit doing nothing. “Though I have no idea how they got it through Security to me.” There was not much in the way of catering choices evident, and she didn’t think a mug of hot coffee would have made it through security either.

“They didn’t.” Alex sat down on the end of the smaller of the two couches, which fortunately didn’t have any suitcases on it, and tucked her feet up underneath her. “There’s a canteen on the runway side of security for the maintenance staff - you were temporarily given an honorary membership.”

“And waitress service.” Bernie was smiling as she remembered her impromptu maintenance inspection of their plane on the way down when she’d had a bacon sandwich delivered to her by
Corporal Smith. “Your doing?”

“Luce organised it - I merely confirmed that you were sufficiently house-trained to politely accept and eat any food put in front of you as long as it didn’t have pepperoni in it.”

“You giving away all my secrets?” Bernie’s tone was teasing, and Alex could hear the smile in her voice even though she couldn’t see it.

“Only the ones that make your life easier...you okay?” Alex had learned a long time ago that Bernie was extremely skillful at deflection and distraction.

“Yes…” Bernie pivoted the chair from side to side, watching the flash of the desk lamp reflected in her watch glass dance across the far wall in time with her movement. “Long day.” There was a knock at the door of the office. “Hang on a sec.” Bernie put her hand over the mouthpiece after hearing Alex’s agreement. “ENTER!” The weariness she felt as she wondered what this latest interruption might be about to bring was pushed aside when she saw who it was. “Everything alright?”

“Yes Colonel.” Corporal John Smith stood at ease when she waved vaguely in his direction, having now disturbed her often enough to know when she was wanting the short-cut through the military protocols that came with disturbing someone in her position in their office. “The flight’s taken off, watched it go myself.”

“No surprises?”

“No Ma’am. Boarded without incident and didn’t disembark. I watched with Jeffers.” He’d referred to his friend by name, forgetting she didn’t yet know who was who on the Base.

“Jeffers?”

“Base Commander’s aide. We, uh, play football together.”

“Midfield?” Bernie had never played much sport herself, but she’d put back together enough injured sportsmen and women, be it genuinely amateur or elite level, to learn to judge a person’s tactical mindset and where they might end up in a side.
“Centre Backs usually.”

“Ah.” She could picture the two being quietly efficient, setting up the attacks and counter attacks, holding the defensive line to prevent disaster and generally not seeking glory or gaining recognition on the scoresheet.

“And your temporary Quarters are set up Colonel. This building, third floor, room 6.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a keyring that had a door key and a swipe card attached to it, putting it on the edge of the desk for her. “Stairs by the main door, swipe card does the landings, key does the room door.”

“Thanks.”

“Good night Colonel.”

Moments later, the office door closed behind him, Bernie sank back into the relative comfort of the desk chair and uncovered the phone mouthpiece. “Al?”

“Still here. You’ve got a bed then?”

“Apparently so.” Bernie felt her shoulders unstiffen a fraction now she knew her difficult problem was in the air and en route to the safe and not especially gentle hands of Peter Parker and the rigours of military discipline. “Plane’s in the air too, Smith watched it for me.”

“You were that worried?” Alex didn’t know what exactly it was that had prompted such swift and decisive action by Bernie and hadn’t tried to ask, respecting Bernie’s position in command. But it was one thing to recognise there were things that Bernie would be involved with that were not going to be shareable, quite another to ignore any possible risk or stress Bernie might be being exposed to and not have concern for her.

“A little.”. Bernie was trying to be honest with Alex and herself as much as she could be, but old habits were hard to change. “I hadn’t given it any thought until I was flying up here and taking Turry through what she needed to know.” She pinched the bridge of her nose, wishing it would do something to help her headache. “Addiction can make people very unpredictable."
"Yeah..." Alex, like Bernie, had treated her fair share of patients who had either medical complications as a result of their addiction or were physically and emotionally unpredictable during their treatment due to being under the influence of whatever they were addicted to. "... I'm guessing that it wasn't alcoholism."

"Mmm, no." Bernie let her hand drop from her face, but kept her eyes closed.

"Drugs then." Alex was mostly just thinking aloud, keeping Bernie company while she took a metaphorical breath and regrouped for the next challenge. "That's why he didn't want us treating Harry in the Medical Centre? Because you'd see the missing drugs?"

"Sort of, yes." He'd been a bit smarter than that, taking the drugs himself but making some of the withdrawals from the Pharmacy in the name of personnel. "And the fact that he had minimal surgical training but the resupply was for surgical packs."

"We didn't need to use the ones from the resupply..." Alex remembered that they'd needed to break into the cargo Bernie was overseeing to get at the optimum drugs for putting Harry under a light sedation while Bernie switched him over to a proper field tracheostomy tube, but now she thought about it, if they were using drugs he'd supposedly already used in treatments then they'd have been struggling to find the cannulas and other items that they needed to administer them. "I'd assumed that we were using drugs intended for the Falklands."

"Some were, but not all." Bernie opened her eyes. "He was told once I was in the air that he was being recalled to the UK and to go pack his essentials."

"But you still had to tell him." Alex now understood why Bernie had been so drained of energy last night, and how she'd managed to be uncharacteristically 'switched on' so early this morning. She'd known what she was returning to and, even if she hadn't consciously acknowledged the risks involved, her subconscious had and was preparing accordingly.

"Yes. In an office just off departures, straight from the tarmac." Bernie smiled as she recalled what had happened. "Seems my reputation had preceded me and there were some of the larger specimens from Aircraft Maintenance just happening to have a tea break right outside the office door, just in case I needed back-up."

"Good." There were always a few tensions between officers and soldiers, understandable if the soldiers had generally only experienced the not so great ones, but once you had a reputation for being one of the good ones, they became rather protective. "Did he go quietly?" The brief recollection of him that she had left her not very confident.
"Yes. Think he was relieved actually."

"Let me guess, you recommended that he get the addiction help as a priority and only work through all the charges once that was underway in the UK?"

"Something like that." He'd be facing some serious charges from both the RAF and the General Medical Council. "I'm no expert but I think someone missed something during his Fitness Exam."
She'd had a look at his record on the flight up and found she was somewhat surprised that he'd been given such a remote and isolated posting given some of the 'red flags' she was seeing that now, especially in the current era where they were trying to be mental health aware and recognise personnel were human as well as military. "It was like I was suddenly back in the old Army."

“When feelings were unacceptable?"

“Pretty much. As an officer it was expected I wouldn’t have them, but then they’d remember I was a woman and assume I was family liaison.”

“Ouch.” Alex loved Bernie, with everything she had, but that was a mental image she was struggling to form. “I love you but…”

“…compassion is breaking the news by telegram rather than ask her.”

“Who said that?” Alex heard the humour in Bernie's tone and could guess from their conversation that this was something that had happened many, many years ago, but it was still incredibly blunt and harsh. It was also, knew Alex, probably fairly accurate at the time too, with Bernie's bedside manner still nearer to businesslike than cuddly.

“Algie actually, to Colonel…” Bernie tried to remember his name. “…somebody, can’t remember his name, probably long dead now. He couldn’t grasp why I wasn’t in the WRAC, never mind going to be operating on him.”

“Rack?” Alex was hearing it as a word not an acronym.

“Women’s Royal Army Corps - all Corps were all male apart from Medical, Dental and Vet.” It
was these little bits of odd military history that Alex knew from stories told when she was at Sandhurst to help her understand the Army's past, but which for Bernie were a part of her service history that occasionally reminded Alex of their age difference. “Technically chaplains too, but they were even more troubled about the idea of women amongst them than the Army, was so it was a theoretical integration.” The nurses had all been mixed together then, and still were in the Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps.

"Poor bloke." Alex still didn't like the man they'd come up against yesterday when they had been hoping to get a third doctor to help them but instead had met aggressive resistance that they had only really been able to push past because of who Bernie was, although knowing that they had some paratroopers helping them did also help. She did, however, know he wasn't the first doctor, civilian or military, to struggle with the pressure on them and for that she was sympathetic to his situation, especially if Bernie's hunch was right. "But even sober I think he's probably still an arse."

"I think you're right," agreed Bernie, finally realising that Alex was talking about the present and not that Colonel with the broken ankle all those years ago. "Tell me about your day? You already know the place better than I do."

"Only for another couple of days, then you'll know all its secrets." Alex had no idea how she managed it, but Bernie always managed to find out all the quiet corners and useful shortcuts quicker than anyone else she'd ever met. "And I'm going to be in the med centre for most of the next two days covering clinics for Tory." Today had been uncharacteristically gentle, with Alex seeing two patients for follow up, both of whom were accompanying family members to service personnel. "So I better find some clean uniform..." She mostly muttered this last bit to herself.

"Grab anything of mine if it helps." Bernie was still wanting to apologise for leaving Alex on her own but knew better than to try and say anything directly. “Captain Roeburn find you then?”

“Yes, came across when Ben and Patch came to say goodbye to Harry just before he went home.” Alex uncurled her legs and curled them under her again, the switch helping her to stave off pins and needles for a while longer. “He had been on an earlier flight down, but remembered us both from Bastion.”

“Oh?” Bernie had tried, off and on, to see if she could recall anything about him, but had come up blank, suggesting she’d not ‘met’ him in the operating theatre. “I don’t think I’ve operated on him?”

“No...do you remember Mikey Granter?”
“Yes.” Bernie closed her eyes, suddenly able to hear the distinctive sound of the mortars as the forward operating base they’d been visiting was attacked. “Did I tell you I met little Alex Granter?”

“No…” Alex was lost in her own memories of that day, trying to piece together enough to work out who Bernie was talking about. “But Fletch did. You only mentioned John…”

“I know.” Bernie could clearly picture the tall, proud Paratrooper sat with the baby in his lap, his quiet voice telling stories that helped his niece understand she was safe while they waited for Serena and Raf to work out what was happening to Jess, Sommingsby’s sister. “Little Alex was very…”

“Chubby baby?” Alex knew Bernie didn’t feel remotely comfortable attempting ‘baby talk’ and was generally very reluctant to get too close to any that they came across, but she could calm a baby or reassure a small child faster and more effectively than almost anyone else Alex had met, she just did it in a very ‘Bernie’ way.

“Yes. What’s this got to do with Captain Roeburn?”

“As Lieutenant Roeburn he was their section officer. You probably wouldn’t remember him…”

“…he held up the fluids.” Bernie did remember him, sort of. “I just remember you telling him to focus and keep his arms up.” That would have been Alex’s standard instruction to anyone pressed into assist them, with gravity helping to ensure the fluids dripped into veins and arteries.

“Apparently you told him there was no shame in vomiting as long as he avoided you, me and the casualty.”

“I don’t remember that.” Bernie laughed as she thought about it some more. “But it certainly sounds like me.” Unfortunately, her laughter was interrupted by a yawn, which then also set Alex off. “You should get some sleep.”

“Pot, kettle’s on line one for you.” Alex didn’t disagree with Bernie’s assessment, but the same was true for the surgeon, only she was also three hours ahead of Alex. “It’s what, half eleven with you?”
“Thanks for the reminder…” Bernie had looked at her watch, which she hadn’t bothered resetting from Falklands time yet, so then had to double check her mental arithmetic against the clock on the wall. “But yes. I’ve got Sick Parade in eight hours give or take, with Turry.”

“Both of you?” Alex was looking at her own watch - she had her own clinic duties tomorrow, but being three hours behind her partner, also had a greater chance of getting some sleep, once she’d done some more unpacking mind. “Expecting a rush once word gets out that there’s a new MO?”

“Something like that.” She was too tired to explain to Alex what her real concern was, namely needing to find the patients whose records suggested they’d had minor procedures or drug courses that might be false. “I miss you.”

“I’m not far away,” Alex curled into a tighter ball, the phone up against her ear, like she was wrapped around as much of Bernie as she could currently reach. “Only three sleeps.” Now she understood more about what Bernie was having to deal with, she also understood why last night she’d been sleeping with a very fidgety Bernie, which was quite uncharacteristic of her. “Which we were expecting,” she reminded gently, knowing that her temporary orders would be disrupting their planned routine before it had even begun, but also knowing that Bernie’s atypical display of ‘clinginess’ was just the usually stoic surgeon’s reaction to quite extreme amounts of pressure and change.

“I know.” Bernie rubbed the bridge of her nose, now unable to ignore her headache. “Have you heard from them?” ‘Them’ in this context was the island’s only hospital, located in the capital Port Stanley. It was only an hour’s drive away from the Base, but with the Falklands weather to contend with, it was not a sensible daily commute for a 9-5 job, never mind Alex with night shifts and emergency calls. Therefore, Alex was also getting a small place to live in Stanley as part of her hospital work, which both she and Bernie hoped to split their time between.

“Sort of.” Alex uncurled enough to look at her watch again, the time in Ascension making her try to work out how to tell Bernie a succinct enough version that the surgeon got some sleep soon, but without making it so brief Bernie launched into a round of twenty questions with her. “Harry’s parents were still here...they’re somehow connected.”

“To the hospital?” Bernie knew that they’d inadvertently made quite an impression on the local community with their willingness to look after one of its sons mid-flight, but she hadn’t got as far as working out who exactly they’d helped.

“Not sure, but they got a phone call from my civilian boss-to-be asking about Harry and I then spoke to him about starting two weeks late.” The plan had been for Alex to have a bit of a break when they arrived, since Bernie was having to start straight away, so her start date as ‘Dr Dawson’ was in four weeks’ time - with the Army reclaiming her for six weeks, that plan was no longer
going to work. “But there’s a new plan and almost everyone’s happy with it.”

“Who’s not happy with it?” Bernie was starting to lose her battle with her yawns, so she restricted herself to just the one question, promising herself that she’d do better when she was more awake.

“No one, just one person’s not seen it yet, so they’re an ‘unknown’ rather than an ‘unhappy’.”

“Ah. They going to be a problem do you think?” Unknown to her, Bernie’s obliviousness was making Alex smile but also realise how important it was to get her to go find her bed for the night.

“I’ve always found her to be very reasonable.” Alex could practically hear the frown Bernie was currently sending her way as she tried to work out who this reasonable woman was that Alex now knew on the Base. "You, goof."

"Me?” Bernie forced herself to stand up and, trapping the phone between her ear and shoulder, set about shoving her paperwork into a heap that would fit into her briefcase. “Why do I need to be involved?”

"Because you need to agree to the Duty Pattern. But it’s weeks away Bern, go sleep.”

“Sorry…” Another yawn meant she almost dropped the phone. “...explain it to me again tomorrow? When I’m more awake?”

“Promise. Go sleep…” Alex decided to take the end of the phone call as a sign she should get up and do some more unpacking - she’d put together a plan that should see her have most of their stuff unpacked by the time Bernie returned, but it relied on her doing a little bit each day after her shifts. “…love you.”

“Love you too…” Bernie managed to close her briefcase and, as an afterthought, open it again and shove her beret in it, before closing it again. “…briefcase and pack...right, I’ve got everything. You sure you’re okay working tomorrow? Because I could…” Bernie’s brain had kicked back into gear now she wasn’t trying to concentrate on packing up as well as talking to Alex, and ‘Colonel Wolfe’ resurfacing.

“I’m more worried about you.” Alex could all too easily picture Bernie starting to puzzle her way through a different shift pattern and solution that would no doubt see Bernie double up her shifts in
order to spare Alex some. “...Stop worrying about me and go find your bed.” She may only be a Captain and her lover now a Colonel, but love outranks everything and it was there, softening the whip of command in her voice as the firm nudge was given.

“Night Al...love you.”

Click.

“Goof.” Chuckling at the abruptness of Bernie’s departure - it wasn’t the first time that Bernie had taken a while to be convinced it was alright to end the call, only for it to happen so promptly she couldn’t actually say goodbye, Alex headed for the kitchen - unpacking went so much more smoothly with a mug of tea.
Chapter 17

“After you…” Bernie paused in the aisle of the aircraft and with a bright smile gestured for her seatmate to precede her off the aircraft. “…Sir.”

“It’s going to be like that is it Colonel?” came the equally good humoured reply as he pulled on his beret and stepped out as encouraged. “What if I was trying to be chivalrous?”

“Chivalry’s for civvy street, or have you forgotten that particular gem Brigadier?” Bernie followed her old friend’s example and pulled on her own beret, wishing she had some gloves to hand as she turned the corner at the galley and got a gust of strong, cold wind.

“Christ, this is fresh.” Nathan blinked a couple of times as he adjusted to the sharpness of the wind, still struggling to believe that he was going to have the luxury of completing this posting with one of his best friends in the Army with him. In public and on duty they’d be Brigadier Putnam and Colonel Wolfe, but it would be lovely to have a true friend in the same hemisphere. Plus it was proving to be the dealbreaker for getting his kids out to visit - turned out penguins weren’t quite enough of an incentive to get them to agree to visit, but penguins and ‘Aunt Bernie’ was tipping the scale in favour of a visit.

“Chicken.” Bernie was finding the temperature drop between the sunny Ascension Island lunchtime and early evening at Mount Pleasant just as bracing, but decades of friendship and long-standing teasing meant she’d have to lose at least two layers of clothing and be approaching hypothermia before admitting to anything resembling even mild discomfort.

“That’s Brigadier Chicken to you…” They were now walking down the steps to the tarmac, Bernie on his shoulder so able to hear his shout as the wind carried it back to her. “…that’s some wind chill.”

“But it’s not snowing.” Bernie shifted her pack into a slightly more squarely settled position against her back as her boots hit the tarmac, missing his look of ‘yeah, right’ that he directed at her. “…and you’ve not got a casualty on a stretcher.” She looked at him in time to catch his rather confused expression. “When I got here last time - it was snowing.”

“You took a stretcher down that?” He’d accepted the snowing part - weather affected everyone and everything, and he knew she’d flown in with a casualty, but had failed to appreciate the stretcher aspect. “You lot really are ‘in arduis fidelis,” he said, quoting the RAMC motto which she’d repeatedly bashed him over the head with when they’d both been doing their Officer Training Courses at Sandhurst.
He’d been on the regular officer course when she’d appeared for her shorter course, and like most of his fellow male cadets, hadn’t been overly pleasant at first to the female non-combat officer cadets, but Bernie Wolfe had given as good as she got and by the time she was commissioned (before him) there was mutual respect. That respect, like most of his contemporaries, only grew when they went out into their regiments and discovered that wherever they went as Infantry, so too went the medics. Compared to some of what he knew both she and other medics had done in their career, in arduis fidelis - faithful in adversity - was something of an understatement.

“It helps when the stretcher bearers are utrinque paratus .” Falling into step with him, Berne waited for him to recognise the Parachute Regiment motto and recall its translation of ‘ready for anything’. It was a game they played over the years, weaving the regimental mottos into conversation and testing each other’s ability to remember them.

“How do you know me sir?” He could barely remember some of the nicknames he’d acquired during his service career, nevermind have others remember them twenty years later, which was testament to how highly she was regarded by both medics and military.

“Still Doc Wolfe.” Bernie saw the existing Force Commander coming out of the terminal building to meet his successor. After her rather stormy introduction to him last time they met, she had no desire to cross paths with him again, nor let him see that she was on good terms with his successor. “I’ll leave you to your welcoming committee Sir.”

“Thank you.” He wasn’t entirely keen on being abandoned, and she could still read him like a book - while he was maintaining a superficially confident ‘senior officer’ disposition, she knew from their conversation on the flight that he was supposed to be dining in the Mess with his predecessor tonight and then basically glued to his hip for the next three days while the handover happened. Pride coming before a fall, and with Brigadiers not really permitted anything more destabilising than a slight stumble, he’d maintain gritted teeth during his handover from one of his less likable fellow officers.

“Please don’t forget your appointment Sir.” Bernie’s tone had shifted to her most dutiful ‘yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir’ voice, causing him to smile - he hadn’t heard her address senior officers like that since Sandhurst. “Even Force Commanders must complete medical registration.” She was fairly certain he’d recognised the lifeline she was offering him, but made it extra obvious to him just to be certain.

“Of course Colonel, must lead by example.” He tried to temper his grin to a suitably ‘Brigadier’ like one, rather than the naughty cadet grin her poe-faced ‘good officer’ routine was actually triggering. “Remind me what time I’m expected?”
“At your convenience Sir, either Captain Dawson or myself will be able to complete it for you before you go into dinner.”

“Thank you Colonel, I’ll be along to see you and the Captain shortly. Thank you for the accommodation.” He’d not immediately spotted her offer of an ‘out’ before dinner, but had not only cottoned on fast, but was also keen to meet his friend’s new partner.

“Sir.” Bernie nodded her head in acknowledgement of the current Force Commander who was now definitely in conversational range, before returning her focus to Nathan. “Our pleasure Sir.” She snapped off a salute and, at his nod which she knew was also a silent ‘thank you’ for giving him an escape option for some of the time before dinner, left the two Senior Officers to get acquainted.

Having managed to get as far as her new office without anyone stopping her to ask for a signature or to help with a patient, Bernie dumped her bags, removed her bulky but warm outer jacket and set off again for the small kitchen area. Assuming she’d remembered the centre's clinic schedule, Alex was running the last clinic of the day and it finished in a few minutes if she wasn't running late. Passing the waiting room on her way to the kitchen, the empty area confirmed that Alex was probably mostly running to schedule and, after the last clinic patient was dealt with, they'd have a few minutes before Nathan could drop by. Humming distractedly, Bernie set about filling up the kettle with fresh water before then tackling the challenge of finding some clean mugs that she could make tea in, assuming she could also find some tea.

"Tea bags are in the coffee jar."

"Thanks." Bernie was half reaching for the aforementioned coffee jar when she registered who it was that had given her this timely intelligence. Tea making abandoned, she turned around and leaned back against the counter edge. "Hi."

"Hello…” Alex mirrored her partner's pose, only she was leaning against the doorframe.

"You okay?” Bernie couldn't do anything to stop her joy at seeing her lover from being clearly visible in her expression, with tired eyes brightening.

“Better now.”
“Oh?” Bernie tried to think of what could have happened during the clinics that Alex had taken. “Too much small talk?” That was what Bernie had found the hardest to endure during her own stints doing long clinics these last couple of days, even though she’d ended up spending most of them doing minor procedures after the first morning.

“You missing the sedation?” Alex wasn’t disagreeing with Bernie’s observation, though she wasn’t finding the adjustment as stark as she imagined Bernie was - most shifts Alex spent the majority of her time engaging with her patients, with the conversation on non-medical topics as much as medical ones as she tried to put nervous patients at ease, or just passed the time while waiting for surgeons to turn up. Bernie, by contrast, generally didn’t get to talk with her patients much outside their specific questions to do with the surgery, but seeing non-surgical patients would be very different.

“Mmm… missed the anaesthetist more.” Bernie’s instinctive response was out of her mouth before she’d thought it through, and her cheeks pinked slightly when she realised what she’d said, hoping her relief at being back with her lover wasn’t confused with a neediness.

“That’s a relief…” Alex pushed off the doorframe and crossed the kitchen to Bernie in four long, easy strides, the small bundle of nerves she’d noticed gathering in the pit of her stomach as the day wore on immediately disappearing. “...I missed the surgeon…” She stopped a tantalisingly close but still decorously ‘distant’ few inches from her, uncertainty taking over again.

“Talk to me?”

“What do we do?”

“Do?” Bernie thought she knew what Alex was thinking about, having been reflecting on the impact Alex’s temporary orders had on them over the last couple of days in between everything else she was thinking about. Unfortunately she was also acutely aware that the Army was a hierarchy based organisation even outside of the immediate lines of command, and what had been an issue when they were Major and Captain was still with them as Captain and Colonel. "Come here?” invited Bernie, opening her arms, hoping Alex took her hint and accepted her hug, which she did.

"I was worried…” mumbled Alex, sinking into the reassuringly familiar warmth of Bernie, her arms wrapping around her body as she instinctively buried her face into the crook of her lover's neck. She didn't want to tell Bernie about the dream she'd had, where she'd been forced to move into barracks, the glare of the current Base Commander bright as he took Bernie's rank slide from her uniform. Even without the added issue of her marriage, Bernie was still the senior officer, and
they were still both women.

"Nightmare?" Bernie still remembered the remembered far too vividly waking up to Alex being in the throes of a nightmare that first night in Holby, her t-shirt soaked with sweat as her subconscious tortured her with what might have been for Bernie had her neck surgery failed to succeed. The nightmare hadn’t stopped immediately, but with time and love it had reduced in both frequency and intensity, though Bernie had known that didn’t mean it wouldn’t reappear at some point in the future if events triggered it. She suspected that this time it wasn’t that particular nightmare though, but a new one, fueled by something Alex was still uncertain about in their new situation.

“Mmm.” Alex’s affirmative hum was muffled by Bernie’s uniform shirt, but she felt Alex’s head nodding against her neck and took that as confirmation, plus as a hint that ‘yes/no’ questions were probably best until Alex’s grip on her relaxed a bit.

“Same one?”

“Mm-nnn.” The pressure from Alex’s nose was more of a side to side shift than the last ‘nod’, making Bernie decide that this was a ‘no’.

“Oh Al…” Bernie pulled her into an even tighter hug, her left hand moving up to start stroking her neck as she tried to provide as much physical reassurance as she could. "...when?" she asked quietly after a couple of moments, once she felt some tension shift out of her lover's body.

"Second night." Days of the week had yet to regain any meaningful context for Alex, with time still being measured relative to their arrival in the Falklands and Bernie being away. The first night she'd been too tired to really think about anything except the unpacking she still wanted to do before she left for the Medical Centre in the morning. The next two nights she'd not been as lucky, and she was starting to dread tonight, as she'd be disrupting Bernie's sleep too, unless…

"Don't even think about it." Bernie's firm refusal caught Alex by surprise and she lifted her head up so she could study her lover's face. "I'll follow you into the other bed," she teased, seeing Alex's tentative answering smile as confirmation she'd guessed Alex's half formed plan correctly. "Unless it's my snoring?"

"Snuffling." Alex found it rather cute, and something she'd become rather accustomed to even before they were able to be open about sharing a bed together. “Not snoring.”
“Promise me you’ll tell me if I ever start snoring?”

“Promise.” It wasn’t something Alex could ask Bernie to promise in return since she already knew she sometimes snored if she slept on her back. Fortunately, when sharing a bed with Bernie she was usually sleeping on her side because that was how they ‘fit’ together, so at least Bernie’s exposure to her snoring was minimal.

“Good.” Pleased that they’d reestablished that early relationship ground-rule, Bernie carefully moved onto the more delicate topic that was now needing to be addressed. “Did anything happen? While I was away?” She’d realised within moments of her meeting him that the existing Force Commander was not a fan of hers, though whether it was because of her specifically, any Medical Officer that was senior enough to not be easily pushed around, or the whole of the Medical Services because he’d not been able to overrule the broader plan that her posting was part of, she didn’t know and didn’t care to know for her own benefit. But Alex was different, and Bernie would be even more unimpressed with him if he’d decided to make Alex’s life anything other than perfectly smooth and professionally calm.

“No. I just...panicked myself.” She felt stupid saying it now, but it had been just that, a panicked realisation that this was Bernie’s team she was locuming in, the team they’d been so careful to ensure she didn’t end up in again. “And not going into breakfast with the others.” Bernie’s blank look made her guilty again - this was supposed to be Bernie’s posting, with Alex ‘just’ there as a civilian partner, at least for the first few months. “I was invited by Sam Fung and David Hythe to have breakfast with them, that first morning you were away, in the Mess.”

“Any good?”

“Food or company?”

“Both, but food first.” Knowing whether the Mess was half decent or not was an important starting point for any posting, and breakfast was usually the safest meal.

“Good, but I still prefer your scrambled eggs.”

“I’ll make them for you tomorrow morning then.” Bernie angled her head just enough so she could rub her no longer cold nose against Alex’s warm one, bringing the start of a smile to Alex’s lips. “How was the company?”
“They were fine - I’d just been expecting the two doctors but it was more than that, with some of the other medical centre staff there too.” They’d been a lively bunch, not that different to what a ward social might produce back at Holby, with nurses, doctors, therapists and facilities staff all mixed up and talking about anything but medicine.

Bernie could hear the unspoken ‘but’ that clearly came next in Alex’s story, but she refrained from pressing her for details, instead deciding that a little distraction with a kiss was called for, plus she could now feel the numbness had gone from her cheeks, so was confident her lips would have thawed too. She started with just a gentle brush of her lips, carefully tracing along Alex’s slightly swollen lower lip that only such an intimate study would reveal, confirming quite how often Alex must have caught it between her teeth as she worried her way through the last few days.

“You’re trying to distract me…” mumbled Alex through a smile when she realised what Bernie was up to, not moving away from the kisses.

“Is it working?” Bernie moved from lips to jaw, determined not to hurry in her loving exploration.

“Yes…” Everything she’d been worrying about was still there, starting with the slightly delayed reaction from some of the medics when she’d declined their offer to come collect her from her quarters so she didn’t have to go into breakfast on her own. Despite Bernie’s directness, it seemed some of them still hadn’t quite twigged that being Bernie’s partner meant living with Bernie in the small bungalow on the Base she’d been assigned for the duration of her tour, rather than in the officer’s quarters where those on four and six month deployments had bedrooms. That in turn had triggered the return of the small knot of anxiety that Bernie’s Army career would suffer since she was the more senior officer generally and Alex’s CO specifically - Alex had never had quite the same concern about Bernie’s marriage which, when they were in Afghanistan, had been literally thousands of miles away.

The one thing she hadn’t worried about was Bernie’s love, which was now being wrapped around her and helping her remember how it was enabling her come to this island community as their doctor because she was here, on this Base as Bernie’s partner. Being a doctor to the military community here was just a final last minute quirk of events, something she was glad to do and rationally knew was again in full view and with the total support of the Army, no matter how many frowns she thought were sent in her direction by the current Base Commander. “....oh!”

“Al?” Startled by Alex’s startled reaction, Bernie pulled back and waited for some hint as to what was causing her lover’s sudden withdrawl, not wanting to pressure her in any way.

“Your ears.”
“What about my ears?”

“They’re freezing!”

“My ears are still getting used to being out.”

Alex’s groan and playful swat to Bernie’s shoulder clued Bernie into the fact that she’d said something that sounded like a joke, albeit accidentally, but it took her a moment to think back to what she’d said and work it out.

“That was unintentional.” She’d been referring to her hair being tied back in its regulation low neat(ish) bun and her beret not covering her ears, but could see what Alex had ‘heard’.

“I know…” Alex settled back into Bernie’s embrace, deciding that the easiest way to avoid the shock of her lover’s cold ears again was to just focus on her lips. “...I’d love you even if it wasn’t.”

Bernie had originally found her way to the kitchen in the hope that a mug of tea would help her to warm up from the sharp cold shock of the wind, but, as the kettle announced it had boiled she wasn’t thinking about tea, or her ears that were bright pink from the cold, but then her ears weren’t cold anymore, not after the kiss Alex had just given her.

“Your ears are still pink…”

“Oh?” Bernie gave herself a quick mental ‘once-over’, not wanting to let go of Alex, who was far more restorative than her planned for tea. “Not from the cold though.” She teasingly bumped the end of Alex’s nose with her own, trying to keep the lighter mood. “What happened at breakfast?”

“Nothing really, I got there first and some were a bit late - they’d been waiting for me.”

“Waiting for you?” It took Bernie a second to recall the habits and routines that were instinctively re-formed and followed at the start of every new posting when she’d been shuttled between barracks as a Captain. “Oh, the ‘make sure you don’t get lost’ tour guides?” She’d never felt the need to loiter in the corridor for the newest person so she could show them the way to breakfast. “I always left extra early to avoid them when I was in Barracks. It’s not like we can’t read maps.” She could understand, especially thanks to inter-service cynicism, members of the Royal Navy and
RAF struggling to read a land-based, ground level map, just as she’d not trust an Army Officer to
navigate the English Channel or find an airport runway from hundreds of miles away, but the
Army was land based and they all had to do plenty of far more complicated map reading than your
basic Barracks plan required. “Didn’t realise that was still a thing.”

“Seems to be, but I wasn’t there.”

“Oh good grief!” Bernie finally understood what the issue had been - clearly her fairly blunt
explanation to her new Staff hadn’t actually been blunt enough. “Do I need to send out change of
address cards?”

“No, the ones who hadn’t got it now…” Alex’s sense had been that it had been a genuine
mistake rather than anything more discriminatory or negative. “…I don’t think they’d realised you
weren’t in the main Quarters either.” It sounded such a silly misunderstanding now she was
describing it all to Bernie, but it had been enough to unsettle her and create the small crack through
which the nightmare could work itself into her sleep. “I probably wouldn’t have in their
position.”

“True.” Movement in the doorway caught Bernie’s eye and she beckoned for Luce to come in as
she let her hands drop from Alex’s sides but didn’t make any effort to otherwise put distance
between them, being of the view that this was off-duty time and her assistant was going to have to
get used to her hugging Alex eventually anyway, so she wasn’t going to pretend otherwise for these
six weeks of temporary duty. “We’re just making tea. Do you want a mug?”

“Oh, thank you Colonel.”

“Relax Luce, Alex is going to make it since she’s clearly already told you about my tea-making.”

“I am?” Alex’s cheeky question earned her a bump on the nose from Bernie’s and a quickly
brushed kiss on her cheek as the surgeon stepped out of her way so she was now the nearest to the
kettle, answering her own question. “I am,” she agreed, looking over her shoulder at her new
friend. “Milk and two?”

“Please. And the new Commander’s here, Brigadier Putnam?” Luce hadn’t been expecting him to
come into the Medical Centre for a couple of days at least, so was rather mortified to discover him
standing in the otherwise deserted reception area when she’d returned from her meeting. “He
insisted he would go to the waiting room not your office Ma’am.”
“I should hope so, he’s been house trained long enough…” Seeing Luce’s expression shift rapidly between various different versions of trying not to show any reaction to Bernie’s rather unusual response to the news that they now had the in-coming Commander in the Medical Centre, Alex prodded Bernie sharply in the shoulder. “…what was that for?”

“Scaring Luce before she’s used to you.” Alex jerked her head in the direction of Bernie’s assistant, knowing Bernie had picked up on Alex’s deliberate and repeated use of the lady’s name. “Be nice, and try to do a proper introduction.”

“Nathan Putnam and I were at Sandhurst together, a long time ago…” Bernie felt another gentle prod be surreptitiously delivered by Alex to her lower back and correctly understood it to mean her introduction and explanation was still incomplete. Since Alex was much better at this sort of thing than she was, Bernie was happy to follow orders, even if they were rather unconventionally given. “…I was his first MO after he’d commissioned, there were rather more of us out in Germany then.” She didn’t want to outright say it was over twenty years ago, but that was going to be fairly obvious to anyone who met the triplets when they came to visit. “And I delivered his three kids.”

“They were all born in Germany?” Luce had, like Alex, never had a long posting to Germany, but she’d transited through it for a few days at a time on a couple of occasions. But being there long enough for three children to be born seemed very long.

“She’s not told you they’re triplets,” volunteered Alex, rolling her eyes at Bernie’s shrug and innocent expression. “I did warn you she’s hopeless at introductions and telling stories.”

“Triplets?” Luce blinked, trying to imagine what it would have been like growing up. “I’ve got two sisters who are twins, but triplets? That’s...a lot of nappies.”

“It was, and midnight feeds…” This time Bernie didn’t need to be prompted by Alex to fill in the gap, knowing that she needed to fill in a couple more blanks. “I’m their godmother, when Nathan had to go away on exercise I helped his wife out.” Bernie swallowed thickly, remembering his wife, who had become as close a friend as Nathan was: Izzy had been Nathan’s school sweetheart and moved with him from Guyana where he’d grown up to the UK and then Germany as his Army Career had required. Bernie had missed Izzy so much since her death from cancer five years ago, even more so when she’d started to develop feelings for Alex.

“So he’s here for registration?” Luce now understood the ‘house trained’ comment better - as Commander he could and would have reasons to meet with the SMO in her office, but registration was something everyone had to do, and everyone who saw a medic waited their turn rather than barging into the treatment rooms. “I’ll go start him on his paperwork then Ma’am.” She appreciated the Colonel not being prepared to give the new Commander too much special treatment, and appreciated the Commander for respecting that - that he’d turned up out of clinic.
hours for a one-off registration hadn’t seemed that unreasonable though she still thought it a bit presumptive of him expecting his friend to just drop everything and sort it out now.

“My fault, I told him on the plane he could hide here with us before he had to go play nice with the grown-ups for dinner.” Bernie looked suitably sheepish and apologetic as she realised his sudden appearance would have caught her assistant completely by surprise. “I didn’t think he’d be this quick and beat me to you though…”

“He’s not.” Alex had glanced at the clock on the wall as she made the tea for the three of them, a fourth mug waiting for Bernie to tell her how her friend took his tea. “Which is my fault.” Alex hadn’t meant to unravel as much as she did when she first saw Bernie, having hoped to either not mention it at all or wait until they were back at their home, but that plan had gone straight out of her mind when she’d seen Bernie in the quiet, otherwise empty kitchen.

“No-one’s fault Ma’am.” Luce quickly thought through everything that she might need to start his registration based on what she’d just learned. “You’ll be doing the registration Ma’am?”

“I’d rather Al did it…” Bernie would have done it if she’d been on her own, but this was too good an opportunity for two important people in her life to meet, with the added bonus that Nathan would be on his best behaviour given it was his medical. Plus there was a rather worrying heap of work already accumulated on Bernie’s desk and if she did Nathan’s registration then she’d have to tackle that afterwards, which would make the day horribly long. “…if you don’t mind?”

“No milk or sugar.” She’d remembered the no milk part, but the amount of sugar had escaped her memory, and it was clear from Alex’s look that she wasn’t entirely buying Bernie’s confident, prompt answer. “I sat next to him on the plane.”

“Will his wife and children be needing to register?” Although not with him now, Luce could set up the files for his family at the same time as his so they were all connected and ready for when they came by for their own registrations.

“He’s widowed.” Izzy’s cancer had been rare, aggressive and inoperable, although that hadn’t helped Bernie cope with not being able to see her friend one last time, plus no surgeon copes well with being told something’s inoperable, especially when they can’t see for themselves. “And the
trips are university age so need temporary registrations when they do come.”

“I’ll get started on his file now Colonel.” Luce was glad she’d asked the Colonel and not raised his family with the Brigadier. “I’ll take him the tea on my way.”

“Thanks Luce, tell him I’ll be there in a minute?”

“Yes Colonel.”

“You going to introduce us?” teased Alex reached up and put her hand on her partner’s forehead, then on the back of her neck, as if feeling for a temperature.

“Funny.” Bernie stole another slow, leisurely kiss, savouring how right it felt, being here with Alex and Nathan, knowing Algie was supporting them from the UK and even the deployed infantry were ‘friendly’.

“Mmm...you got much more work you need to do tonight?”

“You mean aside from the files you put in my in tray?” There wasn’t any sting in Bernie’s words, being very aware of her duties, but she made doubly certain Alex didn’t take offence by sneaking another brief kiss. “If I have, I’ll get it done while you’re seeing Nathan, then we can go home.”

“Dinner’s already half done…” Alex didn’t think Bernie wanted to eat in the Mess after all her travelling, but had made something that could keep if she did.

“Sounds perfect.”
Chapter 18

“It’s…” Bernie paused to wipe up the last of her curry with her naan bread, still in some degree of shock as to how much unpacking Alex had managed to do while she was away. “…amazing Al…”

“My cooking’s not that bad!” Neither of them were brilliant cooks, with years of long duty shifts and Army mass catering giving them limited opportunity and inclination to develop into cordon bleu cooks.

“Is there seconds?” Bernie pointed to her very clean plate, partly as proof of her appreciation of Alex’s cooking, but also because she was now noticing she’d not really eaten much while she was away. “I think I missed lunch.”

“How?” Alex waved her fork in the direction of the pot on the kitchen counter. “There’s plenty.” She’d made generously double quantities of everything, figuring that Bernie would no doubt be starving. “It’s either seconds now or lunch tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Bernie stood up and, detouring via Alex to kiss the top of her head as she gave her a one-armed squeezed hug of gratitude and love, began to serve herself seconds. “You want some?”

“I’m good thanks…” She looked at her glass with a critical eye. “I’ll have another beer, you want one?”

“Mmm, after?” Bernie put her plate down on the table and headed for the fridge to get Alex’s beer. “Bottle opener?”

“Top drawer, on your right…” Alex had found everything in the kitchen that was on their issued inventory and set about rearranging it so things were in places that actually made sense, like having the mugs by the kettle and the pans by the cooker. “…but it’s on the counter by the kettle.”

“Ah…” Bernie closed the drawer she’d opened, though not before noting that it was also the official home of the ice cream scoop and cheese grater, and something that she’d previously only come across in a medical context. “…what was the…” She looked so bemused Alex couldn’t help but smile, knowing what Bernie had seen but finding it sweet she was confused by it.
“Turkey baster.”

"Oh. It looked like a…” Bernie's hand made a vague semi-circle shape as she failed to find any words.

"Yeah, explains all the jokes." Alex was prepared to start on a more detailed explanation if this proved to be another of Bernie's popular culture references blindspots, but Bernie beat her to it.

"I hadn't realised they really looked like that." Being familiar with the proper medical equipment for artificial insemination, she'd been able to imagine what the 'turkey baster' had to be able to do for the jokes she’d heard to work, but never actually seen one. "Why do we have one?"

"Left by a previous occupant, along with very detailed instructions on how to roast the perfect Christmas or Thanksgiving turkey. It was imported especially from the States according to the note I found." Alex took her beer from Bernie with a smile. "Thanks."

"I see." It wasn't the weirdest quarters handover experience she'd ever heard of, but was certainly different to the more mundane yet useful tips like knowing which radiator thermostat was put on backwards and where the power switch was for the fridge. "And dinner is delicious, but I was talking about the unpacking." Bernie proved her point by attacking her second helping with gusto.

"Thanks…” Alex finished the end of her first beer and poured out half of the next one, tilting the bottle towards Bernie in silent offer of a top up. "... I just shoved some things in drawers and cupboards."

"It's amazing…” repeated Bernie, reaching out and catching hold of Alex's hand once she'd finished splitting the beer. "...you've already made it feel like our home and I’ve only seen the kitchen." She looked again at the fridge which already had the photo of the kids and Alex holding up their winners’ medals from the Holby half-marathon which she had taken, and tried not to look at the other photo that was up there. “I still can’t believe you brought that photo…”

“IT’s a good photo!” Alex liked the picture of Bernie in her dress uniform, taken at Sandhurst when she’d been there for something as a Major - Bernie’s best guess had been it must have been the ‘graduation’ from one of the mandatory leadership courses she’d had to take to stop being nagged about her military career progression, which she freely admitted she’d only done to stop Algie and others bothering her about it. Ronnie and Charlie had found the photo, tucked away in the stack of birthday cards they’d both received from Bernie without fail no matter where in the world she was. Both it and the other photos they’d rescued from the attic of the house their father still lived in had been scanned and circulated by Ronnie, with Charlie also getting several printed
‘old school’ as she’d put it, which hadn’t helped Bernie feel kindly disposed to the images they were resurrecting.

“I look like a bus conductor.” Bernie didn’t much like her dress uniform, or any uniform these days that still insisted she wore a skirt, which was most of them still.

“I like that photo…” Alex sipped her beer, glancing between the photo and her lover, knowing that Bernie would never really see what it was in that photo that Alex really loved, which was the spark of achievement that was in her eyes, the same spark that Alex had fallen in love with when she saw it looking at her during a tough surgery that was going well. “…but I do like the uniform more when I’m looking at you wearing it rather than when I’m having to wear it myself.” It was usually at that point Alex grumbled about transferring to the RAF, who had sensibly made trousers available to every woman with every uniform some years earlier, whereas the Army still had mandatory skirt regulations, but after Bernie’s week, she decided it was better not to mention the RAF for a day or two if she possibly could. “Speaking of uniforms…”

“Mmm?” Bernie paused mid chew and looked down at her shirt front, thinking Alex was about to tell her she’d missed her mouth.

“You’re fine…I was thinking about your other uniforms….” They were both wearing the ‘No. 8s’ that they’d lived in when deployed to Afghanistan and made the most sense when travelling between climates, but they’d also had to travel with their other uniforms so they were equipped for all seasons and all occasions. “…how are you going to wear them?”

“On my body?” Bernie prepared to duck having a glass of water thrown over her, but Alex just stuck her tongue out and rolled her eyes. “I’m alright for barracks dress…” This was the khaki green jacket and skirt uniform they wore as office wear when their duties were entirely ‘desk-bound’ or made up of meetings, though Bernie was hoping to avoid it too often as she really hated tights. “…Algie’s wife sent me a care package when I was on Ascension, so I’ve got the rank slides and she’s gone through the dress regs and emailed me a list of questions to answer.”

“Questions?”

“Clothes sizes mostly…” Bernie missed seeing Alex’s eyebrows shoot up as she was gathering up her last forkful of curry. “…and hat size, though I could answer that one from Ascension.”

“That’s…” Alex wasn’t quite sure what to say to the news that another woman, albeit one Bernie had clearly known for years and was married to Algie, was asking Bernie her clothes sizes.
“Meg for you.” Bernie swallowed the last bit of her meal. “She was already a mother hen when she married him, she took to being a CO’s wife like a duck to water.”

“I see…” Alex still didn’t really see why that explained why the request for sizes wasn’t unusual.

“She’s used to sorting out Algie’s uniforms for him everytime he got a promotion - she was probably the one who told him to bring this…” She tapped the rank slide Alex had fixed into position for her in the AAU Consultant’s Office before they left Holby. “….with him. He wouldn’t have thought of that on his own.”

“I’m not sure I would have…” admitted Alex, starting to better understand some of why Bernie was unfazed by the request, though still not fully clear on how rank insignia turned into clothes sizes.

“Me neither. Meg’s always been much better at that sort of thing than either of us.” Bernie looked back at the ‘bus conductor’ picture and smiled. “I think she sewed most of the medal ribbons on that jacket for me.” She looked back at Alex and reached across to pick up her now empty plate. “Apparently I need a new cap and other stuff.”

“Oh?” Alex stood up and helped to clear the table, instinctively settling into their now familiar routine - Bernie did the washing up while Alex put away the salvageable bits of the leftovers and then started on the drying. “Oh, you’re a Colonel now.” She finally realised what Algie’s wife had spotted - it wasn’t just that Bernie’s rank insignia needed to reflect her current rank, but for some of the uniforms that meant there were other changes too. “She’s organising it for you?”

“And getting it posted when it’s ready, once I’ve told her the sizes, unless she can get the trips to bring it with them.” Meg was their other godmother, while Algie and a couple of others from outside the Army were their godfathers.

“Can you post a sword?”

“Why would…” Bernie paused halfway through taking off her watch, suddenly remembering something Alex had read out when they’d been going through all the information they’d been sent about the posting. “…oh god, I’m a Colonel.” She finished taking off her watch and put it on the window sill behind the sink, then plunged her hands into the soapy sink of water and started washing the plates on autopilot.
“Best ask for some gloves with lining...” teased Alex, opening the fridge to put away the leftover curry that would do for lunch for one of them tomorrow. As a Captain and Major, they were excused bringing their most formal uniforms with them as the Army’s token gesture towards ‘packing light’. But when they’d been going through all the guidance and information, it had been clear at various points that such dispensation from the usual pomp and pageantry expectations did not extend to ranks of Colonel and above, a dispensation that Bernie could no longer benefit from. Plus, given the length of her posting here, she was definitely not going to be able to avoid everything by volunteering for extra duty.

“Funny…” As Bernie put the now clean plate on the draining board, she tried to remember what other odd bits and pieces of uniform she didn’t have with her that she now probably needed, in addition to the white gloves that were not remotely windproof, unlike the brown leather ones that went with their khaki uniform.

“Does this mean I’ll get to see you wearing all your medals?” asked Alex, sobering as she came to stand by Bernie, tea towel in hand.

“You’ve seen me wearing them before…” Bernie put the second now clean plate on the draining board and looked at Alex, chewing on her bottom lip as she thought about what she’d just said. “...haven’t you?” They weren’t something she really gave any thought to, never having been in the Army for the medals but for the opportunities it gave her medically and surgically.

“No.” Alex knew she’d seen the miniature versions that they wore on their ‘Mess Dress’ uniforms for evening functions from a distance when she’d been avoiding Lt Colonel Wolfe at a regimental dinner, and thought she’d seen Bernie’s Dress Uniform jacket with its medal ribbons on it hanging up in an office at HQ but she’d never seen the full size medals or Bernie wearing them. “Miniatures only.”

“You will then, yes.” Bernie started to wash up the pan they’d heated up the curry in. “Seems I won’t be able to dodge parade anymore.” She’d never been overly keen on the pomp and pageantry displays, mostly because unlike the other medics she hardly ever had someone watching, so she’d been always happy to take the extra duty shift to free up someone who had a mother or a partner who’d be watching. “They won’t be that different to yours…” she deflected, not particularly interested in them beyond a bit of a reminder as to where she’d been deployed over the years. “...and are in a box in my case.”

“I saw when I unpacked - it’s in the chest of drawers with mine, top right.” It was the same drawer, relatively speaking, as the one they’d used in their bedroom in Holby to keep all their various uniform bits and pieces that didn’t stay on their uniforms when they were hung up in the wardrobe.
“You don’t need to ask to look at them,” observed Bernie gently, putting the final pot down on the draining board and reaching back into the water to find the plug, planning on rinsing the cutlery and cooking utensils after the dirty water had drained from the sink. As far as she was concerned, it wasn’t anything private or sensitive, just an accumulated record of where she’d been posted according to a particular set of rules and criteria.

“I know…why did you pinch me?”

“Pardon?” Bernie hadn’t kept pace with Alex’s subject change, still trying to work out what it meant if Alex had just told her was that she’d never opened the medal box despite packing and unpacking it for their move down here. Why would her medals be more sensitive to share with her lover than her dirty laundry?

“When we were in the locker room at Holby, you pinched me!”

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't dreaming." She took the tea towel from Alex and used it to dry her hands.

"I think you're supposed to pinch yourself." As she spoke, Alex started leaning towards Bernie wanting to kiss her.

"Nope!" Despite putting distance between them, Bernie took the sting out of the apparent rejection with a bright smile and by taking hold of Alex's hand. "I'm not having sex with you for the first time in the southern hemisphere on the kitchen table."

"Who said anything about sex?" Alex allowed herself to be gently tugged into movement and followed her lover back into the small hallway.

"Me?" Bernie stopped just inside the front door and squeezed Alex's hand. "I've missed you…" She wrapped her arms around Alex's waist but kept her distance, not remotely trusting herself not to tumble head first into trying to love Alex with every fibre of her being. "... I've missed us..." Eyes locked with her, Bernie didn't care that she could feel moisture gathering in her eyes. "...but I feel really bad for leaving you with all the unpa…"

Ignoring Bernie's no kissing plan, Alex leaned forwards, backing Bernie up against the front door and cut her off mid word with a kiss that made it very clear that sex was definitely not a one-sided ambition. After a moment's bemusement and total inactivity as she tried to process what was
happening, Bernie joined in the kiss with equal enthusiasm and fervour.

However, when Alex felt her uniform shirt start to be pulled out of her trousers, she managed to gather enough of her scattered resilience and catch hold of Bernie's hands, stilling them. Slowly their kissing shifted from frenetic passion to calmer, softer teasing nips and gentle nose nudges until finally, chests rising and falling in perfect sync, their lips parted as their foreheads came to rest together.

"If you won't start with the kitchen table I'm not starting with the front door."

"That's fair…" Bernie carefully retucked Alex's shirt where she'd managed to unpull it from her waistband, then ran her hands across her back until they rested lightly on Alex's hips. However, in the quiet of this strange hallway that a part of her was noticing she had never seen in daylight, she was struggling to reconcile her overwhelming feeling of 'home' that being with Alex brought with the shyness the unfamiliar house was creating. How could she ask if they could have an 'early' night if she couldn't actually remember where their bedroom was?

"Room on your right is the living room - two proper sofas, armchair...also got a small table and chairs for doing work at."

"Useful." Bernie's breathing was starting to steady again as the lust fueled haze she'd been so conscious of dissipated just enough for her brain to move past Alex. But only as far as one word answers.

"First on the left is the spare bedroom…" Alex hadn't found it until after she'd started unpacking in the living room, which had briefly irritated her until she realised that it would actually force them to properly unpack in order to reclaim the room. "Then bathroom, as in a room with a bath in it."

While Bernie's ability to think about something other than making love to Alex was gradually asserting itself just enough to be building a mental map of their new home, Alex's was deteriorating. And it was all Bernie's fault. "Stop it."

"What?" Bernie's immediate thought was that she wasn't doing anything, then she realised what she was doing and grinned.

"Squiggles." Alex put her hands on top of Bernie's, stilling them and stopping those talented fingers from driving her crazy with the squiggly patterns they were drawing on her hips. "Not helping."
“Okay.”

“Behave.” Alex kept her hands firmly in place on top of Bernie’s. “Kitchen is far end of hall...no squiggling?” Alex challenged Bernie with a raised eyebrow, then removed her left hand and reached forwards, past Bernie to the lock on the front door, which she turned. “...front door has a deadlock.”

“Noted.” Bernie was conscious that Alex was now leaning into her again - reaching to lock the door had seen her weight shift onto Bernie, who decided that moving her hands from their resting place on Alex’s hips to being once more wrapped around her upper back didn’t count as ‘squiggling.

“...so last door is…” Finding herself a bit off balance, Alex moved her other hand from her hip so she was braced with both arms against the front door, one level with the lock and Bernie’s waist, one level with her lover’s ear.

“...third on the left?” Bernie slid her now free hand up Alex’s back so she could once more pull her into a close embrace, bodies pressed together and mouths mere millimetres apart.

“Funny…” There was a part of Alex that was trying to remain detached, to stick to the guided tour and not be distracted by Bernie, but with every second it was becoming a smaller and smaller part of her.

“Bedroom?”

“Thought you’d…” Alex’s willpower and she gave in completely, sinking fully onto her lover’s familiar body and meeting parted lips with her own for a hungry kiss. “...never ask…”
“How do we get to the Med Centre?”

“Mmm?” Alex swallowed the last bite of her scrambled eggs before answering Bernie’s question. “Our neighbour from two doors down is giving us a lift.”

“Oh?” Bernie tried to picture the map of the complex she’d seen back in the UK as she sipped her coffee, recalling that they were in a cul-de-sac of roughly a dozen similar houses.

“Someone in the air traffic control teams - Luce organised it for us, until we got settled.” Alex hadn’t felt comfortable having a driver sent out to collect her while Bernie was away so had asked Luce if there was a bicycle she could borrow. Clearly she was still displaying her ‘newness’ because that wasn’t a sensible suggestion to anyone who was experienced with the local weather, and an alternative arrangement was quickly found.

“Ah.” Bernie started to smirk when she realised the rather obvious omission from Alex’s explanation. “Does this someone have a name?”

“I call her Sergeant.” Alex was usually quite good at remembering names when she was introduced to people, but this time she’d clearly been still asleep on her feet that first morning. “We need to be outside in 5 minutes.” Alex paused after she’d stood up from the table, a thought suddenly occurring to her. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice.” Bernie continued to put their breakfast dishes in the sink, needing only one minute to finish making herself presentable and ready for duty.

“Be extra nice then…” Alex brought her coffee mug over and kissed Bernie’s cheek to take any sting out of her plea. “…I don’t think Luce mentioned you when asking the Sergeant to pick me up.”

“Won’t all three of us fit?”

“Four, she’s dropping us off on the way to dropping her son at school.”
“Do you know his name?”

“Winston - he tells everyone it.” Alex could tell Bernie still wasn’t seeing what her concern was. “He’s not met any Colonels before.”

“Good morning Ma’am.” Luce stood at attention when she saw the Colonel entering her office and greeted her out of habit before she’d properly looked at her. “Oh…”

“I’m confident it’s chocolate spread.” Bernie took off her beret carefully, not wanting to get the sticky sweet spread on any more of her uniform than her beret, but did also manage to signal to Luce she could stand easy. “It seems young Winston has been taught to salute and tried to show me.”

“And the chocolate spread Ma’am?”

“Was on the piece of toast he’d forgotten he was holding.” Bernie put down her briefcase on a convenient chair, able now to indulge in some very un-Colonel like amusement at the situation. “It flew from his hand and landed, spread side down, on my beret.” She was just glad that she had taken her beret off in the car, otherwise she’d have had a chocolate spread stain in her lap. A ruined beret was a problem because she’d need to get another one if it couldn’t be cleaned, but in the short term, she could hardly have done her day’s work in chocolate spread covered trousers.

“Do you have a spare?” Luce didn’t, but she knew that some people had. Berets were very simple items of clothing, but extremely complicated pieces of uniform to wear properly, so even if the Colonel had a spare it was unlikely to be a switch undertaken lightly.

“No, I used to…” Bernie turned her beret round in her hands, considering the damage. “…but when I went to pack it had been eaten by moths.” She looked up at Luce and smiled at her look of concern. “…no great loss, I’d never managed to get it to behave.” It was strange really, but in all her years of service, this was the first time her beret had been a casualty during active duty. “But I probably need to find another one now.”

“I think we can get it cleaned Ma’am.” Luce was thinking about all the people she knew on the Base and island, and while no one was immediately springing to mind as a stain remover superstar,
she was fairly certain that there would be someone who could do something to improve the situation. “If you’d like me to try?”

“That would be wonderful.” Bernie carefully held out the sticky item for Luce to take without becoming Winston’s latest indirect victim. “We’ve been through a fair old bit together…” Even the tours she’d done wearing the UN blue beret it had been with her, tucked in a corner of her kit for any situation she might find herself in when being a representative of the UN was not appropriate or permitted.

“I’ll see what we can do Ma’am.” Looking at it, Luce was beginning to think it might be worth freezing it and then seeing if one of them could slice the chocolate off the surface - it looked too sticky to have soaked in to the felted fabric.

“Thank you. Could you also let Winston’s mother know I’m not remotely upset please?”

“Sergeant Abrahams? Of course.” It wasn’t Luce’s place to ask for an explanation, though she was curious as to why a follow up message was required. Bernie meanwhile, was just glad that she finally knew the name of their generous neighbour who was giving them lifts.

“Thanks - I’m not sure she believed me when I tried.” Bernie had been genuinely unfazed by it, more concerned about what Winston was going to have for his breakfast than the state of her uniform, but his mother had been mortified. “It’s really very kind of her to give us a lift at the moment. Ours is still at sea.” The supply ship that sailed between the UK and the Falklands had left a couple of weeks before they’d flown out, but it wouldn’t arrive for another couple of weeks, so the rest of their belongings and the small 4x4 vehicle they’d bought were still somewhere near the Equator. Bernie picked up her briefcase again, deciding that she put off tackling the heap of work on her desk as long as she could.

“Would you like some coffee Colonel?”

“Thanks, that would be lovely.” And, with only a small sigh, Bernie turned into her office, wondering what she’d find on her desk today, her almost week long absence rather wrecking any plans she’d had for gradually getting to know everyone before she met them through their paperwork.
“...and close.” Alex supported the head of the soldier as he carefully closed his mouth, clearly in a fair bit of pain. “You more comfortable sitting in that chair or on the bed?”

“Here....” His battered and bruised face and jaw was making speaking difficult but Alex, like most medics with her experience, was adept at understanding the sounds made by patients who wanted to speak but weren’t quite succeeding.

“Alright then.” Alex stripped off her gloves and put them in the correct waste bin then sat down at her desk again, making a couple of notes on his record. “You’ve definitely broken your nose, but I’m going to get some x-rays of your head and chest to help work out if anything else is broken or if you’re just very bruised.” She was struggling to work out exactly what was causing his particular set of symptoms as, while his facial injuries were the most eye-catching and ones he was worried about, there seemed to be something else going on. Whatever it was though, she definitely wanted x-rays to see if his nose was going to need realignment as currently it was impossible to tell: clearly he’d broken his nose before this, confirmed by his medical record and ID photo.

Risking a telling off for being cheeky, he gave her a thumbs up with his free hand, finding the thought of talking again not worth the pain.

“Sit tight then…” Alex approved of his improvisation and, after making another note or two, picked up the phone on her desk. Before she could start to dial the extension she wanted, there was a crisp knock at the door.

“Come in!” She glanced at her patient, seeing that he was starting to look a little less grey now she was no longer poking him in places he was already bruised and tender.

“Sorry for the interruption Captain, Morris…” Bernie’s reflex instincts for the military environment were returning rapidly, and she’d already been signalling to stay ‘as you were’ even before she was fully through the door, having taken a moment to find out the name of the patient whose appointment she was disturbing. “...could I borrow your beret for the next couple of hours please?”

“Of course Colonel.” Alex reached across her desk to where she’d tossed it when she’d arrived and decided that, on balance she should probably walk across the room to give it to Bernie rather than throw it at her. Alex wasn’t entirely surprised by the request, having suggested to Bernie as they walked into the Med Centre that she could wear Alex’s if she needed it for anything, though at the time Bernie had been adamant she wouldn’t need it. Clearly Bernie’s plans for the day had changed, or there was something that she’d not realised was an outdoor meeting.
“Thank you Captain.” Bernie took the beret from Alex and winked, their fingers brushing for a fleeting moment. She looked past Alex at her patient, who even from behind, had clearly experienced some sort of bump to the head. “I’ll send someone to take him to x-ray for you?”

“Thanks Ma’am.” As Alex headed back to her desk, she had a sudden thought. “Are you around later this afternoon Colonel?”

“Should be, why?” Bernie had no idea what the rest of her afternoon held after her next meeting which was a tour of the airfield operations, but was happy to prioritise helping Alex with something if she needed it.

“I’d like your opinion on Airman Morris’ x-rays please?”

“Of course, see you later Captain, Morris.”

“Colonel.” Nodding her goodbye to Bernie, Alex sat back down and looked at her patient who was suddenly looking far more nervous than he’d been before. “Hey, relax Tom…” Alex glanced back at his notes, trying to get a sense of what his day to day duties might be while also trying to work out what had just happened to make him go from fairly calm patient to nervous wreck. “…did me asking the Colonel to look at your x-rays make you nervous?” Alex saw the tentative nod, with the confident young airman starting to look more like the hurt teenager he was. Wordlessly Alex reached across the desk and picked up the box of tissues, holding out for him to take a couple. She’d leave it up to him if he wanted to use them for his watering eyes or cut lip. “I’m asking her to look at your x-rays because she’s very good and it seems silly not to.” She put the box of tissues back on her desk, giving him a moment for her words to sink in and to see what effect they had on his nerves. She wasn’t going to tell him this, but her real reason for wanting Bernie to look at his x-rays because she was fairly certain he’d not cracked his jaw or ribs but there was still, somehow, something causing him to struggle a bit with his breathing and posture that didn’t feel like it was explained by his obviously broken nose. She was hoping she’d be able to work out from the x-rays what was going on, but was equally confident that not only would Bernie be an excellent second diagnostic opinion, she’d be the best placed to assess what the best treatment solution was given his age and their location.

“Sorry…” It came out muffled by tissue and somewhat glottal sounding due to his broken nose, but Alex understood what he meant. It also, based on how he winced, wasn’t all that comfortable to talk, so Alex decided to see if she could get him back to signalling with a thumbs up or down.

“It’s alright Tom. Is this the first time you’ve had an injury since you signed up?” She hadn’t seen anything in his medical notes to indicate he’d had anything more serious than a broken nose from a school football game as a thirteen year old, but it wouldn’t be the first time something had missed the records.
“Were you the only one injured in the incident?”

Thumbs up.

“Did you come here with a friend?” Alex knew he’d been brought in by his team’s first aider rather than the Med Centre having to send out an ambulance for him, but Alex knew that wasn’t necessarily the same thing as a fellow Airman who he knew well coming with him.

Thumbs up.

“I’ll see if I can get them to keep you company after you’ve had your x-rays if you’d like?” She had an ulterior motive to helping him feel less angsty about his first proper med centre visit, with concussion being a strong possibility so she didn’t want him nodding off on her - a friendly face tasked with keeping him awake was far more likely to be successful without being unduly stressful than a nurse doing 10 minute obs checks.

Thumbs up, just as there was a crisp knock on the door.

“Come in!” Alex waited to see who it was visiting them now, only to recognise the head appearing as the nurse who’d helped them treat Harry the night they’d arrived.

“You need some x-rays Captain?”

“Please Sandy, Airman Morris…” Alex pulled forward the pad of x-ray request forms and quickly filled out what she wanted, remembering to sign the bottom this time unlike yesterday’s form for another patient. “...will be staying with us the rest of the day so after x-ray could you see that he gets cleaned up and made comfortable please?”

“Yes Captain.” Sandy took the file and form that Alex was holding out, them came round further so she could look at the young lad face on. “Nil by mouth?” she asked, smiling at him while she double checked what Alex’s notes said, experience telling her it was less rude in the long run to get the update from the Doctor over with quickly then give the patient her undivided attention.
“Precautionary, I’ve asked Colonel Wolfe to look at the x-rays.”

“I’ll make sure you both get them then Ma’am.” Seeing there wasn’t anything else that she needed to clarify, the experienced nurse crouched down so she could easily make eye contact with him. “I’m guessing you’re a Tom not a Thomas?”

Thumbs up.

“Good lad.” She patted him reassuringly on his knee, confirming that she was happy with his hand signals and completely understood his aversion to speaking if he could help it - that lip looked like it was split badly enough to benefit from some stitches later. “How do you feel about standing up?”

With a cautious frown, he stood up, wobbling slightly as he adjusted but not needing to hang onto either Alex or Sandy, then gave another thumbs up.

“Right, we’ll set off to x-ray then, but don’t go being all heroic on me…” As the experienced nurse ushered him out of Alex’s office and towards x-ray, Alex decided to follow them as far as the kitchen where hopefully she’d be able to get herself a fresh mug of coffee before her next patient.

“Ah, Colonel?”

Bernie paused mid step and turned around to face Luce, who she really hoped wasn’t going to be about to send her off to another meeting before she’d had time to sit down at her desk for five minutes.

“Yes?”

“There’s a plate of lunch for you in the kitchen from the Mess Ma’am.”
“Oh?” Bernie’s stomach growled in approval of this new plan, though Bernie was slightly confused by it, having resigned herself to a glass of water and if she was really lucky, a banana she’d found in the kitchen at home and remembered to put in her briefcase.

“Captain Dawson’s request, on account of trading her beret for your lunch.” Luce had earlier found Alex stood in front of the kitchen’s shared fridge, frowning at the portion of curry she was holding.

“My lunch?” Bernie caught her upper lip between her teeth as she tried to work out what on earth Alex was talking about via Luce. “This sounds like an Alex moment Luce…” They’d already established that there would be times when, on duty or not, it would be more straightforward for Bernie’s assistant to treat Alex as Bernie’s partner rather than a fellow officer or doctor, and Bernie was certain this was one of those moments.

“Because you have her beret Alex had to eat the leftovers for her lunch, rather than leave them for you to have when you got back Colonel.”

“The Mess isn’t in this building then?” Bernie had a slightly better idea of where certain parts of the Base were now after her morning’s tour, but was still very aware she’d not yet worked out where most things were, including the Mess. While Alex could get away with spending the day in the Med Centre without her beret, or even going out on an emergency medical call without it if needed, going to the Mess in another building without a beret was pushing it, especially as using Bernie as her excuse probably wouldn’t go over very well with the out-going Base Commander.

“No Ma’am.”

“How did you get them to deliver?” Bernie had yet to come across a Mess that was likely to volunteer to do a delivery service.

“You’ll have to ask the Captain that Ma’am.” There were some things Luce wasn’t going to risk breaking rank for, and Alex had been decidedly vague on how she’d managed to achieve it, just telling Luce that a plate would be turning up for Bernie when she got back.

“It’s like that is it?” joked Bernie, wondering what magic Alex had worked that had managed to outdo Luce’s scrambled egg magic the day she’d flown to Ascension. “Thank you Luce, I’ll go find that plate now.” She disappeared into her office to dump her jacket, not needing it now she was in the warmish and, more significantly, windproof Med Centre. “Anything else happen while I was out?” The ‘that I need to know about’ was implied but unspoken, Bernie already more than happy to trust her assistant’s judgment.
“Clinics went on schedule, Captain Fung and Lt Furnby are at the school doing the vaccinations this afternoon and Airman Morris’ x-rays have been sent to you for your review - he’s nil by mouth.”

“Morris…” It took Bernie a moment to place the name. “Oh, the lad with the broken nose. I’ll have a look while I’m eating my lunch.” Bernie scooped up the tablet that she’d left charging on her desk while she was out on her tour. “Any idea where Alex is?”

“She’s probably in her office…” According to the schedule Luce now checked, she wasn’t on duty for the afternoon’s Sick Parade which had started twenty minutes earlier, though she did have a couple of follow-up appointments with some of Lt Turry’s patients she was seeing, however before she could explain this to the Colonel she’d already gone.

“Come in!” Alex put aside her completed paperwork and looked up, unwilling to start on her next piece of paperwork until after she knew what her latest interruption was. “Hi…”

“Bad time?”

“No.” Alex put the cap on her pen and tossed it onto the desk, sensing from Bernie’s expression that this wasn’t an official interruption. “Just trying to not get behind with my paperwork.”

“Show off…” Bernie was certain she was already a lost cause in that particular contest, though she had at least managed to complete all her Ascension paperwork in Ascension. “...I was going to look at some x-rays while I ate lunch…”

“Want some company?” Alex had deliberately not made herself a fresh mug of coffee after she’d finished the curry from last night, a part of her hoping that Bernie might pop by on her way to the kitchen. “You’ve apparently got spag bol.”

“I might need to borrow a bib then…” Bernie was not having the best of luck with negotiating uniform hazards today as, aside from her beret, she’d had her boots get a soaking from the fire hoses and her jacket had almost been splashed with engine oil.
“You look clean…” Alex followed Bernie down the corridor to the kitchen, taking the opportunity to give her a visual ‘once-over’ that was a mix of concerned girlfriend and considerate fellow officer. “…what happened?”

“We got a little too close to the fire hose tests but my boots are waterproof.” It had made her briefly remember that night back at Holby when she’d spent several hours in a rapidly flooding collapsed storm drain with Ro, a former Marine who was now doing rather well based on the last email he’d sent them both. Then, she’d been in her hospital trainers and scrubs which had been neither waterproof nor salvageable. “And I was lucky enough to have a former RAF First Eleven Prop as my tour guide.”

“How was that useful?” Alex didn’t like the way the conversation was going, having already got a fairly good idea how such a skillset would be used on a Base Tour. “And do I need to order x-rays?”

“No x-rays needed, promise.” Bernie had been momentarily winded by the flying tackle she’d been on the receiving end of, but her tackler had been skillful enough to land safely with only his chivalry bruised when he realised he was lying on the ground with a female senior officer lying on top of him. “And it did mean I didn’t end up covered in oil when something burst.” She might not need x-rays, but was fairly certain she’d have a couple of bruises tomorrow. That however, along with her ambition of a soak in a hot bath and a bit of TLC from Alex was something she would definitely not be bringing up until they were home.

“That’s lucky.” Alex knew that accidents happened in machine shops and maintenance facilities but did begin to wonder if Bernie was experiencing particularly bad luck. “You’re staying indoors for the rest of the day though?” Part of her was concerned about what other bad luck Bernie might be going to attract, though her bigger concern was whether they’d have enough clean uniform between them for them both to come on duty tomorrow.

“Yes.” She opened the kitchen door, relieved to see it was empty, her tolerance for fellow service personnel rather low until she’d had something to eat. “Thanks for sorting out some lunch for me, sorry you couldn’t go to the Mess.” Bernie hadn’t thought through the impact on Alex of being without her beret at the time she’d borrowed it.

“Don’t be, I’d always planned to eat here remember?” Alex had made enough dinner last night to ensure there were leftovers for lunch, no matter how hungry Bernie had been, though she had slightly underestimated quite how hungry her partner had been on her return to the island. “Aside from the bruises…” She’d noticed Bernie’s careful stretching of her knee and hip as she looked in the fridge for her lunch, having done enough of her fair share of sports fixture MO duty and A&E shifts to know what happened when you were involved in a game of rugby. “…how was the tour?”
“Interesting. Rather more heavy engineering than I’d expected, definitely need to be more trauma self-sufficient.” One thing her time in both Holby and her last Afghanistan tour had reminded her about was quite how dangerous civilian peacetime activities could be. While the violence of conflict had been the cause of the majority of her trauma cases during her first couple of tours in Afghanistan, the last tour had been more focused on the civilian rebuilding which meant the traumatic incidents of civilian life had begun to dominate their patient-load. In Holby too, for every gunshot and stab wound she’d had come onto her operating table, she’d had the handfuls of car and construction accidents to fix the damage from, with those often being the tougher and more marginal cases.

“When you have a chisel?” guessed Alex, thinking back to one of her earliest postings before she’d started on her specialty, when she’d been MO attached to one of the Engineers’ Regiments. “Water or coffee?”

“Water thanks…” Bernie was frowning at the microwave, trying to work out what the various buttons might mean.

“Try top right three times, bottom left twice, bottom middle three times, bottom right once.” Alex had been in a similar position with her lunch, but being during the more conventional lunchtime gap between clinics, she’d had others to teach her the dark art of the nondescript communal microwave.

“Top right three times…” Bernie obediently began repeating the sequence Alex suggested. “…bottom left twice…oh, I see…” Suddenly she understood the significance of the combination Alex had rattled off and realised it would set the microwave to ‘go’ for 2 and a half minutes, which seemed like a good starting point for her plate of pasta. “What did top right do?”

“Set the power level - apparently one push gets you defrost, two pushes low power and three pushes actually achieves something.” Two pushes was apparently perfect for warming milk and making scrambled egg, though Alex hated warm milk and preferred to have her scrambled eggs made by Bernie at home. “Here…” Alex handed over the glass of water she’d filled for her partner, slightly surprised Bernie hadn’t gone for a mug of something warmer. “…don’t need to worry about ice, it comes out of the tap rather cold.

“Lovely.” Taking the glass, Bernie reminded herself not to gulp it all in one go, but did manage to drink half of it in one go, earning her a raised eyebrow from her partner. “I made the mistake of accepting the first mug of tea I was offered…”

“How many?” Alex knew exactly what she was talking about, having fallen into that trap herself - once you’d accepted one offer of tea when visiting a workshop or team, it was safest to accept every offer so you didn’t inadvertently cause offence. Unfortunately, you rarely got a warning
before you started the inspection tour as to quite how many kettles and teapots you’d be visiting.

“Four…” Bernie went back to the tap and refilled her glass. “…were tea, two coffee.”

“Could have been worse,” reminded Alex, thinking about her own equivalent experiences over the years, with her Reserve Duty weekends being some of the worst now she thought about it.

“I know.” Bernie decided she was in need of food and so popped open the door of the microwave to see if her food was sufficiently heated to be okay to eat. “There could have been no coffee!”

“Goof…” Alex leaned back against the counter, waiting for Bernie to make a start on her lunch before introducing any new topics of conversation, content to just enjoy the quiet, comfortable company of her partner after a busy morning of patients and the still not very familiar faces of a lot of the medical staff. “Any good?”

“Mmm…” Bernie paused in between forkfuls to nod and swallow. “Very good considering.” She took another bite, knowing Alex would understand her statement was a compliment, with Mess food being somewhat variable in quality generally and usually best eaten as fresh as possible rather than reheated a couple of hours later after a short commute. “How did you manage this?”

“Corporal Abrahams is rather embarrassed by this morning’s toast incident.”

“Corporal?” Bernie frowned as she chewed her next mouthful, thinking back to both this morning’s journey and her conversation only a few minutes earlier with Luce. “Wasn’t she a Sergeant this morning?”

“That’s Winston’s Mother, she works in Air Traffic Control. Corporal Abrahams is Winston’s father, who’s a chef in the Mess.”

“Ah.” Bernie ate her next mouthful thoughtfully.

“What?”

“What’s he more mortified about? His son’s aim or the chocolate spread?”
“Both actually, but when I rang to see if they could keep a plate for you to eat in the Mess he insisted they’d send it over for you.”

“Poor Winston…” Bernie genuinely felt sorry for the little boy, not remotely cross about her beret but suspecting he was probably going to be denied chocolate spread on his toast for quite a while, plus this was exactly the sort of small embarrassing anecdote that would no doubt be repeated at family gatherings and celebrations long into his adulthood. “…and poor Tom Morris…” Immediate hunger sated, she’d prodded her tablet into life with one finger while she and Alex were chatting and had been looking at the x-rays while they talked, Alex not remotely fazed by the multi-tasking. “…that will have hurt.”

“I know…” Despite her initial impression when she’d examined him, his jaw was actually showing as not broken or dislocated, but it was still not exactly ‘right’. It had left Alex in somewhat as a quandary as to what to do though, but it clearly he was going to need something to help him recover well. “…his nose seems the least of his problems now…”

“Mmm…” Bernie was eating on autopilot as she looked between two different images of his jaw and neck, then flicked on to look at the other images. “…ah, there it is…”

“What is?” From where she was standing, Alex could tell which x-ray Bernie was looking at but not what she was seeing.

“There…” Bernie pointed at the section of the x-ray that was attracting her interest. “I think Airman Morris has managed to dislocate his SCJ.

“That’s…” Alex picked up the tablet and turned it round so she was looking at the image the right way up. “…not what I was expecting.” She had checked the clavicle bone for fractures, but hadn’t seen anything to indicate it was dislocated at either end, though it was extremely hard to spot on an x-ray, even when the patient was in the optimum position which he hadn’t been in. “What am I not seeing?” Alex looked up at Bernie, expecting a prompt answer, only to recognise the half smile and crossed arms as her partner enjoying a ‘teachable’ moment. “Remember I’m a contented anaesthetist and trauma medic not an aspirational trauma surgeon,” she added, not remotely concerned about being about to learn a new piece of information, but wanting to remind Bernie the context she’d be applying this new knowledge in going forwards.

“That’s exactly it.” Appreciating she wasn’t making much sense, Bernie stood up intending to rinse her plate while she backtracked a bit. “It’s what isn’t on the x-ray that’s making me think it’s his SCJ.”
“You’re saying…” Alex looked at the two facial x-rays Bernie had been studying closely before she went back to this upper chest image. “…that because he’s not got a broken collarbone or fractured ribs that you’re thinking it might be dislocated?” Alex didn’t want to accuse her partner of making one hell of a leap of logic because she knew that wasn’t what Bernie did, but she was still feeling like there were some pieces of the puzzle she wasn’t getting.

“Yes, sort of.” Bernie squirted some washing up liquid on her plate and began to wash it up, trying to explain what she was thinking without treating Alex like an inexperienced trauma surgeon. “Facial injuries suggest he fell face down onto the ground, does history confirm that?”

“Yes.” Alex tried to think of the best way to explain to Bernie what he’d been doing when he fell, only for Bernie to beat her to it.

“Log drill? No, he looked too clean…” Log drills were a form of army physical training where a thick telegraph pole style log was carried by a team of soldiers on their shoulders as they ran usually a muddy cross country style course.

“Basically that actually, they were moving metal beams using that technique and…” Alex trailed off, starting to not see what Bernie had not seen. “You’re thinking anterior dislocation from the beam hitting his scapula as he fell forward?”

“Shall we go have a look?” Plate now washed up and stood in the draining rack, Bernie dried her hands on a nearby teatowel, preparing to wash her hands again when she next saw a sink in either one of the doctor’s offices or treatment rooms, depending where Airman Morris was. “What?” Now looking at Alex, Bernie felt the need to look down at the front of her uniform to see if she’d spilt her late lunch, unable to come up with an alternative explanation for the expression on Alex’s face. “Have I got sauce on my face?”

“No.”

“Then what?” Before Alex could answer, the door to the kitchen opened and Sandy the nurse came in.

“Nevermind…” Alex wasn’t going to explain in front of the nurse that she’d been trying to decide if Bernie being diagnostically brilliant was marginally more or less lovable than when she was being sleepily sweet. “…is Tom Morris still in treatment room two?”
“Yes Ma’am.” The experienced nurse took note of the Colonel picking up the tablet with what looked like x-ray images on it and added two and two together. “I’ll go and get him ready for you to examine him.”

“He still nil by mouth?” asked Bernie, thinking that they could probably get him quite a bit more comfortable fairly quickly after they’d had another look at him.

“Yes Colonel.” Sandy had seen enough broken noses to know when it was going to benefit from a bit of realignment assistance under sedation, so didn’t find the question a surprise.

“Excellent…” As they headed towards the door, Bernie passed the tablet back to Alex, along with an unspoken question.

“How long?” asked Alex, ‘hearing’ the question and glancing at the clock on the wall as she held the door open for Bernie to precede her out into the hall.

“Not long, a few minutes?” Bernie followed Sandy through the door into the suite of treatment rooms, already removing her watch so she could stop at the next sink and give her hands a proper scrub.

“Sandy?” Alex was happy to manage the appropriate short sedation or, if necessary, a general anaesthetic for him, but only if the nurse felt she had the right personnel still on duty as well.

“We’re prepped for a sedation or a general Captain.”

“Now who’s the mind reader?” teased Bernie, impressed with the response, making a mental note to have a close look at what patients they’d collectively seen and treated while she had been on Ascension as clearly they’d taken advantage of Alex’s skills and done more than issue cough drops and sticking plasters.

“Captain Dawson Ma’am.” Sandy had been impressed with the Colonel and Captain when they’d arrived with Harry a few days ago, and working with the Captain while the Colonel had been away had only impressed the nurse more as not only was she calm with the patients, but she was also a good teacher.
“One of her many talents,” agreed Bernie, drying her hands with paper towels after a more clinically appropriate handwash, winking at Alex as they set off for Airman Morris’ room. “Am I doing the exam?” she asked, relaxed either way but conscious he was Alex’s patient not hers.

“Unless you want to get one of the others?” Alex knew a big part of Bernie’s role included teaching and mentoring the more inexperienced doctors through new procedures and Alex knew she would definitely not be doing the manipulations as her role would be managing the sedation and anaesthesia if it was needed.

“They’re both at the school on vaccination duty.” They were also doing routine health and welfare checks and a bit of good old-fashioned community medicine, something which Bernie was wholeheartedly in favour of them doing, even if she herself knew it wasn’t one of her own strengths.

“So it’s just us?”

“Just like old times…” Bernie knocked on the door and went in. “…Airman Morris? I’m Colonel Wolfe, one of the doctors here. May I call you Tom?”
While a not uncommon request in the Medical Centre, Alex was surprised to hear what sounded like Bernie saying it in the Med Centre reception area. Based on the sideways look she got from Luce, it was clear that she wasn't the only one.

"...and a blue one?"

Even more curious, but also starting to think she knew some of what was happening, Alex slowed down and tried to not make too much noise as they both approached the end of the hallway.

"Well done!" Unaware of her stealthy audience, Bernie exchanged a very gentle fist bump with three year old Winston Abrahams who was toast free and consequently reassuringly unarmed. "What about a brown one?"

"Like you with the crown?" asked the small boy, reaching out with a finger and tracing the crown on Bernie's rank slide in the centre of her uniform shirt. It was in range of the three year old because Bernie was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the reception space.

"What about one without the crown?" Unaware of her audience, Bernie sat perfectly still and calm while he puzzled his way through the challenge.

"Put coat on with Mummy's help..." muttered Winston as he mimed sticking his arm out to the side of his body and then, once it was level with his shoulder, he bent it at the elbow. "... Point at Eye..." he brought his hand round so his fingers were sort of level with his eyebrow, "... and show my hand is clean." He turned his hand so his palm was pointing towards Bernie, who with perfectly serious military discipline returned his 'salute', bringing her arm up 'the long way round' and then lowering her arm 'the short way down' by pulling her arm straight down by her side, a move that he copied with not the same crispness but it was still recognisable.

"Well done!" Bernie, who had been taught to 'fist bump' by Winston on the way to the Medical Centre that morning was ready to share another one with him when he stopped, looking very puzzled by something. "What is it?"
"What do I do for brown and blue?"

"I…” Bernie wasn't following his logic at first, thinking that he'd just shown her he could still remember how to do the RAF style salute despite her just teaching him the Army's version, only to see him pointing over her shoulder. Her own curiosity sparked, she twisted and looked over her shoulder and saw Alex and Luce were watching them. With Alex wearing her Army rank insignia and Luce her RAF one, Winston was absolutely right - there was brown and blue together. "... think you should show them both."

"Okay!" Satisfied with the plan, Winston ran over to stand in front of Alex and looked thoughtfully at her rank. "No crown, so mummy coat… Eye…clean hand… " To his great delight Alex returned his 'salute' with the same crispness Bernie had, and he brought his arm down, then ran to the other side of the wide doorway and did his 'blue ones' salute that his father had taught him. Not wishing to let the RAF side down, although she wasn't used to being the one receiving the salute, Luce returned it with her own crisp RAF style salute.

"What do you do if there's a crown?" asked Alex, sufficiently aware her partner's mischievous side to have a pretty good idea.

"Can't show you, no crown."

"Colonel Bernie has a crown." Winston had found 'Wolfe' rather tricky to get right without a shower of spit so she'd improvised and got him calling her Colonel Bernie on the way in to work that morning.

"Yes!" Running back to Bernie who had easily and smoothly stood up while he was saluting Alex, he muttered to himself in fierce concentration as he got his hand in the right place to show a very good attempt at the Army style salute.

"What's the special bit?" asked Luce of Alex in a whisper, not able to spot anything different yet.

"Wait for it…” Alex suddenly had a rather good idea what it might be, and watched Winston carefully.

"Oh…” Luce wasn't quite sure what her reaction was supposed to be when she saw the little boy stick his tongue out at Bernie, not having expected anything that cheeky.
"Remember she taught him to do it." Alex couldn't help but smile at how Bernie was with small children - she'd seen it time and time again. She may have struggled to find a way to interact and engage with her own children, may still find it difficult to know or anticipate what a 'maternal' instinct was, but she was in her own way, absolutely brilliant with any small children she came across.

"What happens when he meets another officer of relevant rank?" Everything she'd seen from the Colonel made Luce believe that she was not the sort of person who would set up a small child for getting into trouble as that would be cruel, but her concern for her friend's child made her double check.

"It's only Brigadier Putnam and me on base at the moment Luce," reassured Bernie, aware of her audience and overhearing their conversation.

"Fist bump Colonel Bernie!"

"Winston!" His father had arrived just in time to hear his son sound sufficiently like he was giving the Colonel an order. "I'm sorry Ma'am..." He was rather confused by her immediate wave of dismissal of his need to apologise, her attention seemingly still completely focused on carefully sharing a fist bump with his son.

"Thank you Colonel Bernie." He turned to Alex and grinned at her. "That's what I do when you have a crown Dr Alex."

"I see." Alex was trying to be suitably serious with him, but he was rather sweet. "Thank you for showing me."

"Daddy!" Duty completed, Winston ran across the reception area and launched himself at his father for a hug, then immediately began explaining what Colonel Bernie had taught him in the few minutes while his father was away.

"Just a moment Winston..." His father wanted to talk to the Colonel without making her wait for an excited little boy’s recounting of the last half an hour. "...thank you for watching him Ma’am."

“Of course, we taught each other something new. Everything alright?” He’d arrived at the Med Centre to meet Bernie who was full of apologies that Alex wasn’t quite ready only to find him
needing to return to the Mess and being full of apologies that their lift home was delayed. A neat compromise had been found when Bernie offered to keep Winston company in the reception area while they waited for everyone else.

“Yes. I’d put the child lock on the hob and no one knew how to turn it on.”

“The hazards of modern parenting?”

“Something like that Ma’am, but thank you for your patience.” He’d not had as much contact with Captain Dawson as his wife, nor met the Colonel until earlier but both his wife and son were excellent judges of character and had been quick to tell him that both doctors were nice. He could also see the benefit of being on friendly terms with the two doctors who lived at the end of the road given Winston seeming to go from crawling to cantering through his childhood without any pause for breath or obstructions and they’d already had more than their fair share of banged knees and elbows.

“Thank you for the lifts - and please…” Bernie held open the door to the Medical Centre as they all stepped out, getting a small smile of agreement from Alex that their joint half thought earlier was still a good one. “…when it’s just us or with Winston, it’s Bernie and Alex.”

“Thank you Colonel…” He saw her pass a beret to Captain Dawson, correctly presuming she was wearing her own one again now it had been cleaned, but also seeing the frown on the Colonel’s face. “…Bernie, I’m David and my wife’s Jenny.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes Winston?”

“Can I have a juice pwease?”

“After we have said bye bye to Colonel Bernie and Dr Alex…” decided his father swiftly, waving good night to Luce as he keyed the remote on the car so they could all get in. “…your pocket money’s not enough to cover the dry cleaning bill.”
"What?" Bernie had looked up as she finished signing off her latest file, moving it over into the 'done' pile on the table.

"Nothing."

"Al..."

"Nothing earth-shattering or especially interesting," corrected Alex, deciding that if she was 'caught' by Bernie she could allow herself to sit more comfortably on the couch and be able to see her lover without twisting.

"Share?" Bernie put down her pen and leaned back in the upright chair she was sat in, finding the top of the chair back dug into her shoulders at just the right point to completely remove any satisfaction from the stretch. "I could do with something not earth-shattering and I'm certain it's more interesting than..." She leaned forwards again enough to be able to read the title of her next report to read. "...the new safe storage regulations for..." her eyes widened a fraction when she realised quite how specific the regulations were becoming. "...something I didn't know could be stored unsafely."

"Is that a word?"

"Unsafely?" Bernie thought about it for a moment, having noticed it did sound a bit strange as she said it the first time. "Yes, but I probably should have said in an unsafe way." She rubbed the back of her neck. "And nice attempt at distraction," she teased, "now I'm definitely curious."

"Winston."

“Smart kid. Quick learner too.”

“He’s not likely to meet the CO is he?” Alex had decided she’d not start thinking of Brigadier Putnam, the new Force Commander, as ‘Nathan’ until after she’d finished her brief locum stint in the Medical Centre - it was much easier to think of him as Bernie’s friend after she was no longer theoretically his doctor also.
“Nathan? Unlikely but he’ll learn to fist bump if he does, he’s also a quick learner.”

“Oh?” Alex had assumed from Bernie’s success at teaching a proper Army salute to a three year old in such a short amount of time that she’d probably done so before, although she hadn’t been able to narrow down the ‘possibles’ for previous tuition beyond guessing it was most likely to be either her triplet godchildren or Ronnie and Charlie, though instinct was starting to steer her towards the triplets.

“When we were in Germany we only knew how to high five.” Bernie continued to give the broader issue some thought as she tidied her remaining paperwork, not so interested in it now. "And if anyone else comes we can order them to find a sense of humour." Bernie was aware that some people could try to take issue with any sort of non-regulation saluting but she'd felt that was too strict with little children, and anything that helped them to feel engaged and included with the military structures they were having to grow up with could only be a good thing. Her own children's upbringing not having that was now making her even more determined that what they'd done for the triplets and other kids over the years was the right approach to take and one to continue with.

"It's strange, isn't it?"

"Mmm?" Bernie had stood up to have a proper stretch and hadn’t therefore followed Alex’s subject change. "What's strange?" Looking in distaste at the chair she’d just stood up from, Bernie decided to head over to the couch that Alex was no longer sharing with an open suitcase.

"Having an evening after a day in uniform…” Alex leaned forwards and stole a lazy kiss as Bernie sat down next to her, knowing that they wouldn't have too many more evenings like this once she was working at the hospital rather than the Base. "... I only ever lived in base quarters or Bastion." She'd only really had the experience of coming 'home' in uniform to the usual after work decisions like whether to cook or if there were tasks to do first in Holby with Bernie. Even then those evenings were rare - shift work on trauma and emergency wards rarely followed a standard 9-5 pattern.

"I did it a couple of times before the kids were big enough for school…” Bernie didn’t want to waste any time thinking about what it was like when she came home and was supposed to be 'wife'. "But it wasn't like this…”

She initiated the kiss this time, a long, languid exploration and affirmation of their love, so different from what she'd had in her marriage.
“What?” It was Alex’s turn to pause with the query, pulling back from the kiss when she realised she was actually feeling Bernie trying not to give into a need to laugh by stretching her lips into a fixed grin and swallowing.

“What about what?”

“What was making you want to laugh?”

“Not your kissing…” Bernie considered herself to be fairly clumsy at navigating the possible pitfalls of her relationship with Alex, all too alert to her previously established ability to prioritise surgeries that needed doing irrespective of what family occasion or celebration she then failed to attend. She’d managed to surprise herself with how much better she was at remembering such events with Alex compared to previously, but was only prepared to consider that to be short term good luck rather than a wholesale change of character. Still, despite her low opinion of her own abilities to be a ‘good’ girlfriend, she was aware enough to recognise that appearing to be laughing at your partner’s kissing technique was not the done thing. “...I mean, it did make me think of something funny, but because of how…” She ground to a halt, lip caught between her teeth, fingers worrying away at the edges of Alex’s navy blue jumper she’d changed into when they’d got home earlier, stuck for how to continue so seeking the relative safety of silence..

It had taken a while for Alex to learn how to read Bernie's silences.

She'd first started noticing them in Afghanistan when Bernie broke them, usually by changing the subject with some suddenly remembered 'thing' that needed attending to.

After a while, she began to notice them in the moment when Bernie fell silent, letting the conversation pause when others would have kept on talking. She hadn't then been able to 'read' the silence, but did manage to trust that it was never something to panic or worry about, and certainly not something that needed to be talked through. But, as she fell in love with Bernie, she also started to understand them, understand her lack of a surgeon's ego outside of surgery and also begin to understand how awkward and alone Bernie was used to feeling away from the operating theatre.

Now, after a couple of years together, talking and loving, Alex was more confident in her ability to 'read' her lover's silences well enough to stay calm as they started and to wait for Bernie to explain them, often starting with a seemingly tangential subject change. Sometimes however, she’d learned to recognise the silences that could only be emerged from if she gave Bernie a nudge that there was nothing too random or tangential and she’d not have her conversational restart used as an accelerant for an argument.
This silence, decided Alex, wrapping her fingers around Bernie’s fidgeting ones, was one of this latter sort, a sort Alex had started to notice usually involved a tangential recollection back to her time with Marcus and his far more adversarial conversational style.

“If I promise not to be offended or turn it into a criticism of my kissing ability will you tell me what you found funny?”

“Mmm…” Bernie focussed on their entwined fingers for a moment or two, acknowledging Alex’s encouragement and taking the time to try and organise her thoughts so she didn’t over-explain the silly realisation that had started this. “...I suddenly pictured seals trying to play rugby.”

“That’s…” Alex wasn’t quite sure what to say, so attempted to at least conjure up the mental image before trying to then analyse what it was about their kiss that had prompted that random yet highly specific image to pop into her girlfriend’s brilliant brain. “...very specific.” Electing to go with it, Alex found she had more questions as she tried to picture it properly. “What sort of seal and Union or League?”

“Elephant....” That was the easy part of Alex’s question. “...and it was just rugby, but it would have been technically Union.”

“Go on.” Alex was finding the mental picture amusing, but she was also now certain that this was a nudge from a memory involving Marcus - while Alex’s childhood had seen her be taken to the occasional rugby league match on a weekend, Bernie’s first exposure to the sport had been the Union variant when she started to go out with Marcus at Medical School.

“The only time I kissed Marcus in the Vicarage was while Dad was out at Evensong, and I remembered thinking it felt like elephant seals playing rugby in my mouth.”

“I see.” Alex really didn’t, and her expression showed it, but she did have to admit it was an amusing thought and one that left her feeling rather smug - she knew that most people’s first few kisses were fairly awful, but this sounded like an especially poor one. “Not enjoyable then?”

“Horrific.” Bernie grinned as she realised where Alex’s thought process had got to. “We’d been going out less than a month and it was only marginally better by the time we were married.”

“Less elephant like?”
“More like wrestling than rugby.”

Alex wasn’t entirely sure how that was an improvement, but didn’t want to ask, partly because she didn’t want to spend any longer thinking about Marcus Dunn than absolutely necessary but mostly because she remembered Bernie’s surprise and delight as she discovered that kissing Alex was something she enjoyed and wanted to do more of. Unfortunately the sudden attack on the base and subsequent casualties meant it was then a few days before she could actually follow through with this plan, but Alex could still remember her bright smile as energised lips met Alex’s own grinning ones.

“Dad had agreed, before we got together, that Marcus could stay the night during the holidays as it was on the way from a rugby match he was playing somewhere to, well, Holby I guess.” Bernie hadn’t previously made the connection with med student Marcus’ ‘home during the holidays’ and the house she’d come to think of as ‘her dead mother-in-law’s’ but, now she thought about it, they would have been the same place. “Anyway, when Dad asked me what we were going to do while he was at Evensong, I’d said watch television as there was always a nature documentary on at the same time, that week it was elephant seals, which had caused Dad to point out that I’d be in his prayers as there was a rugby game on at the same time on a different channel.”

“Kissing on the couch became the compromise?” Alex now could see where the very specific image had come from, though she still hadn’t quite worked out what had prompted her partner to think of it mid kiss with her.

“In retrospect I think I’d have preferred to suffer the rugby…” Now Bernie had explained what had made her want to laugh and why she was able to construct such an amusing mental picture in the first place, she now found herself with a new struggle - how exactly did she explain to Alex why she was suddenly thinking about awkward kisses with her now behaving awfully ex-husband in the middle of decidedly not awful kisses with Alex?

“I’d like to think…” Alex reached up and tucked a stray length of blonde hair behind Bernie’s ear before she went cross-eyed from glaring at it, “...that had teenage me been able to make out with teenage you neither of us would have remembered what the telly options were.”

“Confident…” teased Bernie, relieved Alex understood how she’d ended up down this rather random memory detour. “…and true I think.” No harm in stealing another lazy kiss to prove the veracity of that theory, though Bernie, leaning forwards and smiling when she felt Alex’s lips meet her halfway.

“Mmmm... do we have one now?”
“Have one what?” Alex continued to tease strands of silky blonde hair, released from regulation bun when Bernie had changed out of her uniform and into a white shirt worn half open over an equally white t-shirt that had not helped Alex’s concentration during her final bits of unpacking. Clearly, Bernie’s ability to hang onto a conversation strand was better than Alex’s just now.

“Telly.” Bernie had never managed to get around to organising a set for her Holby flat, discovering that her occasional need for a dose of television news was easily met by either her laptop or iPad.

“Spare bedroom.” The house’s previous occupants had moved some of the furniture around between the rooms to suit how they wanted to live, most of which Alex had undone while Bernie was in Ascension Island, though moving the television set from the spare bedroom back to the living room was a long way down the list of making the place feel like ‘theirs’ given their lack of a set back in the U.K.

“Ah.” Taking Bernie’s ability to keep track of their conversation in between kisses as a challenge, Alex upped the ante and began to trail kisses across her jaw, intending to then move down to that spot on Bernie’s neck. Except she couldn’t quite reach, and when she tried again she realised it wasn’t because Bernie’s neck was too far away.

"You're tired." Bernie angled her head, studying Alex carefully and, in the same way she approached an unstable trauma patient, immediately began to reassess and replan their evening, which they still had plenty of thanks to the unaccustomed ‘office hours’ shift pattern they were following for a few days. "You said that you had found all the ingredients in the NAAFI?"

"Mmm…” Alex mimicked one of Bernie's go-to movements when her own neck was tired and rubbed it, unable to stop the slight frown when it did little to improve her comfort, all thoughts about trying to best Bernie in a distraction-by-kisses competition forgotten. "Yes, Haven't frozen the lamb yet."

When she had been up at the stores buying some food and essentials, Alex had been able to buy local lamb as well as the more standard imported staples that they were accustomed to finding in base stores wherever they were in the world. After a brief detour back to the vegetables via the small spice and dried fruit sections, Alex realised she had all the ingredients for what she privately considered to be Bernie’s signature meal, and one of her favourites. Without really thinking about it, Alex had bought sufficient quantities of all the ingredients and enough diced lamb for her immediate cooking plans and their freezer. It was the part of Alex that had been hoping that Bernie would cook that had meant she’d not frozen all the lamb she’d had left over after cooking yesterday’s curry.

"Right." Bernie looked at her watch, doing some quick mental arithmetic. "Go shower while I
soak the rice and chop things." She’d been taught this particular recipe for Kabuli Pulao by one of their interpreter-and-chaperone local guides in Afghanistan who travelled with them when they were going out into the villages offering health checks for village elders and the children. She’d tried to protest that she wasn’t much of a cook, but had been overruled by the feisty woman who had decided that cooking wasn’t as complicated as saving lives so she had no excuse. It turned out, according to this particular family recipe, that the ‘secret’ to success was nothing more complicated than remembering to allow a good two hours for the rice to soak before cooking it, a ‘secret’ that made it a perfect dinner to go alongside her new plan for the evening, helped by both of them having a lateish lunch. “Back rub?”

"What about your paperwork?” Alex had some very good memories of Bernie working wonders on her back and neck after long shifts hunched over patients in either the operating theatre or during MERT calls. They were memories she’d treasured when she’d allowed herself to think about her time with Bernie, but those moments had become increasingly fleeting when the pain of losing Bernie to her husband and a ‘regulation’ life had made it too hard. Once they were back together in Holby, and back rubs could be given without needing to keep one ear open for intruders into their happy bubble, Alex had been able to form some new, positively glorious memories of her lover's skilfulness at delivering the 'perfect' back rub.

"There's tomorrow." Bernie stood up and held her hand out for Alex to take as she also stood up. "I don’t always remember to take care of you as well as you take care of me.” Bernie rushed on when she saw Alex was about to try and disagree. “And doing your ironing and polishing at the same time as mine isn’t taking care of you.” She reached out cautiously with one hand, catching hold of the edge of one of Alex’s jumper again. “You’re taking care of me so well and I worry I will stop noticing.” She’d been conscious this morning, coming into this room looking for something, how little luggage there was left to unpack, meaning how much Alex had unpacked in her absence, not to mention doing all the shopping and ‘setting-up’ their house needed. "And stop remembering to love you as well as you love me.”

“It’s called being human Bern…” whispered Alex, electing to reassure her brilliant but emotionally battered and bruised love with a soft kiss rather than words. “And a back rub would be wonderful, thank you.”

“I love you.” Bernie’s eyes were as bright as her smile as she said this, feeling the familiar deep sense of calm and rightness that being with Alex brought her, a feeling she’d only really previously experienced in the operating theatre with scalpel in hand.

“I love you too…” Alex kissed Bernie’s nose and then stepped out of kissing range, the thought of a shower and back rub before food too tempting. “...will you make enough for lunch tomorrow please?”

“Sure.” Bernie followed Alex back out into the hall, thinking through the quantities she’d need to
make that much and therefore how much rice she needed to start soaking now.

“Thanks.” As Alex disappeared into their bedroom to shower, Bernie continued on into the kitchen and started to hunt through the cupboards for the ingredients and pans she’d need, not having explored the kitchen cupboards yet.

By the time she had the rice soaking in one bowl and the lamb marinating in another she was halfway through the beer she’d opened and hadn’t noticed she was humming, something else that had for so many years been something she’d only done when in the operating theatre.

Now though, she didn’t only feel calm in theatre, didn’t feel right in herself for only a small fraction of the day, didn’t have the guilt of only being able to feel at ease and peace with herself when confronted with someone else whose life was now in traumatic chaos. Her moment of calm was no longer dependent on someone else’s moment of crisis, but exclusively hers to have and to savour.

She was, as Algie had noticed when he saw her as they left Holby for the last time, different now to how she’d been before, and it wasn’t because she was now in a relationship with Alex, a relationship that finally saw her experience the happiness that being in love and being loved could bring.

It wasn’t just because she was in love and happy.

It was because she, Berenice Griselda Wolfe, was finally fully able to stand tall, with her shoulders back and chin held high, her father’s ‘ray of sunshine’ once more.

She was no longer Major Wolfe, a bruised, broken and fragmented army surgeon, held together by regulations and uniform.

She was ‘Colonel Bernie’ and ‘Doc Wolfe’.

She was Colonel Berenice ‘call me Bernie’ Wolfe.

“Bern?”
Alex had come into the bedroom from the bathroom feeling refreshed from her shower and looking forward to her back rub, only to be surprised to find Bernie not yet there.

“Coming!”

Grabbing her half drunk beer and another one for Alex, Bernie turned the kitchen light off and headed for their bedroom, ready to massage her lover’s aches and pains away as best she could.

She was professionally and personally happy and love with life and all it would no doubt throw at her and Alex during their life together: she was, for the first time in a very long time, as she’d said to Algie, feeling ‘whole’ again.

She now just needed some penguins….

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed it.

This effectively concludes my 'Being Bernie' series, though I will at some point hopefully return to write an epilogue story that might include a penguin or two!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!