What will be, will be

by CrescentColours

Summary

Set after their first kiss. Canon divergent. Trigger warnings for self harm, PTSD, war, domestic violence.
Chapter 1 - Office

"Serena?"

At the sound of her name the surgeon looked up from her desk where she'd had her head in her hands. She ran her fingers quickly through her short dark hair trying to tame it from where she'd been running her hands through it. She bit her lower lip and inhaled, trying to slow her racing heart and her racing thoughts. Her cheeks were flushed and she could feel how the back of her black vest was damp against her spine.

The source of these bodily reactions was standing in the doorway with her curly blonde hair just beginning to escape from its tie. A scrub cap was being wrung anxiously between two long-fingered hands as the woman who'd just entered the room shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"Serena?" she said again looking across to the brunette seated in the corner, at the desk in neat order, in sharp contrast to the chaos covering her own. "I, um..."

Serena couldn't make any words form in her head let alone actually articulate them. She raised her eyebrow and shrugged her shoulders gently, waving her hands in a gesture of apology. Not much rendered the talented surgeon speechless but this truly had stolen her words. The single thought that played round and round as if on a loop was the feel of her best friend's lips on hers as they'd kissed on the floor outside theatre.

"Serena, I'm sorry, I, um well, just, Serena it's, oh God"

The blonde dropped into a chair, wincing slightly at the protest from her back at the lack of proper care in sitting. She looked across at Serena who was to all intents and purposes a statue right now, closed her eyes and thunked her forehead down on the desk, not even reacting as a small avalanche of files rearranged themselves around her. She could hear the sound of her heartbeat in her ears, feel the adrenaline coursing through her bloodstream. How had she screwed up so badly? She knocked her head down again, trying to block out the noise of the fear and the shame that were taunting her with their mocking voices inside her brain.

"Bernie"

She heard the whisper and stilled her movements, clutching a handful of her dark blue scrub trousers in each hands as she waited, for an eternity, for another word. She kept her head on the desk, not trusting herself to look up, not wanting to see anger, revulsion or disgust looking back at her.

It had taken a superhuman effort for Serena to speak a word, but she had to stop Bernie, her co-lead and best friend from hurting herself. She might be almightily confused right now but she didn't want that. Trouble is, she had no follow up words. She looked across at Bernie who still had her head on the desk and tears sprang up unbidden in her eyes. Desperate to offer some measure of comfort she pushed her chair back from the desk and stood, holding her own desk for dear life as ballast. Her legs were like over cooked spaghetti, limp and formless.

At the sound Bernie sat up but kept her eyes firmly fixed downwards. She knew she'd ruined it but didn't want to look for that final confirmation in Serena's eyes. She thought that might break her. She been shot, blown up, beaten, divorced, but the biggest fear of her life was that the wonderful, feisty brunette, that she would sell her soul for, might never again look at her or speak to her.
"It's okay Bernie"

Serena had no idea how she'd managed to get that out but the relief in being able to actually speak was palpable. Still the blonde refused to look up, which made a prickle of fear run up and down Serena's spine. What if Bernie ran? What if she got this wrong and she lost the person who had become the most dear to her? She had to get some words out.

"Bernie, please, please look at me"

Bernie lifted her head but fixed her gaze on the cleft in Serena's chin. Unbidden the thought of kissing her there sprang into her mind and she raised her hands to her burning cheeks in horror, hoping Serena couldn't read her mind on this occasion, like she seemed to have developed a particular knack for. Finishing Bernie's sentences, saying aloud what she was thinking, in anyone else it would have unnerved her, but with Serena it just felt natural, like they were two halves of the same whole.

"Bernie, please.."

...came the voice again and Bernie willed herself to do better and raised her eyes slowly over the curve of pale cheekbones tinged pink to the soft brown eyes she could lose herself in. Immediately she began to search them, what emotions were there, clues to thoughts. She could see the tears that had formed and without warning one trickled down her own cheek, not that she noticed.

The words came in a rush,

"Serena, I'm so sorry, it was the emotion of the moment and I just got swept up in it and you were so kind to me and I didn't think just reacted and"

At that she had to stop and drag in a desperate breath. About to start again with any apology she could think of when all of a sudden Serena was right in front of her and pressing her right index finger to Bernie's lips silencing her.

"Bernie, stop. I'm not mad. Just a little, well, thrown I guess"

Serena lightly ran her fingertip over Bernie's lower lip causing the other woman to shiver involuntarily. She looked into the dark eyes so filled with fear and her heart melted. This amazing woman, who she'd befriended and quickly found an ease and a comfort, with needed some better reassurance. Without pausing to think, Serena removed her hand from Bernie's face and brought her fingertips to her own mouth. Watching Bernie watching her she kissed her fingertips and placed them back over Bernie's lips. With her left hand she grabbed Bernie's right and linked their fingers.

"Bernie, we need to talk about this. But right now I need to go to Jason. Please, please don't be afraid"

Not trusting herself to speak Bernie nodded and ran her thumb over Serena's knuckles as they held hands. She lifted her left hand to cup Serena's cheek, barely knowing where she found the courage to do so. She tried to memorise every detail of the brunettes face, as if she might forget a detail.

With a final squeeze Serena broke the contact and moved back slightly. Smiling nervously she turned to grab her coat and bag while Bernie wordlessly watched her having moved back to her own desk. She fuss ed at getting the buttons done up, her fingers didn't seem to be attached to the rest of her. Taking a final glance at her desk she moved through the office and took hold of the door handle.

"Night Bernie"
"Night"

Quickly she walked through the door and took a breath. Turning round she saw Bernie slump in her chair and instinctively went back into the office. Bernie looked up as she sensed someone come in and gave a squeak of surprise as Serena dropped a soft kiss to her cheek and another to her forehead before turning round and going without another word or glance back.

Looking at the clock Bernie realised she should have left nearly two hours ago. Gathering her things she made for the exit, waving her goodbye to Raf and Morven without really seeing them, heading home.
Chapter 2 - Serena

Serena stood in her bedroom in front of the pale grey framed, full length mirror. The lamp by the bedside cast a soft golden glow from behind her as she looked herself in the eyes. Saw her herself looking back quizzically, with faint worry lines etched across her forehead. She didn't remember much of the dinner she had just had with Jason and pleading a headache had come upstairs straight after. Not looking away she moved back slightly to sit on the edge of the bed.

"What does this mean?" She asked herself. She wasn't angry, she knew if anything she should feel flattered that someone as stunning as Bernie Wolfe...hang on. Stunning? When did that word drop into her consciousness. She admired Bernie, her dedication, her fierce fight for her patients and her colleagues, for her country. Her intellect was superb, her manner soft and gentle but with an inner strength that came just when Serena needed it. The trust between them, in theatre, on the ward and with each other's confidences had only grown deeper. She had meant what she had said to Bernie. It wasn't just Fletch that would call her fearless and fantastic, they were Serena's words. The slight smile that Bernie had given her when she said them told her that she knew that as well, that Serena didn't think it was her fault, that she didn't blame her, was well, everything.

Then...they'd kissed. Bernie had kissed her first but Serena had kissed back, didn't think, didn't process, just knew she needed her lips back in contact with one of the most important people in her life. To pour everything into that moment to be a salve on the wounds on Bernie's heart and soul. To offer comfort. Love.

Serena gasped at herself as that word came into her mind. Love? "Do I love Bernie?" She whispered out loud.

The simple answer was, yes.

She nodded at herself and then the fear crashes over her like a wave, drowning that love in questions. Am I a lesbian? Do I want to have sex with her? HOW do I have sex with her? What will everyone say, Jason, Elinor, Ric, Henrik, her charges Raf, Morven, Fletch?

She shook herself slightly to slow everything down. "Getting ahead of yourself old girl" she thought as you took a deep breath. "One kiss, well more like three or four and you've leapt into bed with her." She chuckled slightly at that, never one to take things slowly.

"How is Bernie now?" she wondered as she thought about how she'd left. The pain etched into that beautiful - "another new word there Serena" - face, the thought that she had somehow hurt the brunette was plain to see and Serena realised that having to run straight out to make a shepherds pie for her routine-driven nephew didn't exactly scream reassurance. It screamed of running away, even though she had gone back in.

"I need to make sure she is okay" Serena thought as she delved into her handbag for her phone. Firing off a quick message, she set it on the pale silvery, wooden bedside table and began to undress. Unbidden she imagined Bernie's hands undoing the buttons of her pale green blouse, pulling her strapping black vest that was still damp with sweat over head and unclasping her bra. Smoothing her trousers down her legs and her knickers with it, now completely naked, she turned to look at herself once more. And cringed.

How could she be so ridiculous to think anyone could want this? The soft, round belly, striped with
silvery stretch marks, the wrinkles and spots on her skin, the marks and scars reminding her of things she tried not to think about. She turned away sharply, desperate to cover herself. Finding the pale grey cotton vest and soft pink bottoms she pulled them on and sank into bed. Pulling the duvet up round her she lay on her back staring at the ceiling, eyes following but not really noticing the faint patterns on the ceiling. She snapped off the light and let her eyes get accustomed to the dark.

Her phone lit up at her bedside and vibrated. A text message.
Chapter 3 - Bernie

Chapter 3.

Bernie, meanwhile, found herself at home without really remembering any of the drive. Replaying each moment of the evening over and over in her head, remembering the thrill and the joy as Serena hadn't pulled away, had kissed her back, clutching at her muscles as if she might never let go. The way their foreheads had come to rest on each other's as they broke apart, panting, just looking, but deep, deep inside each other's souls. Then hearing the sound of someone calling her name and watching Serena's back disappear as she fled to the office. She almost could hear her own heart crack when she saw the tears in her eyes when they were back in the office. But then she had come over to Bernie, offered comfort, touch before she left to go home.

Why had she come back in and given those sweet kisses to her forehead and cheek? Why is this SO confusing?

Trailing up the stairs to her drab little flat she put the key in the lock, twisted and pushed the door open. Never had it felt less welcoming. Less lonely. Dropping her keys, coat and bag in a heap she headed straight for the kitchen. "Beer" she thought to herself. That would calm the storm raging inside her head. Opening the fridge she pulled one out and cracked the top off on the edge of the counter. It foamed slightly as she took a sip and moved to the lounge, before deciding to go straight up to bed. Retrieving her phone from the pocket of her grey Holby hoody she chucked it at the pillow as she set the beer down carefully on the floor. Quickly, she undressed, picking last nights t-shirt and shorts up she pulled them on and sat on the edge of the bed and took a longer pull at her beer before deciding she didn't want any more and placing it on the windowsill. Running her fingers through her unruly curly hair she stretched her back out carefully and flipped to lie on her stomach, burying her face in her pillow.

"I couldn't have screwed this up more if I tried. Way to go Major" she berated herself. "You make the best friend you've ever had and you fuck it up by kissing her like some hormonal adolescent"

Tears spring up again and she dashes them away angrily. Not really one to indulge in emotions and certainly not deserving of her own self pity. Her heart stops in her mouth as her phone lights up and vibrates, could it be? No, no, it won't be. It'll be some pizza place or someone asking if she had had an accident in the last 4 years...where to start with that one. Daring to hope, she turns it over and sees her name. Serena. Not Serena Campbell, just Serena. Only the important people in her life had just the one name in her phone, Cam, Charlotte and Serena. Oh and Jason she realised, smiling fondly to herself at that, at how the young man had worked his way so easily into her affection.

Hovering her finger over the message, she took a deep breath and swiped it open, immediately shutting her eyes. Its all still okay if she doesn't read it, but she can't put it off forever. Swallowing heavily she opens her eyes.

"Bernie, I need to know you're okay. Please. Even just a reply of yes or no. I'm worried about what you're thinking. I meant what I said, it's okay and I'm not mad. Far from it. S x "

Clamping her hand over her mouth Bernie ran for the bathroom. Resting her head on the cool porcelain she heaved the contents of her stomach into the toilet. "Get a grip woman" she thought to herself, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. Pushing up off the floor she rinsed her mouth out and brushed her teeth quickly before returning to her abandoned phone.

How did she answer that? Yes she's okay, especially seeing the words in front of her that Serena
had said out loud, reading them over and over. No she's not okay because in the pit of her still churning stomach the fear of losing Serena and of hurting her was threatening to overtake her.

She clenched her fists briefly and sang the lines of a song in her head, her pre-battle ritual. Even now, going into every surgery, it had to be done, to calm her, ground and focus on the task in hand. Relaxing her grip she picked up her phone and typed.

Without giving herself chance to edit, she pressed send and then held her phone to her lips. Settling under the blankets she placed her phone on the pillow beside her and waited.
Chapter 4

Serena snatched her phone up and furiously swiped at it, momentarily dazzled by the light of the screen in the darkness of her bedroom. All her muscles tensed and she could hear the rush of blood in her ears. Forcing herself to take three slow breaths she looked down to read it.

Bernie:
"I hate myself for what I've done. I'm going to leave in the morning. I'm sorry Serena. B x"

NO.
NO.

Serena realised she'd vocalised that out loud and listened quietly for any movement from Jason. Thankfully he didn't seem to have been disturbed. Sitting up sharply she debated calling Bernie but realised quickly that that would probably freak the army medic out. She started a new message, erased it, started again, deleted. "Come ON Campbell" she said to herself, but more quietly this time. "You've got to do this and you have ONE chance to make this right".

A flash of inspiration took hold and she tapped out four words. Just four. Added the signature S and a single x, exhaled and pressed send.

Realising that she needed to move she slipped out of bed and tugged her dressing gown on, shivering slightly in the cool night air. Taking her phone she opened the door and waited. When she heard nothing she softly padded down the stairs, avoiding the creaks and the wobbly rail as she did so, headed into the kitchen and closed the door. Flicking the light on and placing her phone carefully on the table she moved over to the cupboards. Despite being nearly 1 in the morning she seriously contemplated a glass, hell a bottle, of Shiraz but sensible Serena won out and she poured herself a glass of water from the filter jug and sat down.

Tapping her fingers to an unheard beat she waited and waited. Willing her phone to light up, to ring, whatever her friend did was fine as long as she replied.

Resting her chin in her palm she closed her eyes and sighed. "Everything will be different now" she thought and a ripple of sadness washed over her. The easy banter, the teasing, the gentle touches of each other. The looks in theatre, bringing each other coffee, drinks in Albies, casual dinners, all evaporated. With one kiss, her world had changed.

But then she thought about it some more and realised that all of those things, from their very first meeting in the car park, had been leading to this, even if neither of them knew it. It hadn't been plain sailing, Bernie had lied and cheated, not on Serena, but it had stung all the same after what Edward had out her through and yet Serena found it so easy to forgive her, would always find it easy. Her voice came into her head, "that's what love is I suppose. Defending the indefensible."

Love. Yep. That's what it was and maybe had always been.

Oh God this was torture. Should she have called? No, it was the right decision, Bernie would have gone into a blind panic if she'd moved from texts to calls. This way, Serena reasoned, she had chance to think about what she wanted to say. Bernie was always so considered, she never spoke without being certain of the consequence of her words, in direct contrast with her actions usually, which tended to be more immediate, instinctive. "Army training" she thought. "Can't second guess your decisions there".
She nibbled her lower lip anxiously and looked around the kitchen. Jason’s lists fixed with magnets to the fridge, photos of him and Elinor on the wall, a shelf of cookbooks jostling for position, spices and oils on a line. All giving little insights into who she was and who Jason needed her to be. Methodical, organised, practical. She snorted at that, she was, after all, hopeless at anything DIY related.

Her gaze shifted back to her phone just as it lit and vibrated. Her vision swam for a second and she grabbed at the edge of the table, noting that was the second time tonight she'd needed to support her own weight. She reached across and saw it again.

Bernie.
Chapter 5 - Bernie

Chapter 5

Bernie shut her eyes tight and counted slowly to 100 in her head. Even as a child she'd found herself anxious and counting seemed to help. Later, in the army, it made her a crack shot, the silent repeating of numbers giving her a laser-like focus. She'd also used it, to her eternal shame, when having sex with Marcus, not so much at the beginning but later on when thoughts of soft, beautiful women began to occupy more and more space in her brain, she found herself unable to relax with him.

Mentally she then began to make a list, resignation letter, call Cam, give notice in her flat, apply for new jobs, what she needed to pack. A well of heartache grew larger and larger in the centre of her chest as she imagined her life without Serena, cold, empty, lifeless. And all her own fault. She gave into the tears then, properly sobbed at thought of the person who made her most whole, hating her. Even though her words spoken and by text had said she was okay and not mad, once she'd had time to think about it she knew the brunette would realise the upheaval just wasn't worth it. Dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual, aversion to liars and cheats, basically despising everything that Bernie was. The look she had given the army medic that day after she'd admitted lying about Cameron was the most painful moment of Bernie's entire existence, not even the IED had hurt like that.

She turned over on her side and brought her knees up to her chest, sobs giving way to shuddering breaths, eyes stinging from the salty tears that continued to track down her cheeks. Rubbing the scar that bisected her chest, she dragged her nails over it, needed to feel pain, because the pain on the inside was too great to bear. Why couldn't the bloody thing have just killed her? Then a wave of guilt hit as she thought about Cam and Charlotte and yes Serena and Jason, even though they hadn't known her then and the sobs started once more.

Still she was waiting, but what for? There was no way Serena was going to respond. Why would she. She'd been nice, checked in on Bernie, who'd thrown it all back in her face and was going to do what she always did. Run. She was so good at running, from Marcus, from the army, from Alex and now Serena. Beautiful, perfect, amazing Serena who had lit up her life in ways she never thought possible. Offered kindness, care, simple friendship and with one kiss damnit she'd lost it all.

"It's no more than I deserve" sobbed Bernie and then all at once sat up and rubbed her eyes. Stopping the flow of tears and sniffling she took some breaths and counted again to 100. She needed to get back in control. She swung her legs out of the bed and took a dizzying step before sitting down again hard. The combination of not having eaten, the dizzying emotions and having cried herself raw had taken its toll. She curled up again and heard her phone vibrate, stealing her breath and for one moment she thought she might faint.

Delving for it under the covers where it had fallen she pressed the home button clumsily.

Serena. "Come say goodbye, please? S x"

Bernie just stared. Of all the things Serena could have said, she hadn't expected that. Some variation of "don't go" was, in truth, what she'd been truly hoping for or that she would say something laced with anger so Bernie would feel justified in going. This simple, calm request totally threw Bernie she didn't know what to say. She thought for a while and eventually she tapped out a one word response and pressed send.
Chapter 6

Serena started to pace up and down the kitchen, mindlessly fiddling, straightening the tea towels, twisting the tap back over the smaller of the two sinks, brushing invisible crumbs from the work surface.

Had she got it wrong? She'd sent a question and she didn't think, well hoped Bernie wouldn't ignore that. It wasn't want she wanted to send. Not at all. She wanted to send an essay frankly, explaining her feelings, her confusion, her, and she gulps here, desire and simply to tell her stoic army medic that she was loved. That it didn't matter that they were both terrified, slightly too old and each with baggage. That it didn't matter that it would complicate work and the inevitable gossip mill. That nothing else mattered but the two of them, taking this journey together.

But knowing Bernie as she did, and she thought she probably knew her as well as anyone ever had been allowed to, if not even a bit more, she'd have scared her more than she already was. Even though Bernie needed comfort even if she wouldn't admit it, her brain had taken her down a familiar path. Screw up, guilt, run. Serena recognised this pattern time and again in what she knew about the other woman's life, she hadn't really heard Serena reassure her, not in person, not by text, she'd assumed, because that was what always happened that she had got it so wrong it was irretrievable. The brunette smiled sadly to herself at that, knowing that that couldn't be further from the truth. But Bernie wasn't ready to hear that, to allow herself to believe that this could be different. Serena's heart broke a little thinking of Bernie alone in her chilly little flat in agony over what she had done, built a life for herself, settled and then, though not true, ruined it by giving in to the simple desire to be even closer to her.

Serena closed her eyes, thinking back to sitting outside theatre again. The raw emotions pouring off Bernie in waves, how she'd almost allowed herself to cry and the panic Serena had felt, how she'd have done anything, anything to change that. The glance down at Bernie's lips that she'd given, thinking about it now, giving silent permission for her best friend to lean over and capture her lips in a gentle kiss, hand in her hair. How Serena had pulled back slightly, looked at Bernie and in that moment, lost her heart to the Major. Desperate for that contact, desperate to heal Bernie in the only way she knew how, despite the years of medical training, to kiss her and pull her close. She flushed slightly at the memory of Bernie's muscles as she'd clung to her, trying to get close. The strength that was there, making Serena moan a little as Bernie's lips melded into hers.

She'd run back to the office when she'd heard the nurse call out for Ms Wolfe, not in fear or shame, but because her head was spinning and she knew that if she'd stayed she'd have practically leapt into the other woman's lap right there on the floor. When she'd got to the office and thrown herself in the chair, she literally couldn't think or speak and that ultimately had lead to this. The biggest flirt in Holby, the woman who always had a quip or banter and who so often had the last word, particularly on AAU, couldn't speak and that change had literally sent Bernie reeling.

She thought about how Bernie had started to hurt herself and once again her eyes filled up. Never, never did she want that to happen again and if Bernie would just let her back in, just a fraction, she'd show her how to heal, how to be at peace, she'd give her time, energy, body, love to the woman, just so she would never do that again. She wondered briefly if Bernie did other things to hurt herself. Self-sabotage seemed to be a constant thread so a step further into self-harm didn't seem so unlikely once she thought about it. She couldn't begin to imagine all Bernie had seen, been through, continued to experience in the shadowy recesses of her mind and how she even began to
cope with that.

So why the message? "Come and say goodbye? S x"

Bernie needed to feel back in control. To know Serena was not like the others, that she wouldn't stop her if that's what she really wanted. It seemed heartless she knew, but telling Bernie to stay wasn't going to cut it. She had to want to. She had to choose to.
Serena knew that Bernie would want to slip away, unnoticed and unseen. That was what she wasn't going to allow, while still giving the illusion of a choice. She knew Bernie, well hoped, that she would not deny Serena a chance to say goodbye when she specifically asked for it, to see her one last time. Bernie never denied her anything, even when they disagreed about something she had this knack of making Serena feel like she'd got what she wanted, even if she had totally changed her mind. If she wanted to go to Albies, they went. If she wanted coffee mid-shift, Bernie would appear with it, if she needed a sounding board, Bernie was there, hands on her hips, head tilted and peering through her fringe as she tried to consider what was needed. She tried to remember Bernie ever saying no to her, and couldn't.

And then her phone went off again.

Bernie.
Chapter 7 - Bernie

Chapter 7

Bernie was throwing stuff in to a bag, well more accurately bags, trying to quell the rising despair at yet again having totally fucked up and this time, being truly heartbroken about it. Leaving to go on tour was different, she was serving her country. Yes, saying goodbye to the kids was hard every time, but she could always justify it to herself, especially when she saw the people that her presence was helping in the hell-holes of the world that the army was sent to. With inadequate kit and crap resources, she thought to herself, remembering the countless operations she'd performed in less than sterile conditions through necessity, the tracheotomy she'd performed in Kandahar with a ball point pen - not just on TV she thought, the little boys legs she'd splinted with beams from the rubble of his own house in Fallujah and many more. Such a sharp contrast to the gleaming trauma unit she now considered her own at Holby General. Had considered.

Leaving Marcus, well her hand had been forced their by her coming out, not the way she'd ever intended it, but it was a blessed relief if she was honest. It hasn't worked for a long time and coming back under the pretext of saving her marriage had only revealed the cracks that ran deep, especially the fact she actually loved women, a fact borne out of her torrid and tempestuous affair with Alex. There was shouting and recriminations and begging. Bernie took a deep breath and forced herself to remember the beating he'd given her before she left the house. She probably, definitely, could have overpowered him, stopped him, but she didn't want to. She deserved it and the pain of the blows he inflicted with his hands and his feet were honestly welcome, so much easier to deal with than words. "Or the other thing" Bernie thought, then pushed it far back again in her brain, riding a wave of nausea as she did. Then he had waged war on her in the divorce, her own personal Afghanistan, plotting, planning and devastating her with his own IED, using the children. Those statements they had written that had stolen her breath and coherent thought. Where her solicitor had made her lie on the floor with her feet raised because the blood had drained so entirely from Bernie's head. The words that she used to punish herself with at the lowest moments. "Mum was never there". "She hated Dad and I think she hates us too". She sat with her head in her hands remembering this until she needed to go back to the matter in hand.

Alex, well she left Bernie, physically, but in actuality, Bernie had left her. Not able to cope with how they had been outed and the after effects she had emotionally withdrawn until she saw that Alex had had to go. With Bernie's blessing now, she realised. Their affair had been thrilling, opening her eyes to some of the reality of being with a woman, but it was never meant to last. Stolen moments in army tents, hands all over each other in the locker room but none of the intimacy of a real relationship, nights spent just holding each other, lazy days in pjs, holding hands on a walk through the park, none of it. And despite being a big, macho army medic, Bernie was and is a romantic at heart. Loves the fluff and domesticity of relationships, wants the dreary and mundane with Serena as much as she wants...

"Woah there Major" she thought. All of that last thought, a relationship with Serena, sex with Serena was too much to bear, the pain of glimpsing that in their easy friendship, then losing it because essentially she couldn't keep it confined to friendship, confined to flirty banter in theatre, was why she at that very moment stuffing pants and socks in a duffel bag.

Stopping, she sat on the edge of her bed, checking her phone quickly. Nothing. Maybe Serena had changed her mind about wanting to see Bernie. The theft she'd sent back, simply "when", had perhaps been a little, frosty? Not really what she wanted but the plan to protect Serena from herself was in full on mode and maybe, she would text back that it didn't matter, to tell Bernie to just fuck
off then, though she knew that was unlikely. Serena wanted, no needed her chance to tell Bernie it wasn't okay, that she is mad and that she never wanted to see the blonde ever again.

Semi-consciously she was running her short fingernails down her forearm, digging in slightly more as she thought of the hurt and disappointment, betrayal and anger that she would see in Serena's eyes. Knew she would, because she had put all those emotions there before in other situations and yet each time, her eyes had softened and she had ended up looking back at Bernie again with such kindness it made her whimper. But not this time. Even Serena couldn't defend this level of indefensible. It was like Helmand all over again, realising a split second too late that she was about to be blown up on that bridge and then waking up on the roadside, metal sticking out of her, with her young charges working furiously to keep her alive. That split second where she had realised her foolishness but was powerless to change it. Felt so like this.

Collecting a few things from the bathroom she placed them in her bag and began to pack her books into a box. Never one for frills and fancies her flat was as sterile as her bunks in barracks. Collecting the two treasured photos of Cam and Charlotte from the mantelpiece she dropped a kiss to each frame and added them to the top of the box.

That was it. Packed.

She looked at the clock on the wall. 5am. Gosh she was tired. She sat on the sofa and pulled the comforter over her, feeling suddenly cold and weary, feeling her age as her bones creaked a little. Resting her head against the back of the sofa she thought about the desert, the wide open expanses, so rugged, so bleak and yet so beautiful. Nothing but miles and miles of space, no worries, no fear, just gentle peace especially at night when the stars came out and lit the heavens so majestically. Not a big one for religion, Bernie though if there was a God, then this was evidence of Him. The stunning beauty of it all. She closed her eyes and felt the chill of the night air and she reminisced.

Her pocket vibrated and she jumped.

Serena.
Chapter 8 - Serena

Chapter 8.

"When?"

"Ouch" thought Serena, physically wincing at the ice cold text she'd received back. Not even a "B x" at the end that had become their trademark with each other so quickly that sometimes you'd see it hastily scribbled out in a patient file as they wrote notes for each other on the care.

She knew what was happening. Bernie was sealing her heart off, packing it in ice to save it, to be resuscitated later when the pain and the damage had healed, just like they did sometimes with patients with overwhelming injuries. Cool their body so they can heal and then warm them back up again slowly. That's what Serena planned to do. Their relationship so far had been a slow burn and despite her tendency to jump in feet first and disregard the warnings, Serena was inarguably patient. The way she had adapted to Jason was evidence of that, coping with his constant need for rigid structure and attention to detail, demanding explanation of her and long-lasting consistency. She'd had no hesitation in him coming to live with her, despite the upheaval for them both and she didn't regret a second of it.

Bernie, in some ways, was very like Jason. The army life of rules and orders and discipline. The black and white thinking, all or nothing, no half measures. The thinking and questions to ensure she had all the information she needed and the unconscious disregard for danger in pursuit of a goal. It was why their friendship worked, well one of the many reasons why, Serena was patient. She could be snappy, short fused, especially if there was a caffeine shortage or she didn't get her regular evening dose of Shiraz, but underneath it all, she was good at waiting.

She'd spent a lot of her life waiting. Waiting for Edward to propose, waiting to conceive Elinor, waiting for exam results and promotions. Waiting for her mother to die. That had been so very hard and so very lonely. She often wished she had had Bernie in her life then, to listen, to hug the pain away, to rub ointment into the deep scratches her mother left. To just walk silently alongside her at the funeral. To hold her when she had emptied herself of every year her body was capable of producing. To help her rebuild.

"I'm lonely" thought Serena, not with self-pity, just as an observable fact. She loved her little tribe on AAU, her ducklings as she thought of them privately. The Fletcher children, especially serious Evie and troubled Mikey. They very much saw her as a mother figure and Serena found it so easy to love them for who they are. Elinor, who ran from her mother at every opportunity, still at the very centre of her heart. Jason, who despite holding the title nephew was very much Serena's son in her own mind, seeing no distinction between him and Elinor. She give up her life for either of them.

And now Bernie. "I love her" thought Serena. "I love her so so much" and she leant her head on her arms and wept, for the love she had and how scared she was to lose her. What if this mad plan didn't work? What if she went anyway, leaving Serena foolishly and pathetically devoted to a woman who didn't look back? Would her heart ever mend?

Picking up her phone she inhaled noisily and typed a short message and listened to the whoosh as it sent.

"Good morning Auntie Serena"
"Morning Jason! All ready to go I see"
"Yes. You're up 93 minutes before you would normally be on your day off"

Serena smiled at that. Loved how her nephew had assimilated all Serena's little habits into his schedule.

"I'm going now Auntie Serena, I have built in extra time as the footpath on Walsgrave Street is closed"

Standing, Serena went over to Jason and lightly touched his arm affectionately, and he responded in kind. It was their version of a hug, from a need to show each other love even though Jason found physical touch so difficult.

"Bye Jason, have a wonderful day"
"Bye Auntie Serena. Don't forget it's the blue bin day"

And just like that, off he went. She watched him as he walked down the path, glanced at his watch and wave like he did every morning to her without looking back. She waves anyway, it's part of their relationship and she sends him off with a silent plea to the world to be kind to him today.

Moving back to the kitchen she flicked the coffee machine on and started to measure the smooth, dark, intense-smelling powder into the opening. Just the scent made her come alive, she'd had no sleep at all and the intoxicatingly lively aroma filled her senses and brought some clarity even before she'd had a sip. Capturing her favourite china mug with the words "I'm silently correcting your grammar" on it - thank you AAU Secret Santa 2015 - she watched the dark liquid swirl into the cup and drew it up between her hands.

Moving upstairs she went upstairs and into the little office she'd created herself. Mostly it was just used by herself and Jason as storage space for books and papers or the occasional need to sit at a proper desk for documents. She poked the power button on the PC and as it hummed into life plugged the sync cable for her phone into it.

Just before she could attach her phone it buzzed, almost making her drop it.

Bernie.
Chapter 9. Bernie

Bernie allowed herself a small smile as she read the text. She knew Serena was itching to be cold and formal, but even at the end, she still couldn't manage to leave out the little touches of warmth.

"Come anytime after 10am. You know where it is. Jason's at work and we both have the day off. I'll be here. Please come? S x"

When had they started signing their texts to each other with kisses? She couldn't remember. It wasn't something she did with anyone else. Not even her children. It was something so exclusively theirs. She felt bad about leaving it off her last text to Serena but she had to. She had to make Serena see her fully for what she is, a manipulating, lying, cheating whore".

Marcus' words. But not inaccurate she thought to herself. He was just better at expressing it to her than anyone else. And showing it...no. She wouldn't go there. Not now. Back in the box in her mind she placed those memories, and mentally sealed it with super glue. She'd learned to compartmentalise on her first tour. Nothing could have prepared her for that.

They'd been on a routine patrol in Basra. Newly commissioned and with a fresh-faced set of young troops to command she set out around the perimeter of the base intending to circle slowly, looking for weakness, threats, constantly assessing, analysing. Yes she was here as a medic but as a serving soldier in the theatre of war she had to play her part. Truth be told, she quite enjoyed the chance to escape for a little while, to be outside in the fierce Iraqi sunshine and just look. They got out of the vehicle and she'd set watchers as the engineers reviewed a section of the compound wall that looked like it was crumbling.

She'd heard it before she saw it. The unmistakeable whistle of an incoming threat. "MORTAR" she'd roared, throwing herself under the armoured vehicle they had travelled in. Everything went still until there was an almighty whump and the explosion, the loudest thing she'd ever heard filled the air with a liquid heat. Counting 10 breaths in her head she grabbed her rifle and ducked out from under the wagon.

The sight was something else. A huge crater, section of the wall missing, a boot. Wait, what? Whose boot? Why had they taken it off - Oh. She realised that a foot was on the boot, attached to a leg that no longer was anchored to the body it belonged to. She tasted bile but bit it back as she looked around desperately for anyone who could be aiming at them right now. Saw the terrified eyes of two of her soldiers as they emerged from behind the wall where they'd thrown themselves on bearing the mortar. 3 missing. 3, as it turned out, dead. Wounds she couldn't heal, limbs she couldn't save. But the thing she couldn't remove from her mind was the two faces of the soldiers who'd survived. The shock, the guilt, the trauma of having to pick up pieces of their comrades.

That's why she had boxes in her mind. So she didn't see that, day in, day out.

Not that she was thinking about Basra right now, that box was still shut. The one with Marcus and all the other men who'd mocked her, jeered at her, put their fists on her and more was open wide and the litany of hateful words slowly leaked their poison once more into Bernie's mind, convincing her that really she was doing Serena a massive favour. She deserved better than broken, damaged, evil Berenice Griselda Wolfe. Recognising a need arising to silence her mind Bernie went into the kitchen, opened a draw and drew what she found there across her palm. Exhaling she felt her thoughts clear as she looked down at her hand. It only lasted a minute through before the
revulsion at herself rose up and for the second time in less than 12 hours she found herself retching.

Wrapping her hand in some kitchen paper she slid down to the floor and rested her head on her elbows as they folded up on top of her knees. She grasped in her pocket with her other hand and stared at the messages Serena had sent her. How fervently she wished that it could be okay and that this could all go away and they could go back to their easy lives. For a minute she tried to let herself believe it could but things were too far gone in poor Bernie's exhausted, muddled brain.

She text Serena back and pushed herself up off the floor and began the slow trudge to her car with the stuff she'd packed.
Chapter 10 - Serena

Chapter 10.

Serena looked down at herself before she looked at her phone. Still in the pyjamas and dressing gown of last night, she thought she needed to factor in time to get dressed.

Bernie's text simply read, "see you then". Serena had to sit on her hands briefly to prevent herself texting back some version of "stop being a sapphic angst fest, I love you, you idiot" straight back again. It wasn't the answer. Bernie needed a softer approach with this. As frustrating as this was for Serena she recognised how scared Bernie was and was beginning to see the layers of damage that made up the other woman's understanding of the world. It was no wonder she had been such an enthusiastic friend, she had seen so little kindness and Serena knew that she didn't really even know the half of it most likely.

Texting back simply "Good, S x" she plugged her phone into the PC and mentally sent a shower of blessings over Jason for teaching her the workings of her phone and its operating systems, chuckling a little at how she had not fully appreciated the 3 hour lecture on it at the time. Selecting what she wanted she quickly put together a document and sent it to the printer, again, thanking Jason for sorting all this out otherwise she'd be banging her head with frustration right now.

Leaving the printer running she went back to her bedroom and stripped off her nightwear. Standing under the hot spray of the shower felt so good and like she was preparing herself. Clean hair and clean skin always made Serena feel more able to face anything. Trowelling off she selected her clothes, basic black underwear, her one pair of indigo jeans, a pale blue blouse and a royal blue v-neck jumper in a soft cosy wool. Pulling some socks on she decided to forego any make up, realising it was highly likely that however this went she would cry it all of anyway.

A river of fear ran through her: what if this didn't work? What if Bernie ran anyway? "No Serena" she thought. "Don't do that. It won't help". Gathering a few things she needed from her room she moved back to the office where her printing was waiting. Sitting on the floor she started to put the final part of her plan together. Using every ounce of self control not to just lie down and cry, she worked away, weaving together the threads of her plan.

When she finished she went back to the PC and opened her personal email and fired a few quick messages around. If she had stopped to think at that point she might have second guessed herself but she was invested in this too deep now. There was no plan B, no alternatives she could think of that were better. Not a feeling the usually confident Serena Campbell liked nor a position she would normally find herself in. Bernie teased her sometimes that not only did she have a plan B and a plan C but the whole bloody alphabet. No avenue unconsidered. No plan without an alternative. Not this time and it frightened her a little. The plan upon plan was all about control, she didn't need a lengthy psych evaluation for that one. The need to predict every possible outcome, manage every variable. It made her a good scientist, a respected surgeon, a brilliant teacher and possibly, she conceded, fairly annoying as a friend. It left little room for spontaneous actions, and Jason had only brought that side out of her more.

The clock on the way chimed, 9am.

Shaking herself she gathered all the things she needed, taking two trips down the stairs. Hesitating she decided on the lounge being too relaxed, Bernie needed something a little more formal she thought, to start with. She dropped one thing on the sofa and went into the kitchen. Spreading the rest of her materials out on the cosy table in the corner. "Perfect" she thought. Not too formal by using the dining room, relaxed enough so she would feel comfortable. The dining room was a
slightly austere space, facing north, they rarely used it and it reminded her slightly of the boardroom at the hospital.

She considered eating something but quickly decided not to. The knots in her stomach were a clue to how food might sit there if she ate. Vaguely wished she could have some Shiraz for courage before making her second coffee of the morning. Serena without wine was bad but uncaffeinated Serena was something she would inflict on anyone.

Watching the minutes on the clock go by slowly she rehearsed her plan in her mind. Thinking through what to say, how to play it, where to tone it down slightly from her original thoughts. Not being able to stand the silence suddenly she docked the iPod lying in the counter and listened as it played something Jason had downloaded, it was surprisingly soothing and she found herself skipping back so she could sing along.

Serena loved singing and had a rich, deep alto voice. Although always wanting to be a doctor, she had starred in plays and concerts at school and had sung solo at the graduation from medical school, earning a standing ovation. It was how she relaxed herself and occasionally found the theatre staff staring at her in wonder and amazement as she had sung along unconsciously to the track playing as she operated. She found now that it was helping the adrenaline level drop and to ground her in the moment.

5 to 10. She flicked the iPod off and picked up her phone. Entering the lounge once more she sat in the wide window sill where she could see the driveway without being too directly observed. She wanted to watch. If Bernie pulled in and then left again, which, Serena acknowledged, was a distinct possibility, then she wanted at least one last glimpse of her. Blinking away the sudden tears furiously she gave herself a scolding. Tears would scare Bernie. Don't ruin this before you've had a chance to do this.

Closing her eyes she smoothed her hands through her hair and breathed out. Hearing the crunch of wheels on gravel, she opened her eyes.

10am.
Chapter 11 - Bernie

Chapter 11.

Bernie had dressed herself without really thinking. Consequently she was slightly mismatched in a pair of skinny blacks jeans and a navy blue hoody over a faded grey t shirt. She had used some dry shampoo and shoved her hair up in a messy ponytail, but as usual, bits were escaping already, adding to the dishevelled air around her. The back of her car was full of tennis and her bags and she'd written out letters for Henrik and for Cam. She planned to leave them both with Serena as she was having to see her anyway, the text "Good S x" making her slightly nervous. If Serena wanted her pound of flesh she could have it Bernie decided. She would listen to whatever Serena said and then she would go.

Where was slightly more difficult but there were plenty of B and Bs in Holby or further afield where she could hole up for a few weeks while she planned her next move. Getting a reference from Henrik might prove tricky though, after all he had let her open the trauma unit and she was leaving him high and dry. She felt a pang of remorse at that, the gentle and intimidating Swede had always seemed to go out of his way for her and she hated to think he was going to think badly of her. "not possible" hissed the voice in her head, "he knows it was only a matter of time before you created a disaster". She clenched her fists and inhaled sharply as a pang of pain ran through her. Fetching some more kitchen paper she bound her palm again, even less effectively than last time and shoved it in her pocket. Made a mental note to keep it there while she was with Serena.

She thought about AAU next, how quickly they had accepted her as one of them, brought her into the little family that Serena had created there. Cheering each other on in the high points and holding one another in the desperate lows that seemed to haunt the corridors. RAF with his wife and Fletch and his kids. Morven. Bernie shook her head sadly as she thought about all the talented and sensitive young doctor had had to cope with in the last year. Knew that her leaving would probably cause them all moments of pain until they realised that she had really hurt the mother of AAU, her best friend, then they'd close off and be lost to her forever. Just another set of ghosts to confine to a box in her mind, thought Bernie, feeling the sadness rush up and over her. This was the first time she had fit, belonged, mattered. Even in the army she had held herself separate, apart from Alex of course. This had been the first time she let her guard drop, allowed herself friends and that was clearly the problem. She just wasn't cut out for it, didn't deserve them. "Never again" Bernie agreed with herself. "I can't feel this again. I'm better off alone where I can't damage anyone".

Feeling the beginnings of a headache she went back to the tiny bathroom and dig around for some paracetamol. Finding a box she dug two out and swallowed them without water. Briefly considered...but no. Not like that. Not now. Not yet. She looked at her face in the mirror above the sink and started slightly as she saw the pale, gaunt face with huge dark bags under the reddest eyes possible look back at her. Resisted the urge to rip it off the wall and throw it across the room. She couldn't bare to look at herself, she was repulsed by the sight of herself, as so many people had told her she should be.

Looking at her thin silver watch she noted the time and pulled on a pair of converse and a light khaki jacket. Took one last look around the flat and closed the front door, pushing the keys into the key safe outside. In her letter to Cameron she'd asked him to let the landlord know and to ask him to email her the final bills including any charges he liked lieu of a notice period. It had started to drizzle so she walked quickly to the car and got in the drivers seat. A wall of anxiety rose as realised she was going to see Serena. Thought briefly about just going but no, she would, for once
face the fear and do it anyway. Then she would run, with justification for all the hurt and misery she was leaving in her wake.

Forcing herself to pay attention as she drove, she negotiated the few miles between her house and Serena's. She'd been there a few times for dinner with the brunette and Jason and loved how it always felt warm and welcoming, smelling of flowers and Jason's aftershave, filled with the sound of some weird singers she'd never heard of but always feeling like a home. Some chance of that today. She wasn't expecting to even be allowed through the door, Serena probably would just shout at her there and then and send her off in a haze of anger.

Rounding the final corner she swallowed and pulled into the driveway, gravel crunching under her wheels as she put on the handbrake and turned off the ignition. Sat there for a few minutes waiting for the world to stop spinning and to be able to breathe again.

Summoning every last ounce of courage she closed her eyes, sang her battle song in her head and opened the car door.
Chapter 12 - Serena

Chapter 12

Her phone buzzed while she stared absently at the little sports car that had pulled into her driveway. It was Jason, simply sending a thumbs up emoji and she felt relief as she knew he had understood her email. He was the one part of "The Plan", as she was now deeming it in her head, that was an unknown until then.

Staying seated was proving incredibly difficult. She wanted nothing more than to fly out of the front door, yank open the car and pull the infuriating, wonderful army medic into her arms and hold her tight. She giggled slightly as she pictured Bernie's face if she did that, which quickly turned to sorrow as she thought Bernie's most likely reaction would probably be some impressive wheel spin as she executed a perfect J-turn on Serena's driveway and roared off into the sunset.

She bit back the tears that threatened to form, if she opened the door with wet eyes Bernie would panic. "Cool, calm, collected" Serena repeated to herself. "No clues to the fact you are in fact an emotional wreck". Turning back to the window she looked unseen at the blonde in the car. She looked like she was talking to her herself. "Probably her goodbye speech" she thought and then the tears refused to stay away. Grabbing a tissue she blotted her eyes carefully, not wanting to make them red.

She thought back to the last time she'd tried to hide her tears from Bernie. Stood in the peace garden after Arthur's death, the trauma surgeon had come down for a cigarette and had found her there. She had immediately turned her back in Bernie, not wanting pity, swallowing the need to just give and sob for the boy she had come to love, for the unfairness of it all, for Morven and the fact that once again she felt desperately alone with trying to be strong for everyone. If Bernie was remotely kind to her she'd lose all semblance of control. It had always been the way, ever since her parents had taught her about not showing your emotion. Not something she was very good at to be honest, Serena had always been and continued to be a heart on her sleeve kind of girl but there was something about kindness that evoked the need to just give in and full on sob.

She'd stayed with her back to Bernie while she talked, fighting a losing battle as the soothing tones of her friends voice washed over her and a strangled sob escaped. Screwing up her eyes and her fists she tried to stop but Bernie, wonderful, kind Bernie had come across and laid her hand on Serena's shoulder questioningly. She'd told her not to be nice to her, that she'd make it worse but still she slipped a muscled arm around Serena's shoulder, allowed her to cry and be angry without saying anything. The brunette had had to fight the urge to spin into Bernie's arms, grab her desperately by the collar and hold on, hoping Bernie would never let her go, make her feel safe again. Instead she allowed Bernie to lead them off to Albies, buy her a glass of wine and sit together. They hadn't talked a lot, silence was, well had been, easy between them, able to communicate with a look, a gesture, a touch. She'd never felt more in tune with someone in her whole life she realised, and in that moment, lost her heart, even if she hadn't recognised it at the time, something she was cursing herself for now. Why had she been so blind to the love that was offered her and that she was so willing to reciprocate? They danced around this for so long, neither of them admitting it to the other and not really to themselves until that magical moment outside theatre where the world could have stopped turning and they still would have been completely absorbed in each other, in that moment there had been no time or space for anyone or anything besides the love between them.

And that kiss. Those kisses back. The fire and the passion, coupled with the tenderness and the,
yes, love, that has radiated between them for so long was all that existed for either of them. Nothing apart from hands and lips and eyes, learning each other in a whole new way. If she did nothing but kiss Bernie bloody stubborn mule Wolfe for the rest of her life she'd die a happy woman, Serena thought and rolled her eyes at herself.

Then her breath caught in her throat and her cheeks flamed as the car door opened and Bernie got out.
Chapter 13

Her footsteps crunched as she moved slowly over the gravel, her legs felt like they weren't attached to her body. She concentrated on breathing, slowly, deeply to try to stop the world spinning as the edges of her vision were slightly black. Fainting now would not be a good move, so she kept her eyes firmly fixed on her feet until she got a bit closer to the house. She looked up and time stopped as she spied Serena sitting in the window looking back at her. The world swayed dangerously at that first glimpse of her and Bernie staggered and squatted for a second so that she could collect herself. Was Serena going to come to the door? Wait for her? No. she was going make Bernie come to the door and ring the bell. That felt faintly cruel until she realised Serena was probably letting her be in control to the last moment, still giving her the choice to walk away if she wanted. "Or rehearsing her goodbye speech" her mind whispered wickedly. Determined to get this over with she walked with small steps to the door.

Serena watched her and for the umpteenth time in the last 24 hours filled up with tears. The Bernie walking towards her was a broken shell, she could see that so clearly. The fight she was clearly having with herself just to breathe and to walk. Clutching the windowsill Serena forced herself to stay put. This was about Bernie, making the choice, she had to allow her to walk away without speaking if that's what she chose. Then their eyes met and Serena put her hand to her cheek as if she'd been slapped. Even at a distance she could see the raw red eyes of someone who had cried until they'd had nothing left to cry with. She'd never seen Bernie cry she realised. The closest had been the night before sat on the floor outside theatre. Was that really only yesterday? It felt like days had passed and now they were engaged in this tortuous slow dance where Bernie had convinced herself she had ruined everything and was going to run. "Not this time" Serena half thought and half pleaded out loud as she watched Bernie sink into a squat. The need to rescue her was excruciating and still she just sat. There was still time for the Major to hightail it out of there without speaking. Waited, hardly breathing as she watched Bernie collect herself, stand dizzily and begin walking with baby steps at a snails pace to the door. She would wait until Bernie rang the bell. Then she would move, because the blonde would have given her permission to.

Bernie reached the door and braced herself against it, one hand each side of the frame before she hastily shoved her left hand back in her pocket. Leaning her forehead on the cool glass she counted again in her head fighting the rising panic, bile and desperate voice in her head telling her to run. "I can't do this" thought Bernie. "I can't hear her say the words she hates me" and turned back from the door taking 4 steps. No. she turned back and resumed her previous position braced against the door. She would do this, she could do this, for Serena. For the woman she loved more than she had ever thought possible, the woman who she had lost with her own thoughtless need. She allowed herself to replay the kiss in her mind. She'd seen Serena glance at her lips and that was all that it had taken. The vascular surgeon had poured comfort into her troubled mind, "fantastic, fearless" and she'd acted, craving the love and care that no one had ever shown her and brought their lips together. She had no idea why Serena had kissed her back, had comforted her again in the office afterwards, those sweet goodbye kisses. She hadn't had time to think at that point Bernie reasoned, so was still doing what she always did, spreading kindness. It wasn't until the "Come and say goodbye?" text that she knew for certain that Serena had proceeded and was ready for Bernie to leave. Now she was going to experience that full force. She allowed herself a full minute and then with a trembling hand pressed the doorbell.
Chapter 14

Serena opened the door, slowly. She didn't want to do anything that might cause Bernie to bolt. Taking a deep breath as she did, she arranged her face, she hoped, in a kind expression. Not that that mattered because Bernie's eyes were firmly fixed on her feet in her black and white Converse. Looking at the blonde Serena almost flinched. She looked dishevelled and weary, like the effort of holding herself upright was almost too much. One hand crammed awkwardly into the pocket of her jacket, she clearly hadn't noticed that she had fastened it wrong and there was one large khaki button left over at the bottom. But what really got to Serena was Bernie's face, that beautiful, gorgeous face was deathly pale except for two prominent dark circles and those raw red eyes that even the best make up would have been useless to hide. Not that she ever bothered will all that girly stuff, and not that she needed to, throughly Serena. Normally the Major had the most perfect, flawless lily-white skin she'd ever seen. Today is was dull and blotchy, with what looked like a faint trace of dried blood high up by her hairline. Serena frowned at that but couldn't see any obvious cause, then quickly rearranged her face to something more neutral.

Slowly, painfully, Bernie dragged her eyes over Serena's knees, took in the soft blue wool of her pullover and fixed her eyes firmly on the delicate skin at her throat, unable to find the courage to meet her best friends eyes. Unwilling to see the hatred, the revulsion her mind told her would be there. She waited for Serena to break the silence and when she didn't say anything Bernie knew she had to take the last step and slowly, slowly her eyes travelled further. Past the adorable cleft in her chin, up the perfect cheekbones to Serena's eyes. As soon as their eyes met Bernie screwed hers shut. This had been a terrible idea. She should have just gone. If she'd been able to she might have run in that second but unfortunately the proximity to Serena had rendered her legs fairly useless. If she hadn't still had one hand on the door frame she probably would have puddles on the floor in an exhausted, broken heap. What was she doing here? Serena didn't seem to want to shout at her. Surely she would have started by now if she was intending to.

Serena continued to just look at Bernie, drinking her in. Trying to memorise every detail. This could after all be the last time she ever laid eyes on her and a wave of sadness came, forcing her to shut her own eyes for a second before she went back to studying the other woman's face. She kept being drawn to the dried blood though, the doctor in her rising up, wanting to take care of Bernie if she was physically hurt. She was going to try to mend the emotional hurt too but that was far less easy. She waited patiently for Bernie to speak, it had to be her first. She had an idea that if she even opened her mouth to speak before the army medic did that she would bolt without being shown what Serena had put together and she wasn't having that. If Bernie still wanted to go then, then she would let her, wouldn't, couldn't stand in her way. But not until after that.

Bernie was fighting the urge to run with every single ounce of her mental strength. She owed Serena this. It's the one things she'd asked for, for Bernie to come and say goodbye and she would do it if it killed her. It felt like it was after all. Managing to draw in a shaky breath she whispered "Goodbye Serena" and relief flooded over her. She'd done it. She done what Serena had asked and now she could go. Two tears forced their way out from under her closed eyelids and she turned to go.
Chapter 15.

All of a sudden there was a hand wrapped around her wrist that was in her jacket pocket, stilling her steps. Not turning back around she closed her eyes and fought the tears. Serena had stopped her. "Here it comes" she thought to herself and braced as hard for the impact of the words as she once had when facing enemy fire. This was going to hurt far worse than any bullet wound and she sported three scars as testament to that not being an exaggeration. It took everything Bernie had left not to pull away and run, but still, her love for Serena wouldn't let her, wouldn't deny her if this is what she really wanted to do. "You deserve this" hissed the ever-present mocking voice of her own mind.

"Bernie"

Serena's voice cut through the noise and the buzz in her ears. She swallowed hard, still refusing to turn round, not ready once again and unable to read the tone of Serena's voice so clearly. There was clearly irritation and frustration but not the fierce heat of anger she'd expected. It almost sounded...fond? She shook herself imperceptibly at that, knowing it couldn't be true, that her tired, desperate mind was trying read stuff into what wasn't there. She wanted nothing more than to turn around and fall into open arms but that was a fantasy. The fact her friend was touching her at all was a minor miracle.

"Bernie" came Serena's voice again. "Bernie, I can't do this on the doorstep. Please can we go inside?"

Her knees buckled a little a that. Of course Serena wouldn't want to do this outside, to make a spectacle of herself in front of her neighbours, in front of strangers passing by on the street. She should have thought, have prepared for this but it hadn't entered her head that she would be invited inside, asked, not commanded, and she was totally blindsided. The panic rose in that and all of a sudden she was in flashback to Basra. She'd been blindsided that day too and she'd lost 3 young people to death's embrace in the field, and another, one of the survivors to a bridge over the M4 18 months later, so haunted by what he'd seen he simply couldn't take it. The 5th, the other survivor, was in prison having beaten his wife so hard in the throes of a flashback she now had permanent brain damage and he was serving 12 years. 6 lives ruined simply because she'd been caught by something she couldn't see, even though she'd tried so hard to think of every eventuality, the mortar, not a weapon favoured by the insurgents at that time, she hadn't predicted, and on hearing it had yelled too late. At the hearing afterwards she had not faced any accusation, in fact had been commended for her leadership and later awarded a bloody medal, at Buckingham Palace no less, for gallantry at refusing to leave the bodies of her soldiers behind. Major Berenice Griselda Wolfe QGM. What a joke she thought. It should be Bernie Wolfe, SUC. Screw up coward. She'd felt such a fraud that day in her dress uniform with so many people stopping her and thanking her for her service. Even the protestors against the war had nodded at her as she went past down The Mall, recognising that it was not her choice to go to war, she was simply following orders. Remembering how two little boys who'd been watching the Welsh Guards at the gate had spotted her and saluted, standing to their version of attention. She saluted back and they'd broken into wide smiles. That had been the best part of that day, she thought to herself, the one moment when she'd made someone else happy before Marcus had hurried her onward. He'd never been comfortable being an "army wife" and she'd realised he felt inadequate next to her when she was in uniform, as if her service was somehow shaming to him, that he wasn't man enough to serve so his wife had had to.
Snapping suddenly back to the present she realised Serena was still holding her wrist, her question still hanging in the air. Shuffling her feet she turned back slightly towards Serena, who kept hold of her wrist. She seemed to realise, Bernie thought, that the blonde was still favouring flight over fight. She had no fight left in her anymore. She'd used it all so all that was left was running. But she stayed. Turned to Serena fully, though not meeting her eyes, and nodding her yes, took a shaky step over the doorstep and inside, where Serena, still clutching her wrist, closed the door behind them.
All the while Bernie had been lost between Basra and Buckingham Palace, Serena had simply watched her. Held her wrist gently and yet firmly and watched. She could see that the blonde had retreated somewhere in the recesses of memories and had contented herself to wait and provide that small link to the here and now. She watched shadows pass across the exhausted face of the woman she loved and desperately wanted to do more, offer soothing words, touches but, knowing how fragile the army medics state of mind truly was, did nothing more than keep her fingers wrapped round the slender wrist, just at the junction where the hand disappeared into the pocket. Restrained herself from reaching up and brushing stray blonde fringe pieces from unseeing eyes.

When Bernie snapped back into herself and finally came through the door she could have shouted in relief. Phase 1 complete as Jason would say, she thought to herself fondly. Quickly, without letting go, she shut the door behind them and struggled with urge to lock it. Not a wise move she surmised, even though to her it meant safety, to Bernie it would mean confinement and probably panic. She'd been around Bernie enough to recognise that the Major always positioned herself to be able to escape, always clocked entrances and exits to any new space and never let herself be trapped without the ability to egress. This wasn't about controlling Bernie anyway. It was about demonstrating what she would lose, then always, always giving her the choice.

Realising they were still stood in the hallway and neither one of them had moved or spoken Serena asked Bernie if she would like to take her jacket off, to which Bernie simply shook her head. Saw her glance down at the row of her shoes and Jason's and the questions pass through her of should she remove her shoes, would she be in here long enough, what if she needed to run quickly.

"It's okay" Serena said gently, causing Bernie to start at the sound of her voice, "you can keep them on if you want to. I don't mind". The corner of Bernie's mouth twitched up momentarily in gratitude, swiftly replaced by a tremble in her lower lip that Serena kindly pretended not to notice. "She's exhausted" Serena thought. "No wonder she's gone into a panic about what's happened" and her heart went out to Bernie all over again. She'd never felt like this about anyone, not even Elinor and Jason, she wanted to protect them as a mother of course, but she wanted to offer Bernie every single part of her if only it would bring even a tiny measure of relief for a single second, even if it took all of her, she'd do it in a heartbeat. This wasn't defending the indefensible it was loving someone who thought she was unlovable. And without love the burden would be too great, buy with love all things were possible. Snatches of a song wandered into Serena's mind and she tucked it away for now.

She watched Bernie, who had shut her eyes again, clench her right fist and since slightly as she appeared also to be lost in the throes of a song, she recognise the slight head movements as a rhythm of some sorts and wondered what it was. Briefly considered if it might be the national anthem and had to swallow a chuckle at herself, why on earth would it be, though she had listened to Bernie whistle it a couple of times, though come to think of it, that had been when Bernie was teasing her back when she was deputy CEO.

She watched as whatever Bernie was lost in played out again and she opened her eyes, seeming a little more present in the moment than she previously had. Looked at her struggle briefly with herself.

"Serena, um"
"Yes Dar-Bernie?"

"Well, um, why am I here?"
"Damn" thought Serena. "I can't answer that without telling her." No. She had to didn't she? The fear came back badly. She shoved down the need to just cup Bernie's face and kiss the pain in her soul away but that was for later. The blonde needed to trust her, and to trust herself and as good a kisser as Serena prided herself on being, it was going to take more. She took a deep breath and looked at Bernie in the eye. Both fighting the urge to look away, they tried to pour words out to each other without words. With the eye contact that was also so expressive.

"Bernie", Serena began, "I know you're super scared right now and I don't think you heard me, when I said it was okay" she said simply, watching the other woman wince and turn away slightly. "I'm not mad either, I'm not angry. I am not going to stop you going, not if it's what you really want, but...", she paused, trying to read the 100 mile an hour thoughts and emotions ripping their way through the blonde's mind and face. "but, I am going to ask you to give me a little time, an hour, to trust me, just for one hour and then you can go, if you choose and I won't stand in your way, I won't beg, I won't run after you and make a scene. Just an hour".

She stopped then. Trying again to make sense of the non verbal cues she was getting from the army medic. She saw a look of abject terror pass across the woman's face and realised Bernie thought she was trapping her. Her heart sank as she leant against the stair rail for support. "The door isn't locked Bernie" and immediately Bernie exhaled a noisy breath that neither of them had seen she'd been holding. Panting slightly, she shoved her hair out of her face where it was falling down and tried to control her breathing.

"You can leave now if you want, in five minutes or in an hour. I'm not keeping you prisoner". Bernie nodded and immediately was in the throes of yet another flashback, of voices and laughing. Of bonds around her wrists and ankles. Of....NO. Bernie forced herself back into the present by biting down on her right hand slightly until the sounds and images faded to just Serena, looking at her. Nodding simply, she said nothing other than "okay" in a whimper.

In a moment of courage Serena held her right hand out to Bernie for her to hold and Bernie offered her right hand back to her so now they were stood shaking hands. They both smiled a little at that, Bernie's fading faster. "I wanted to hold your hand, just for a moment so we could maybe go in the kitchen"? Serena was making an effort to be clear and simple without being too direct. "Will you take my hand..."

And as the words left her mouth she trailed off as abject panic came over Bernie and she backed-pedalled from Serena, shaking her head violently but just as quickly coming back towards Serena as she saw her expressive brown eyes full with heavy tears that she was trying hard not to let fall.

"I, I can't Serena..please"
"Please Bernie. Please, please just take my hand. I'm not asking for any other touch."

Bernie realised she didn't have anything left to argue with. Slowly, she withdrew her left hand from her pocket and offered it, palm down to Serena, certain she was about to be thrown out of the house, or, be prevented from leaving as Serena called for help.

As it happened, Serena did neither. Looking at Bernie's hand quizzically at the raggedy kitchen paper, wrapped loosely around it. She moved to take her hand in her own but quickly looked at Bernie for permission. Seeing no objection she turned her friends hand over and gently unwrapped
it, revealing the still oozing gash diagonally across the pale skin. Realising she was seeing confirmation of her earlier thoughts that Bernie might be self harming, she knew how she reacted now was crucial. As a vascular surgeon, knowing Bernie and being utterly not bothered by the sight of blood she simply and tenderly brought the back of her hand to her lips, kissed it and then lightly pressed Bernie's hand into the grip of her own and so very gently started them both down the hallway to the kitchen.
Chapter 18

Slowly, not wanting Bernie to freak out, Serena lead them down the hall and through the glass panelled door into the kitchen. Her favourite room she often thought. Cosy and homey. She and Jason had found an easy routine in here. He loved to help and had made certain tasks his own, setting the table, stacking the dishwasher according to some precise algorithm he's tried to explain more than once to optimise the full efficiency of the eco cycle he insisted they use, that Serena didn't begin to try to understand, she wasn't stupid, far from it, but Jason's intellect was infinitely superior. A half smile crosses her face thinking about their last scrabble game where she'd lost by nearly 750 points, which would ordinarily be an issue for the normally super competitive woman but instead it just made her proud of her nephew that she loved as a son. She'd been so blessed by his arrival in her life, yes it was difficult at times but he was so worth it.

The Plan was going to have to take a back seat for a few minutes. Pulling a stool out from under the counter she settled Bernie on it, noticing her checking the exits as usual, even though she'd been in the room before. Keeping a gentle hold of poor Bernie's hand she twisted away slightly and retrieved the largest first aid kit the blonde had ever seen. Looking at Serena through her fringe she raised an eyebrow in a silent question. Serena chuckled and said "Girl Scout. Plus Jason really is the most accident prone human being on the planet" she grinned and Bernie offered a shy smile at that, before dropping her gaze to their hands, still loosely together. A small sigh escaped her as she squared her shoulders, waiting for the inevitable inevitable interrogation that was sure to follow but it didn't come.

Serena laid out quickly what she needed, alcohol wipes, steri-strips and a set of tweezers and some dressings. If nothing else she was going to make sure the trauma surgeon went away with this piece of her cared for.

"What did you use" she asked, not prying but needing to know about infection sources. Bernie recognised it as a doctors question and that made it easier to reply.

"Kitchen knife. A clean one"

Serena nodded and opened an alcohol wipe. "There is no way to pretend this isn't going to sting like a bitch". "Sorry" she added. as an afterthought but kept the "for more than you know right now" inside her own head. Bernie hissed a little as the alcohol smarted but said nothing, just watching as Serena used the sterile tweezers to lay the steri-strips across the cut at a 90 degree angle and then covered it with a clean dressing followed by a crepe bandage and swept the detritus into the nearby bin.

The fear returned to Bernie then. Whilst it had been excruciating to show Serena what she'd done there had been huge comfort for her in the way Serena had taken care of the wound because it was simple doctor-patient, now they were back to Serena and Bernie and right here, right now, that was terrifying.

Serena had taken hold of her bandaged hand again, cradling it between both of hers. She seemed to be waiting, thought Bernie, though God knows what for as the army medic was far from being able to speak. Then she was being gently tugged to standing and just for a moment Bernie was desperate for Serena to pull her across the space and into her arms, but they were moving across to the long oak table. A bench covered in cosy cushioned fabric ran down one side and Serena settled Bernie on the edge of that, pulling out a chair from the head of the table where she herself sat, saying
nothing. Bernie pulled her gaze away and looked at the table.

Arranged in a line in front of her were a series of white envelopes, numbered 1 to 7.
Chapter 19

Frowning slightly Bernie looked at Serena, asking the silent question "what are these."

"Will you hear me out"? Serena asked. "Because I would really like you to hear what I want to say, but I'm scared.

"You're scared? Of what?" Bernie whispered. "You're the bravest person I know."

Serena sniffled a little. Do. Not. Cry. She told herself sternly. Bernie, action woman herself, who'd fought, served and nearly died for Queen and country thought she was brave.

"I'm scared of lots of things Bernie. Have you forgotten the great spider incident?" and gave a half giggle that turned into a shudder.

Bernie let out a laugh at that, remembering the really very small spider that had appeared on the wall of their office and Serena had screamed so hard and so suddenly that Berne had thrown a whole cup of lukewarm coffee high in the air in fright as she had assessed for attack and injury instantly. Unfortunately she'd thrown it in an arc and it's trajectory covered Serena head to toe, her pale blue blouse turning light brown, making Serena shriek again as she'd not noticed Bernie throw it as she'd been fixated on the spider and its proximity to her body. Bernie had then made it worse by laughing so hard she'd cried whilst Serena had shouted for Fletch to come and remove the damn thing, Bernie having been rendered helpless by her giggles. Coming over to tell her off, Bernie had offered her treasured grey hoodie to Serena immediately and disarmed her. She'd ended up sending Serena for a shower and a set of scrubs whilst she had bought a peace offering coffee and pastry from Pulses.

"Yes okay" Serena snorted at her. "so spiders, horror films..." Bernie laughed again, "but most of all", she continued, "I'm scared of you.."

Bernie recoiled instantly like she'd been slapped and got up in one movement. The tears poured out of her, she couldn't stem the tide.

"I haven't finished! exclaimed Serena, in a slightly harsher tone than she'd intended. "You said you'd hear me out!"

Bernie froze and looked at Serena who tugged her back to sitting down, passing her a tissue from the box on the table. The brunette berated herself, "choose your words more carefully Campbell!" as she waited for Bernie to get the tears under some control. Reaching out, wrapped her hand round the shaking woman's wrist and traces faint circles over the skin on the inside. Bernie just let her, seeming at last to draw some comfort from physical touch from Serena.

"Are you ready for me to finish darling?" Serena said and immediately cursed herself for the term of endearment that had slipped out. "Fuck sake Serena" she thought to herself. "Reign it in" as Bernie began to cry again at hearing the word. "Sorry Bernie" she said out loud, tears rising in her own eyes. Bernie took a deep breath and visibly made an effort to control herself as Serena surreptitiously wiped her own eyes. Looking up at Serena she just nodded, and gripped the wrist holding hers to anchor herself.

"I'm scared of you leaving under an influence of a lie, thinking you've screwed this up. I'm scared you are going to go and I'll never see you again. I'm afraid of you hurting yourself not just
physically, but emotionally and I'm scared you'll bolt before I'm done."

Serena drew in a shaky breath and looked at Bernie whose mouth had fallen open in astonishment. Not giving herself chance to think, she continued,

"I want to show you, if you'll let me, some things to help you decide what to do. Think of it like a science experiment if that helps. Testing some hypotheses. That's what these envelopes will do. They're not meant to hurt you or frighten you, just help you decide."

Serena found herself unable to continue for a moment, choked up with the image of Bernie leaving and never coming back. Bernie on the other hand was trying so hard to process what was happening. They just sat, holding each other's wrists.

Bernie summoned every ounce of courage left in her weary mind and looked at Serena. "Okay" she whispered. "I'll look".

Serena could have fainted, cried, shouted and sung. But all she did simply was pick up the envelope marked 1.
Chapter 20

She passed the envelope to Bernie who just sat and held it in her bandaged hand for a few moments, thinking about how much trouble Serena had gone to and how she owed her to stay and see this through, before she did the right thing and saved Serena from her by leaving her. "She asks so little from me" thought the troubled medic. "I can do this for her." She traced the cursive number one on the front with her eyes, written in fountain pen. She loved how Serena had little things she wouldn't compromise on, fountain pen, bone china mugs for coffee and tea if at all possible in a proper cup and saucer. Handwritten thank you notes left for their colleagues, fresh flowers in their office each week and scented drawer liners, even in her work desk. Like part of her friend and colleague was an old soul from a bygone age. Bernie could picture her in a flowing dress, stepping out a horse drawn carriage in Victorian England, regal and graceful. She, on the other hand, would probably have been some slightly grubby scullery maid, far beneath the notice of Lady Serena Campbell and the blonde gave brief thanks for being born when they were.

Serena could see Bernie was lost in thought, but not in unpleasant ones she decided, there wasn't that air of tension that she sometimes caught when they were alone in their office and she glanced up to find Bernie present in body but absent somewhere in her mind. On those occasions Serena had to take hold of the arms of her chair to stop herself going and gathering Bernie up in a fierce hug until she came back to the room, instead waiting until she came round of her own accord, her eyes immediately searching for her best friend and the relief at finding her, even if she did quickly glance away, especially if their eyes met, the weight of shame too heavy to maintain it.

Torn between waiting for Bernie to do this in her own time and mentally wanting to move her along, conscious of only having asked for an hour, she inhaled and cleared her throat, making the other woman flinch slightly as her mind was dragged back to the here and now. Their eyes met and the brunette gave a nod of encouragement, trying to telepathically communicate messages of comfort and care. Bernie bit her lip and let go of Serena's wrist so she could use her good hand to run her fingertips under the seal of the glue holding the flap down. It was a small envelope this one, less than A5 and when she released the back a faint air of soap rose into the air. There was no paper in it, which is what Bernie has been expecting and she inhaled a little as a tiny amount of fear crept into the edges of her mind again.

"Remember what I said Bernie, they're not here to frighten you or hurt you"

She'd needed that reminder and her vision cleared again where it had started to go hazy. Leaning forward she opened up the envelope and a small patch of dark blue cloth came tumbling out, a piece of a set of scrubs she recognised. Turning it over she saw the words "Trauma Unit Doctor" on them, it was a neatly trimmed section from one of her scrub tops from the hospital. She followed each letter with her index finger and smiled before looking up at Serena.

"Reason 1. The trauma unit. Your trauma unit, that you are so proud of and that I am proud of you for. Using the skills that you've worked so hard to gain, the experiences you've lived for to put the most broken people back together"

Serena's voice was thick and heavy with unshed tears. "I can't keep it going without you Bernie. It's too much for one person. We fought so hard to get it, if you, it will most likely go too. I won't want it to but I can't see any other way. I'm not saying this to hurt you. I'm trying to show you what you've achieved and I don't want you to lose it."

The trauma surgeon's injured hand flew to her own cheek as she desperately tried to remember how
to take a breath. Her, no, their trauma unit, where they did their best work together, where they were so in sync with each other it was like they were one mind, would close. Her heart hurt and her cheeks burned as she fought down a sob. Serena had given her all she'd ever wanted from her working life in helping her get the trauma unit approved and built, losing that was like losing her dreams.

Serena did nothing more than watch to start with but saw the internal struggle and once again took a hand in hers and traced those tiny circles on delicate, pale skin. "This is so hard" she thought and then had a word with herself, there was a way to go yet with The Plan, she needed to keep it together, for both of them. Became aware that Bernie had spoken and she'd missed it.

"Sorry, I zoned out for a second."
"Serena, um..well.."
"Yes?"
"Well, um, why do you have a set of my scrubs here?"

Oh crap. She hadn't expected that as a question and examined herself to see how honest she should be. Then reminded she had called Bernie out for lying in the past she decided to just go with it. Every single thing she said or did might the thing that caused Bernie to go so how much worse could it be?

"Well, um" said the vascular surgeon, unconsciously echoing the Major, "I, sometimes, well, sleep in the top, it makes me feel safe when we've had a difficult day, like you've got my back like you said you did."

Oh. OH. Bernie blushed at the compliment hidden there, that she made Serena feel safe.

"It upset me a little to have to sacrifice it, but I can soon steal another" Serena said, winking at Bernie, trying and succeeding in raising a smile on the face looking back at her. "Don't worry, there isn't a piece of your hoodie anywhere, even I wouldn't be THAT mean" she chuckled softly.

Turning her attention back to the piece of fabric, Bernie picked it up and rubbed it against her cheek. That hadn't been so bad, they both thought at the same time, I can do this. Picking up the envelope she carefully replaced the small square and loosely sealed it again, placing it next to her on the bench. Looking up she saw Serena looking back and holding envelope 2.
Chapter 21 - Envelope 2

Chapter 21.

Bernie shifted a little in her seat, tucking her legs underneath her. She became aware of just how tired she felt as she sat there and rubbed her eyes which were sore and puffy. She looked over at Serena who was sat leaning forward slightly. She wanted to ask her if she would hold her hand but didn't dare. She'd ruined this with the kiss, she couldn't ask that of Serena, push her any further than she already had. A sob rose up and escaped her throat and the other woman's face registered a look of something like alarm and concern and the brunette reached over and took Bernie's hand in hers, immediately relaxing the blonde.

"I know this is hard Bernie. I've got you".

Oh god this was torture. "I can't think" thought the muddle Major. So much of her wanted to run towards Serena instead of away from her but she couldn't, could she. She couldn't damage this incredible, beautiful woman she'd lost her heart to. "She will be so much better off with you" her mind interjected cruelly and another sob forced its way out. Serena began stroking the back of her hand immediately, which was soothing and painful in the same moment.

Serena took a breath and passed over envelope 2 with a slightly tremor in her hand, unusual for the normally unflappable surgeon. This was larger, A4 sized and flat, with no real weight to it, the number 2 in the royal blue ink that was her trademark. She didn't think this one was too big a risk, that Bernie would get this one but that it might tug on her heartstrings a little and she hoped the Major could take it. She had never seen her best friend look more broken and a sob rose in her own throat but unlike the other doctor she managed to choke it down before it escaped. She had another word with herself, The Plan still had some way to run, and she needed to keep control for both of them. Still running her thumb over the back of Bernie's hand, she almost snatched it away when she realised she was holding her, but then saw that it was giving her comfort. Poor, confused, traumatised Bernie, who clearly craved love and affection from Serena and who was completely terrified of it at the same time. She made a silent vow to herself, that if this worked, she would show the other woman every single day that she was loved and cared for. "I want to spend my life with her" Serena thought, and the enormity of that hit her in a wave and she closed her eyes briefly. "Let's not say that out loud right now!" she agreed herself.

Shakily Bernie reached out bravely and took envelope 2 from Serena. Making brief eye contact for encouragement she reluctantly took her hand out of the other woman's and once again to be able to open it, missing the warmth of the contact instantly. It was paper this time and she slid it out carefully so she didn't damage it. Turning it over she immediately gave a wide smile. It was a picture of Cameron and Jason side by side. Cameron was looking at Jason with a huge grin on his face and Jason had his eyes shut behind his glasses clearly laughing really hard. It was a picture full of warmth and light and life and Bernie looked fondly at the two young men who occupied a place in the very centre of her heart. They were a reason, she knew, to stay.

"Reason 2, our beautiful, crazy, funny boys." Serena said. "You've just started to rebuild your relationship with Cam and I think, if you persevere, he will reapply to med school". She knew that was a huge wish of Bernie's, that he would finish his programme and qualify. "If you run, you go back to the beginning again. Have to build that trust again. I don't know where you're thinking of going, but if you leave Holby, he won't be as easy to see."

Bernie nodded, sniffling, and ran her fingertip down the side of Cameron's face. Her precious boy, she'd seen the hurt in his eyes too many times when she'd left, especially as a little boy when she
was going on tour. He'd tried to be so brace each time and yet when it came time to go, he'd cling to her and Marcus had had to physically remove him. As he'd got older he'd been less demonstrative but always giving her a fierce hug when she left, the remnants of that little lad still in there.

"And then Jason. Who in his own words "likes Dr Bernie very much"." Serena smiles fondly at the thought of her nephew and Bernie smiled shyly with her. "He has made you a part of his life, in ways you maybe don't know. He always asks about you every evening, if I go out and remind him he has my number, he always says he has yours as well. You connect about games and tanks and documentaries and army life in a way I can't, in a way I've never seen him let anyone in. If you go, he'll ask about you for months, when are you coming back, did he do something wrong, did I..." Serena had to stop then or she as going to lose it. Felt Bernie take the initiative surprisingly and slip her hand back into the brunette's, simply seeking to give the comfort she had received and it was so very welcome.

"Where did you get this photo? I've not seen it before."

"Facebook"

Bernie raised her eyebrows at this, Serena was known to hate social media with a passion, her old fashioned side preferring letters and calls.

"You've got Facebook?" she said incredulously and was rewarded with a peal of laughter.

"Oh come on now, you know I don't, despite Elinor's best efforts. Jason and I agreed that when he got Facebook I should have the password to check he was using it appropriately. I stole it from there. It was from their outing to the football a few weeks back. I love it."

" I do too" offered Bernie and ran her finger down the side of Jason's face in the photo, just as she had with Cam. "It's so easy to care about Jason and I'm so touched to hear what you've said."

Serena nodded, not trusting herself to speak at hearing the love in her friends voice for her complicated nephew. But then the shadow passed across Bernie's face and she could see that something had popped into her head, a doubt, a worry and that the fear had come back hard. She kept hold of the blondes hand, trying to transmit calm and peace in her touch. Waited for the intensity to drop a little and picked up envelope 3.
Chapter 22. Envelope 3

Chapter Notes

This is LONG. Would love to hear thoughts about if this is moving too slowly or how it's making you feel. I love these two and want to get it right!

Serena begins to wonder (like the writer) if maybe she was dragging this out too much. Both envelopes so far had proved to be enormous journeys of emotion and she had wanted that, to give Bernie reasons, counter-reasons to what was going on in her mind that had warped her thinking, that she'd screwed up so badly it wasn't fixable. What if Bernie actually really did want to go though, didn't want to with a silly old straight woman, well formerly straight. What if all she was doing was causing pain and prolonging the inevitable for them both, that was going to take so much longer to heal from. "Should I just be letting her go?" even though the mere thought of that was like stamping on her own heart, ruminated the brunette. Yet all the signs, the needing to be close, wanting her hand held, which Serena could see Bernie needed if she didn't know it, the looks of care and concern and the fact she was still sitting here at her kitchen table suggested that Bernie was at best undecided. "Keep going" she urges herself internally. She (and the readers) will tell you if you get it catastrophically wrong.

Part of Bernie had to admit she was intrigued by what Serena had put on the rest of the envelopes. "Nobody has ever cared like this for me" she thought. "Why isn't she shouting at me" she asked herself again. Forcing herself to move she rested her chin in her hand and looked at Serena.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked and looked in horror as Serena wrapped her arms around herself, clearly wounded by the question. She hadn't intended to say it like that, but now it was out there, she couldn't take it back. Like she couldn't take the kiss back, couldn't change what had happened. This stupid question was another piece of evidence why she shouldn't be here, shouldn't be doing this to Serena and she she shifted her weight slightly as if to spring up again.

"I will answer that, just not quite yet" came the answer. "If you want to go, you can remember but I very much hope you'll stay and see this through, the envelopes I mean" Serena added hastily. Everything she said sounded like a declaration of undying love in her ears and set warning bells off in her mind as she recognised the need to keep it simple and not too over-emotional. Bernie had evidenced with her cut to her hand how she couldn't process large emotional experiences without hurting herself and the brunette did not want to be responsible for any more scars. "She's got more than enough for a lifetime" she said to herself. Bernie nodded at the reply. "I will stay" came the response and Serena's vision went black at the edges and she furiously fought off the faint that threatened to happen with some deep breathing.

She slid envelope 3 across the small expanse of table between them. This was another A4 size one, but this time clearly filled with something as the sides bulged out slightly and it had a small amount of weight to it. Bernie just stared at it, gathering the fortitude to open it and see the next reason Serena had constructed for staying. Part of her wanted to guess but her mind stayed blank, because she couldn't fathom any reasons, even though Serena had given her two very concrete ones.

Again, she opened slowly and this time several things came out, some small pieces of paper and
some larger ones, and a pair of socks.

She laughed a silent laugh as the socks, knowing exactly what they were about so she turned her attention to the pieces of paper. A receipt from Pulses, for two coffees, a chocolate croissant and a cinnamon swirl, the thought of which made Bernie's stomach rumble audibly, making Serena giggle. A printed out menu from the Italian with the extensive wine list on Chester Road. A pizza menu from Dominoes, a label from a bottle of wine she recognised as having given Serena for her birthday, Shiraz, named Serena, which she had found by accident when looking for the perfect bottle. A printed set of two letter scrabble words was the last thing out.

She waited for Bernie to look through each item, studying her face intensely for any clue to her thoughts. Some of these were more obvious than others and she wanted the Major to have chance to look through, to try to guess. Watching as she laid the items out in a line and waiting for a sign to speak, not wanting to startle the woman but also, selfishly wanting to keep her here a little, knowing that if Bernie left, she herself would never feel whole again and her heart rate increased and her pith went dry at the chasm of loneliness and emptiness that had opened in front of her, a deep, dark, uninviting loss that she'd stared into several times and almost lost herself into, falling, falling, down into the hole where depression waited to catch her with its arms. She blinked the image away and saw Bernie looking at her through the fringe covering her eyes.

"Reason 3 - memories. Memories you've experienced and ones you haven't had yet. A history and a present that you share with a unique set of people, who won't be there to reminisce with you about them. About that sharp frost in October when you realised you hadn't got gloves so came to work with socks on your hands and tried to shake Hanssen's hand while still wearing them." Serena couldn't help herself then and dissolved into giggles and Bernie, after a moment, joined in, enjoying the warmth of the memory and the look on the tall man's face as he'd shaken her hand in a sock. She'd looked round to see if anyone had clocked it and Serena had been there with tears pouring down her face, clutching her stomach as it hurt from laughing so hard. "Put a sock in it" had become one of their phrases, only understood by them, and it always lightened a dark moment.

Serena wiped her eyes and continued.

"Pulses - who now know when one of us appears, that we don't even need to speak, to extra shot Americanoes, a chocolate croissant and a cinnamon swirl. I forgot to tell Lucy you weren't in the other morning and was presented with our order. The extra caffeine was welcome but I can't eat two pastries every morning! Not all of us have a big macho army medic metabolism" she joked. "Then there's the Italian where I am drinking my way through the best Shiraz collection in Holby..."

"Apart from the one here" Bernie quipped and bit her lip, wondering if that had gone too far, but was relieved to see Serena grin from ear to ear.

"Well true!! But the way they always give us the same table and then have to throw us out at the end of the evening. Then when you order the ward pizza, and always, always put pineapple on it, which is frankly a crime against tastebuds.." "Oy" put in Bernie.. "And the rest of us give all ours to you, which come to think of it, might be your plan anyway. Then there's the wine, I have no idea where you found a wine called Serena. Who else would get that, would know that that was the perfect gift, not because it was very drinkable Shiraz but because we shared it and you drank some."

The heat in the room intensified and the air seemed to thicken as they drew slightly close to each other. Serena allowed her eyes to flicker down to Bernie's gorgeous lips, the soft like velvet mouth that had given her the sweetest kisses she'd ever had, and shivered slightly at the thought of those
kisses not being confined to her mouth and a tiny moan escaped her. She snapped her eyes back up and realised Bernie's eyes were like dinner plates, she could see all of the whites." She reminded herself this was supposed to be slowing things down and thoughts and looks like that were not helpful.

"You printed the list of two letter words off so I could try to give Jason a little competitiveness when we play scrabble and test me on them. Who else is going to throw a random letter at me in theatre when it's stressful and get me to repeat all the two letter words back to them" Bernie thought briefly about tossing one out there now, but could see Serena hadn't finished.

"Those are memories we've made, that no one else shares, wont giggle with me about in a corner when we see Hansen, won't eat with me, drink with me, operate wit me in the same way, or with you. It'll be gone. Swallowed up by the distance between us"

They sat and looked into each other's eyes, seeing the sadness reflected back to their own.

"It doesn't have to be like this" screamed Serena's mind. Bernie's simply thanked God and the Universe that there were some happy memories to treasure in it all, not everything had been awful for Serena. "Till now"

"Okay?" Serena whispered and Bernie nodded as a single tear tracked its way down her cheek. The brunette so wanted to lean in and kiss that tear and any more away, but she looked down instead and picked up envelope 4.
Thank you all for the precious comments all the way through this but especially over my insecurity on the last chapter. I'm not sure I've got this chapter right, it's a bit too dialogue focussed, but I hope you get something from it anyway xx

Chapter 23.

Bernie absent-mindlessly ran her sore hand through her hair and winced as she felt the edges of the skin pull against the steri-strips. She frightened herself by cutting her hand. As a surgeon her hands were her tools, and causing damage to her left palm felt like a sign to herself and the world that she'd given up. She couldn't do it anymore, keep it together, live with everything in her head. The flashbacks and memories that were always in the room, the nightmares that left her sweaty and hoarse. And the litany of mistakes and bad choices that had led to this, causing pain to the person she loved like no other, Serena, who spoke.

"Do you want me to have another look at it?"

Bernie shook her head and forced her bandaged hand between her thighs as she sat, trying to hide it. A great well of shame and grief rose up in her and she put her forehead on the table, not too gently, and Serena sucked in a breath. The silence was all of a sudden absolutely deafening. If Serena had known what would come out her mouth next she definitely wouldn't have said it, who said stuff like that in a situation like this, even as a joke?

"Don't hit your head, you need the brain cells".

OH. GOD. "Err what I meant..." and then stopped when she saw Bernie's shoulders shaking, with what she thought were sobs, but when she sat up Serena realised she'd managed to make her laugh with mirth and broken the moment of pain and self-recrimination for the blonde. Flushing a very violent shade of red she shoved envelope 4 towards Bernie and said,

"There's paper in this one. Can you take them out one at a time please?"

The trauma surgeon nodded her agreement and broke the seal. Slid the first piece of paper out and turned it over to a grinning Fletch staring back at her. She exhaled and said

"More Facebook stalking Ms Campbell?"

"Jason's Facebook was the gift that just kept on giving. Though I can never unsee the photo of Fletch on some stag do asleep with the word "twat" written on his forehead in scarlet lipstick."

They grinned at each other until the enormity of what nearly happened to Fletch hit them both and they found themselves tearing up, and Bernie had a wave of nausea as the guilt crashed over her. Seeing this happen Serena started to speak in a soft, low voice.

"Reason 4a. Fletch and the Fletchlings. We've both become, well actually don't know, mother figures? Weird aunties? I think we provide structure and boundaries, disciple, the odd adventure and I think the kids trust us now. They'd miss you terribly Bernie. I won't let them play with the
ECG machine after all and I don't know anything about Pokemon or Bristol Rovers, Mikey looks at you with stars in his eyes ever since you took him there. And Fletch, who you mended so brilliantly in theatre, relies on you. To soften my temper, ground us all, as a sounding board and a friend”.

Serena paused, running a quick assessment of how that had been received. Bernie was clearly emotional but keeping it just about in check as she slid the next piece of paper out of the envelope.

"Reason 4b. Raf."

The picture of Raf was clearly from the hospital website and was slightly out of date. He looked formal and professional, not smiling. A Raf Bernie wasn't sure she recognised. Serena picked up the puzzled look and continued.

"This was just after Raf joined us. It's cost him so much. His wife got pregnant with another doctors child from our same ward and she pretended it was his to start with. She left him because she wanted the baby more. He was broken for a long time but slowly, slowly we've put him back together. I can see he wants to be a trauma specialist, asks to assist you if possible, sees your skills and your incredible mind, your fearlessness when operating and your fight for every patient. He trusts you, supports you and wants so much to be like you as a surgeon. If you leave, he loses a mentor and a friend."

Bernie closed her eyes at this. She knew how Raf adored Serena, would do anything in his power to protect her, serve her, help her, so to hear that he saw her as a mentor and as a friend caused another crack in the poor woman's fragile heart as she realised the pain she would cause Raf and Fletch by going.

Serena studied Bernie's face while she had her eyes closed. The pale skin with the hint of freckles across her nose, the rise and hollow of her cheeks, the angle of her perfect jaw. "I want to kiss all of those" she thought and closed her own eyes, waiting for the desire to drop, before opening them again to see her friend looking back at her, the kept the eye contact for a full minute, no words, until Bernie couldn't handle it any more and looked away first, back down to the envelope with one final piece of paper in it. She thought she knew what she might see and she was proved right when Morven was looking back at her from the page, alongside Arthur. They had their eyes closed and their foreheads touching, the only hint that not all was well was the nasal oxygen Arthur was wearing. She looked up to see Serena, her face etched in grief as she struggled to explain to Bernie reason 4c, Morven.

Keeping her eyes shut and with a distinct wobble to her voice Serena said simply "if you go, one less person who remembers Arthur will be here. A bit more of him is lost with you. And Morven won't have anyone to talk to about him, because I can't listen, not yet, because if I do, I'll cry and that's not fair on her. You're an amazing listener Bernie"

She had to stop then, so choked up her throat closed. Both of them thought back to the day in the peace garden where Serena had broken down and been so comforted by Bernie slipping her a round her shoulders and holding her as she cried. Being family, "AAU is a family", Serena stammered out, "if you go, a piece of our family is gone." Then she was crying, properly, in love, in grief, in overarching anxiety.

Bernie picked up each picture and tenderly stroked each face, just as she had done with the picture of Cameron and Jason. Not looking at Serena because if she did, she'd gather the brunette in her arms and kiss her, and that was what had got them here in the first place. The hatred she felt for herself in that moment was overwhelming and she put a hand to her face as she listened to the voices in her mind tell her how worthless and disgusting and pointless she was, knowing, truly
knowing it was all true, and it was only a matter of time until Serena saw her true colours. "Over halfway now" she thought, "and then I'll be gone and Serena won't hurt anymore."
Chapter 24 - Intermission

Chapter Notes

Domestic fluff in the middle of the angst. Thank you again for the reviews and suggestions, keep all comments coming! Xx

Chapter 24

When Bernie finally pulls herself from the harsh refrain that's resonating around the inside of her mind she has a brief moment of panic when she realises Serena is no longer sitting in front of her. Spinning round on the bench she sags in relief as she sees Serena at the counter pouring them both a glass of water. For one horrible moment she thought she might have...no lets not go there. She watches the brunette as she refills the filter jug and comes back to the table, handing one to Bernie as she sips hers own and settles herself back into the chair. Even with all the emotion and pain sitting at the table with them, Bernie can't help but tease a little.

"What is this? Do my eyes deceive me or is Ms Campbell imbibing something that is not coffee or Shiraz!"
"You know me" shot back Serena, "full of surprises".

The many meanings of those words hit them both. Their slightly flirty, okay, very flirty banter never went away, but there was always a gentleness and respect to it. Even from that first day, when Serena was exasperated at her ridiculous car, there has been the coming together of their worlds in laughter and teasing, interspersed with the huge ups and downs that came with being clinical leads in emergency medicine and found themselves becoming fast friends and then falling faster and faster in love.

"Bernie, I know I only asked for an hour. That was up over 20 minutes ago. I don't want you to go, but I'd like to see this through and I think maybe we need to eat something?"

Serena looked so hopeful but Bernie was torn. She wanted to give everything that the vascular surgeon wanted to her, "she deserves every star in the sky" thought the blonde, but also knowing that leaving was the only way to heal Serena and protect her. In the end she nodded, as when she had mentioned both of their stomachs rumbled. The brunette smiled a little,

"Scrambled eggs and toast?"
"Lovely" replied Bernie automatically, "can I help"
"No, no, it will only take a few minutes."

She watched Serena crack eggs into a glass bowl and whisk them up, adding a little cream to them and salt and pepper. She popped them in the microwave and put some slices of bread in the stainless steel toaster on the counter. Got some plates out and some cutlery. The cosy domesticity of it all surrounded them both like a fluffy blanket, Bernie had had several meals here but there was something nurturing about this that she couldn't quite put her finger on and it confused her, still not really believing that Serena wouldn't just turn round and scream at her.

Serena was welcoming the chance to break the heady emotions for a few minutes, and recognised that their fasted state was probably not helping had decided to feed them, giving them both chance
to collect themselves and process a little. She spread butter on the bread and laid it on the plates, dividing the eggs between the two and then set one in front of Bernie and immediately started to eat, becoming aware of how hungry she really was. After a few bites she realised that Bernie hadn't taken a single mouthful.

"Do you not like it?" She asked and in the same moment realised why she hasn't started to eat. Pulling Bernie's plate over to her she cut the food into small squares and pushed it back in front of her, resuming eating like nothing had happened, missing the look of gratitude and devotion that Bernie shot at her, but sighing faintly with pleasure and relief as Bernie picked her fork up in her right hand and put a bite in her mouth. She'd got it right.

They ate in silence, but not an uncomfortable one and Serena collected up the plates afterwards and tucked them in the dishwasher, acknowledging to herself that Jason would rearrange how she'd stacked them when he next looked, she could hear him saying "Auntie Serena the algorithm says plates should go here" and shrugged her shoulders a little with affection for his ways. Squaring them up again she walked back over to the table and picked up envelope 5.
Chapter 25 - Envelope 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry to all of you who thought Serena would not use a microwave, you're entirely right but they take so much longer in a pan.

Here we go, intermission is over.

Chapter 25.

She couldn't guess what else there might be. All the important things and people had been covered hadn't they? She hummed slightly as she exhaled, and traced the number 5 with her fingers. Apprehensive, she slowly unpicked the flap on the small white envelope and a single piece of paper came out. A picture of a beautiful wolf cub with startling blue eyes and luscious grey white fur that you could lose your hands in if those sharp milk-white teeth didn't take it off first. Just a baby, and so cute but already with a steely-eye and an air of determination that comes with all animals high in the food chain, the clues of future strength and beauty and fierceness all reflected in the amazing young animal.

"Facebook let me down here, told you it was stupid."

Bernie looked at Serena and raised her eyebrows in a question.

"I couldn't find a picture of her because Jason isn't friends with her yet" and it hit the blonde medic like a freight train, who the brunette meant.

"Charlotte" she whispered hoarsely and the tears started again.

"Yes" said Serena gently. "Reason 5 is Charlotte"

"She wouldn't stop me. She'd probably welcome it" sobbed Bernie. "She HATES me."

Serena ran her fingers up her friends arm and rested the tips in the crook of Bernie's elbow, again, unconsciously trying to communicate empathy and care, warmth and love with her touch. Touch had become such a part of their interactions together, neither one would claim to be tactile, especially the Major, but with each other they were, their own special language along with the looks and the glances, that no one else could or would ever be able to fully interpret, despite Cameron guessing a little having watched Serena rub his Mother's back when they were facing away from him and talking and seeing the longing in his Mum's eyes whenever she was near.

"Bernie, she doesn't, even if you both think she does. She's muddled and Marcus has done a number on her. Edward did exactly the same to Elinor. But slowly, time spent together has meant she's seen my heart, and she's seen Edwards true colours. Especially when my mum died".

"She won't see me so it won't be like that for us. I've lost her"

Bernie cried like Serena had never seen her do and taking a risk, lifted her hand to cup Bernie's cheek, feeling the other woman freeze as she did so.

"Maybe not right now, but she will. Elinor buggered off to Germany for six months once but she always comes back, because I'm her Mum. Charlotte will too, in her time, but if you run again,
how's that going to look to her? She doesn't know any of what's happened. Don't you think she might see it as you leaving her again, not that you're leaving me?"

Serena knew these words were painful, though not intended with any cruelty. Bernie was so determined running was the answer and it had been for most of her life, but you can only run so far so many times before there is nothing to run back to and you're lost.

Bernie was crying so hard she could barely breathe. Her little girl had been so different from Cam when she'd left to go on tour. She would hug her mother and go straight back to her colouring or her dolls as if her Mum was just going to the shop. She knew though, heard from Marcus, how Charlotte would cry herself to sleep every night after kissing the picture of her that stood next to her canopy bed. How she would regress to wetting the bed for the first week or wake screaming from nightmares where she saw her mother walking away, clinging to her Daddy as if he might go too. He was safe and always there. He had been a good father to them, even though he'd used them in the divorce, she could see why Charlotte would totally believe him and do anything he asked, as Marcus hadn't been the one to put her through that. A piece of her heart was forever missing whilst Charlotte wasn't in her life and the pain was so great she'd boxed it off in her mind with the other things marked as "too painful" and now Serena had lifted the lid and the raw grief was too consuming. She needed something sharp, but there was no way Serena was going to allow that so instead she bit down on the inside of her left arm, leaving teeth marks. The shock of the pain and the release it gave helped her get control.

Serena was internally horrified at this, she'd not caused the pain, but she'd exposed Bernie to it again and it was clear the other woman simply couldn't cope with that. "I've gone too far" Serena thought desperately when all of a sudden Bernie lifted her head and picked the picture up, crushing it to her chest as if trying to send Charlotte love through that action. It brought hot tears to Serena's eyes and she blinked them away quickly not wanting Bernie to thinking she was crying about her biting herself, even though she was a bit.

Finally Bernie put the picture down carefully and repeated her action of running her fingertips down the wolf cubs face. She looked at Serena wearily and before she could open her mouth, the brunette nodded and said "You can take it with you Bernie" causing fresh tears to spring up.

"Thank you" she whispered and Serena nodded again, not trusting herself to speak. Passing the tissues over, they both looked down at stared at envelope 6.
Chapter 26.

It's bulkier this time, one of those large padded envelopes with room inside for all sorts of things. The ever present fountain pen had made a 6 on the front and the familiarity of that was as odd comfort. She'd given up now trying to guess, Serena had surprised her so much with the picture of the wolf cub and the emotional connection that this could be going literally anywhere.

The brunette had to stop herself rubbing her hands in glee at what was coming next. She was pleased with the contents of this envelope, the inspiration having hit whilst she had been sat on the office floor. This was personal now and she was actually looking forward to sharing this piece of herself with Bernie, after all, she wanted to know everything about the blonde." A cold hand of fear tried to invade, maybe she didn't want to know, Bernie didn't, that is, but Serena had the idea that wasn't true, that deep inside the Major did love her and was simply not at a place to see it, to see her and the love that seemed to exploding out of every pore and growing exponentially by the second.

There was obvious weight to this one and Bernie turned it over carefully, not knowing what was inside, whether it was delicate. She ripped the red cotton thread across from left to right that allowed her access and slowly reached inside. She drew out a book, a photograph and a bracelet with a charm on it. Turning each of them over in her hands she examined them and waited for Serena to explain.

"Reason 6. Things you don't know".

Well that made absolutely no sense in anyone's head surely. How could things you don't know be reasons to stay if you don't know them? She was so tired and couldn't begin to see the logic here.

"The photograph is my Mother, with Jason's mother." Bernie looked up sharply at that, Serena had never, never talked about this. "We didn't have an easy relationship at any point really, Mother and I. She was dismissive of my plan to be a doctor like my father, thinking I'd never land a decent husband like that".

Serena smiled but Bernie winced a little at the lack of understanding Serena's mother had had of her.

"She was even less impressed by Harvard, didn't understand why I needed another degree, more letters that came after my name that were "meaningless if you're not married dear"," mimicking a little. "I think the only time I've ever pleased her was marrying Edward and having Elinor. When we divorced, she didn't speak to me for a month, refused to listen to how he'd cheated again and again, about his drinking and his treatment of me. I must have done something wrong in her eyes, I always did.

"Serena" breathed Bernie, "you're.."

"She never told me about my sister" Serena cut across Bernie, not really hearing her. "We never had the chance to get to know each other, I missed all of Jason's childhood because my mother ran from the truth and the shame of staying and being open with me was too much and it cost all of us. Not just my mother who ran away from it, not literally but metaphorically, and we all lost."

They sat in companionable silence for a bit, Bernie in awe and wonder at how Serena had just shared and Serena in wonder and awe that she had managed to get all that out and Bernie not bolt,
knowing some of it was a bit close to the bone, but feeling the freedom that comes with complete honesty.

Serena reached over and picked up the book and put in Bernie's hands. To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee. The army medic looked at it carefully. It was clearly an old, much-loved copy and when she opened the cover she saw "Serena McKinnie" cluing her in that this was a treasured possession.

"Do you know the book?" Serena asked? Bernie nodded, having studied it at school. "I love this book" the brunette said simply. "It's been halfway round the world with me. It reminds me to love, no matter who the person is, to see deeper into people than what is on the surface. It's taught me people can surprise you, do things you don't expect and yes, that life doesn't always go the way you want it to. I cry every single time I read it when Tom dies, at the injustice. It makes me a better Mum, Auntie, friend and doctor, because it gives me a standard to live to. Not the Hippocratic oath, this book, is my gold standard. Can I read you something?"

Bernie nods again, misty-eyed at having learned another new thing about the perfect woman in front of her that she thought she knew so well. Serena knows the book almost word for word but easily flips the to the page she wants and begins to read:

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it"

"You think you know someone and then they surprise you, over and over again" Serena said, shutting the book. "You think you're doing the right thing but unless you've climbed into that person's skin, how can you know?" She stopped, not wanting to push too hard, letting Bernie draw her own conclusions.

Bernie felt the first real stab of self-doubt, she had climbed into Serena's skin hadn't she? Seen the fear, the anger, heard the gossip about them and what that would do to the intensely private and proper Serena, who took the moral education of her doctors as seriously as their medical training. Was she wrong? "No" Bernie thought quickly, "I'm not, she's showing me that I haven't considers her at all in this, when I kissed her" and stifled a sob.

Serena watched the battle her best friend was clearly having in her mind and decided to try to still the storm momentarily. She picked up the bracelet and opened Bernie's hand to drop it in. It was a simple silver chain with a little enamel bird on it, nothing fancy or expensive.

"My Dad gave me this", she said, recapturing Bernie's attention. "He was the encourager in our family, thrilled when I wanted to become a doctor like him. He was always there if I was scared or unhappy. He didn't have a great way with words, but he could always comfort me when I was scared or sad, and he'd sing to me. Always the same song and I sing it to myself when I'm worried or need to do something hard and it comforts me. He gave me this bracelet just before he died to remind me.." she couldn't go on, choked up with the memories of her precious father.

Bernie picked up her glass of water and turned so she was straddling the bench, left side to the table, facing Serena. She raised the glass to her lips and raised a mouthful. She closed her eyes and asked bravely "Will you sing it to me? Please?"

Serena took a mouthful of her own water and set her glass back down. Took a few deep breaths and sang in her rich deep voice:

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise"

And jumped at the smashing of glass on the floor, where Bernie had dropped hers. "What, what's wrong Bernie love, tell me?"

Bernie stared at her, eyes wide. She clenched her fists and sang back in a sweet soprano:

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to be free."

"How did you know?" She fired at Serena who was completely thrown. "How did you know that's my song, the song I sing before every battle I've ever been in, every hard thing I've ever had to do"?

" I didn't" stammered Serena in amazement, not expecting this at all. " it's always been my song too"

They stared at each other, it felt like hours, days, broken only when Serena stood to fetch a dustpan, mindful instantly of the temptation the shards of glass might present to the other woman. She cleared it away, wrapping it up carefully in a newspaper, sat back down and said gently:

"It belongs to both of us now" and fastened the bracelet around Bernie's right wrist.
Chapter 27 - Envelope 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you soooo much for your lovely comments, I was really happy with chapter 26. Don't hate me for 27 please!

Chapter 27.

Looking down as the cool metal made contact with her wrist, Bernie's mouth fell open. This was one of Serena's most treasured possessions, and she put it on Bernie. That wasn't an action of someone who hated her, didn't want to see her was it? For the hundredth time that day Bernie filled up with tears. How could this perfect, amazing woman see flawed, awful Bernie and still do something so profoundly beautiful? Her head pounded and she looked up at Serena, whose own tears had spilled over her lower lids and were tumbling down her cheeks as she caressed the blonde woman's wrist where she'd fastened something with so much meaning.

And Bernie lost it. She threw herself towards Serena who moved back slightly, stunned at what was happening as Bernie wrapped her arms around Serena, buried her face into her shoulder and sobbed like the world was ending. It only took half a second for Serena to respond by putting her own arms around Bernie, pressing her face into the blonde curly hair and let her own tears continue to fall. They cried themselves dry and continued to hold each other, as tears gave way to gasping breaths and then slowed further until they were in control again.

Bernie pushed back from Serena and wiped her face on her sleeve. She couldn't make eye contact after that, how could she, again, have sought physical comfort from Serena without invitation. "Serena, I need to go" and started to fiddle with the clasp on the bracelet.

Serena bit back a stinging retort. After all of that, she was still going to run. "Fucking hell" she thought to herself. And then composed herself, remembering The Plan was not finished. She put her hand on Bernie's thigh, and picked up the last envelope, number 7. "Please, please, after all this, open this envelope. Please."

Bernie looked around wildly and then hummed to herself. One more. Then she would free Serena from this heartache forever. She shifted in her seat and took the envelope. It was small and square and surprisingly heavy. "Careful" said Serena, implying something in it was important. Sliding her finger through the seal she opened it and a silver metal disk attached to some fabric came out. Bernie took one look at it and bolted.

To the small bathroom that adjoined the kitchen and threw up loudly and violently, retching over and over again, not hearing as Serena came in and re-tied her hair and rubbed circles on her back, making soothing noises as she waited for this to pass.

Knelt on the floor behind Bernie, Serena was giving herself a hard time. This was a stupid idea, you didn't think this through. You know what Bernie got hers for. Why would you remind her of that? Her mind furiously working over how she might salvage this.

Suddenly Bernie flushed and stood up. Moving robotically she went and resumed her place at the table. Serena wordlessly passed her her own glass of water and unseeing Bernie took a mouthful,
"where did you get.."
"This isn't your one Bernie. I'm so sorry you thought it was, I'm sorry I reminded you of there, of Basra"

"It's okay" Bernie forced out. "Who's?"
"My Dad" Serena answered. "He was also awarded the Queens Gallantry medal like you". She ran her fingers over the dark blue, pearl grey and rose pink stripes on the ribbon fondly. "He wasn't military but you don't need to be for this medal. He saved 6 men single handed when their plane crashed in the arctic when they were on a research trip. Not only did he do two surgeries with basic supplies, he kept them all alive for over a week. He was so brave". She paused for a minute.
"Whenever I was brave he would pin it to my chest, awarding it to me"

Bernie made eye contact then. "You're brave too Bernie" Serena said simply. "I don't just mean Basra and the other wars you've been in. You're brave, because every single day you make the choice to survive, to keep going, to help others, I can't imagine how hard that is, even though I've seen a little more of that today than I had before".

She stopped then for another mouthful of their now shared water because her mouth had gone dry. This was a big moment.

"If you can fight in a war, survive divorce, heal the most token people, day after day deal with what your mind shows you and tells you, you're brave and you have the medal to prove it. So, if you can be brave and do all that, I hope you'll be brave with me now and do one last thing for me before you go."

Bernie took a moment to assess. She'd said she would stay for the envelopes and no more, she'd used all the courage she had for that, she was done. She moved her right hand up to once more shove her fringe out of her face and the little bird charm on the bracelet jingled a little. Feeling and hearing that made her decision for her and she nodded her yes to Serena, who smiled, got up and offered her hand to Bernie. The army doctor took it and stood and allowed herself to be lead to the lounge where Serena had earlier dropped something off before going to the kitchen. Passing through the double doors and pausing next to the coffee table she looked at the sofa. Resting there were two familiar shapes to her now. Envelopes. Bearing the numbers 8 and 9.
Chapter 28. Envelope 8

Bernie just looks at the two new envelopes without speaking. She wasn't emotional prepared for more envelopes and felt an accusatory snap rise to her lips that she bit back before she vocalised it. This was Serena's show and she was entitled to do this how she wanted. Two more wasn't ten more. "I can do two" she thought and said "Is this it Serena?" needing confirmation. "I promise Bernie, no more after these two. I just, well, wanted these two separate, it seemed right. I didn't mean to trick you, I'm sorry.."
"It's okay" the blonde whispered. "I can do this for you"

The enormity of that hit the both. Serena knew Bernie didn't really want to be here, wouldn't have even come to say goodbye if she hadn't demanded it of her, but she always did what Serena asked, cared for her so much like that. It's why Serena couldn't ask her outright to stay, it wouldn't be fair. The Major had to want to." Bernie meanwhile was thinking about how she would do anything for Serena, the brightest star in her sky and the one she had herself extinguished with the kiss.

Serena sat on the edge of the other sofa which was set at 90 degrees to the other one with the envelopes on and the immediately got back up as Bernie stayed standing. She went over and stood next to her, wanting to take her hand but it was the bandaged one and she would not cause any more pain. She picked number 8 up and drew Bernie back to the opposite sofa so they both could sit. The army medic perched on the very edge, her anxiety plain to see. She wouldn't look at Serena as she was handed the envelope. She had an inkling that this was big, why else would it be separate.

It was an A4 envelope that felt like it was full, crammed full of paper. She sat and held it, the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "I can't..."
Serena took it back off and waited until her friends breathing slowed.
"Do you want me to?"
Bernie nodded in relief as she met Serena's eyes. "Can you just wait a few minutes though or..."
"Or?" Serena prompted.

Bernie said nothing for a second and taking her eyes away, breathe out, "Or I might run" she admitted sadly.
Serena nodded and sat back slightly still holding the envelope. She closed her eyes and they sat in silence for a while. She jumped a little when she felt Bernie's fingers ghost up her arm but kept her eyes closed, not wanting to frighten the poor woman.
"I'm ready" came the whisper.

Serena slowly and surely opened the envelope and drew out the stack of papers. "Close your eyes Bernie. I won't hurt you."
And Bernie did what she was asked, choosing to trust the woman she'd found and lost again by her own actions. She felt Serena get up from the sofa and heard paper rustling in front of her somewhere. A few moments passed and the comforting weight of her best friend returned to the sofa but she kept her eyes closed.
"Can I hold your hand?"

Came Serena's voice, wobbling slightly and Bernie sagged with relief. "Yes please" she replied and instantly felt her heart rate slow as warm fingers were slipped into her right hand. Serena felt calmer too and they sat there with their eyes shut again, neither really wanting the moment to end.
"On 3?" Serena asked. "3" replied Bernie with more confidence than she felt. 
"1,2,3."

She opened her eyes. In front of her, laid all over the coffee table and the floor in front of her, were pictures of her and Serena together. Selfies they'd taken together and pictures from others. Them singing together on the ward and in Albies, at various birthday parties and functions. All dressed up at the conference they'd been to on facial-maxillary trauma to present their work. At the wedding of one of the nurses from Keller and the Christmas party last year. Sat with Jason appearing between their shoulders pulling a silly face, pictures skating with the Fletcher kids, Serena clinging to Bernie as she'd never skated before, outside the cinema both pretending to kiss Colin Firth on the cheek on a life size cutout, and one shot she hadn't seen before, where she was sat at the desk at the nurses station and Serena was looking at her, not realising the picture had been taken. A look so filled with wonder and care and love?

Serena just let her look, at each picture while she studied the blonde's face, still holding her hand in a slightly sweaty grip. Opened her mouth and said.

"Reason 8 - me."

She couldn't say anything else after that. The words wouldn't come. She wanted to be all Bernie's reasons, part of every part of her life, forever and ever amen.

Bernie turned and searched her eyes, those dark, soulful eyes looking back at her, almost as if she was seeing her for the first time. Serena let her look, holding the gaze so Bernie could confirm what she was saying. And then, reached behind her back and passed her something.

Envelope 9.
Chapter 29 - Envelope 9

Chapter Notes

Well it seems you all thought the last reason would be Serena! So I hope this is worth it xx

Chapter 29.

She looked down at the envelope between them, the blue number 9 showing a slight wobble as if this had been done by a nervous hand. It had weight to it but Bernie could barely process that right now. "Reason 8 - Me" - what? What did that really mean. Did Serena not want her to go, how could she not after Bernie had shown up, having cut herself, cried, thrown up, bitten herself, smashed a glass, launched herself at the brunette again, been sad, angry and still she had given her envelope 8. Herself. It was all going too fast in her head, she raised her hand to her head and again the little bird jingled. Not really thinking she brought it to her lips and dropped a soft kiss to it, evoking a strangled noise from the woman opposite her, something between an inhale and a sob and a choke.

Watching Bernie kiss the little bird that meant so much to Serena was almost enough to make her sob but, not yet. "You can cry all you want, after this one" she promised herself. Looking at the pale, tired face with such a bewildered expression on it made Serena vow to God, to the Universe and the Heavens that she would love this woman with everything she had for all eternity if they would just provide a little help. Right now.

They both looked down at the envelope and Bernie slid down to the floor to sit, head in her hands. After about 2 and a half heartbeats Serena joined her, leaning their backs against the sofa, the envelope still lying on the sofa, now somewhere between their shoulders. Serena swallowed and opened her mouth to speak.

"Last one."

Bernie nodded and Serena drew the envelope down into her lap, turning slightly and she opened the seal and passed it to the Major who didn't immediately tip it out. What could be more important than Serena? Then Serena reached across and took the envelope back.

"I'll pass it to you" she said nervously. "Hold your hands out"

Bernie obeyed instantly, almost closing her eyes as well like a little girl receiving a surprise present. She watched as Serena looked in the envelope and drew out a small purple-red booklet. A passport.

She passed it to Bernie who flipped to the photo page, "No laughing" murmured the brunette as she saw Serena's beautiful face looking back at her. She looked up, totally lost.

"I can't ask you to stay Bernie, you have to want to. So, what I am saying to you is, where you go, I'll go. Always. Wherever you want or need to run, whenever you do, I'll always come. So if you decide after this envelope to run, I'll run with you. Reason 9."

Bernie's mouth fell open in astonishment. This wasn't real was it? How, what, how? "What about
"Jason?" came tumbling out and Serena fell even harder in love with her right there and right then. She dug her phone out of the pocket of her jeans and showed Bernie she was opening the email app. Clicking on the sent items she opened one and passed it to Bernie who read:

"Jason, I need to tell you something, you know how you and I talked about how much we both like Dr Bernie? Well, I love her and she is really sad right now and I think she might want to leave Holby. I don't want her to be alone so I'd like us to go too. I know that will be scary but I promise we will take all your things and we will still watch all your shows and eat the food we like. Please can you let me know if you're okay with this? Love you, Auntie Serena"

"What did he say?" Bernie whispered in the quietest voice her friend had ever heard. Not trusting herself to speak, Serena reached into the envelope again and pulled out a second passport and passed it to Bernie. She flipped to see Jason looking back at her and looking up again Serena showed her the simple thumbs up message he'd replied with. And Bernie dissolved. Putting her hands to face she started to sob without being able to look away from the brunette who did the only thing possible. Opened her arms out wide for the crying Major to fall into. And she did.

Serena gathered her up into her arms as her own tears formed. She felt Bernie clutch desperately at her jumper as she buried her face into Serena's front and cried for all she was worth. The brunette kissed the top of her head and just held her there, letting her own tears drip unheeded, never wanting to let go of the woman who'd stolen her heart and her breath.

They sat and the blonde continued to cry in big juddering sobs, Serena could feel the tears running down into her cleavage and collecting there but she didn't mind. She'd do anything, be anything, go anywhere for this beautiful, precious soul in her arms. Serena heard the key in the lock of the front door and so did Bernie but she was still crying too hard for either of them to move.

"Auntie Serena?"
"We're in here Jason"
She watched as the young man came and stood in the doorway, finding herself overwhelmed with love for him as he looked, assessing the situation, her wonderful boy.

Then he did something she didn't expect. Without speaking he came over and knelt, facing Serena, behind Bernie's back as she was nestled into the other woman, and wrapped his arms around Bernie, and holding onto Serena's shoulders in a hug for them both, laying his cheek on the blonde's back as they sat. Jason, who hated physical contact.

And the three of them sat there together in a unique and perfect huddle of love.
Chapter 30 - The Question

Chapter Notes

So glad you seem to like the last envelope! I can't stop this just yet!! Let me know if there is anything you particularly do or don't want to see xx

Chapter 30.

They stayed all together until predictably Jason moved but not before he squeezed his Aunts shoulders - their usual version of a hug and that wasn't lost on Serena. He'd been simply amazing today and she was so proud of him. She made a mental note to tell him that later. He shuffled back slightly and sat watching the two women cuddled together, no judgement in his open face. Slowly, gradually Bernie got control and she pushed herself away from the brunette and sat between them looking at her hands. Serena had a prickle of fear run up her spine - had it been enough? Did she still want to run? Would she let them go to? How were they going to manage this? The questions buzzed in her brain loudly, so loudly she almost missed Jason speaking:
"Dr Bernie?"
The army medic looked over at him immediately, so moved by the hug he had just wrapped her in that she'd do anything right now to help him if she could.
"Dr Bernie", he said again, "where are we going, because I'd like to know what to pack and if I need my waterproofs please".

Both Bernie and Serena swallowed smiles at this, ever-practical Jason, cutting to the heart of the matter without even realising, then Serena inhaled sharply and held her breath, recognising this was a pivotal moment. Bernie rubbed her face with her right hand and cleared her throat.
"Well Jason, I know that your Auntie Serena explained I was sad and might want to leave, but, if it's alright with you, I'd very much like us all to stay here."
"Okay" said the young man. "That's good, I'm used to here. Auntie Serena are you alright?"

Bernie turned to look at Serena, whose mouth and eyes were wide open in amazement. She'd still thought Bernie was going to leave them and her brain simply couldn't compute what she'd just said.
"Auntie Serena?" Jason said again, the worry beginning to rise in his tone and he started to fidget a coin between his finger, a sure sign of his anxiety coming out. Serena rushed to reassure him.
"I'm fine Jason, more than fine, thank you. You've been wonderful I wonder, if you might run Bernie a bath in my ensuite?"
"Of course" he said, relaxing at her words. "Shall I use your special bubble bath?"
"Yes please love" and off he went, talking to himself as he did.

Bernie turned slowly and looked at Serena.
"Is it okay?" and immediately freaked out when Serena burst into tears. "Oh God, I'm sorry, I'll go, I shouldn't have said that..mmfph"
The end of her sentence was lost as Serena gently pressed her lips to the blonde's in the sweetest kiss either had ever experienced.
"Darling Bernie, its more than okay. I never want you to leave. Neither does Jason - special bubble bath - that's a sign!" she grinned. "I want to tell you so much, say so much, without scaring you off. I know this has been so very hard, but, well, I love you and I can't lose you, it would break my heart." The tears began to roll again and Bernie brought her hand up to gently wipe them away.
"Please let me in Bernie, let me care for you" she struggled out before closing her eyes.

Bernie thought for a moment and looked at the woman who'd just confessed to loving her. With no prompting had kissed her. And for once in her life Bernie decided not to second guess her heart. She leant back into Serena and said "yes please", closing her eyes at the warmth of the woman wrapped around her body and her heart. They sat for a while, just close and still until they heard Jason shout down the stairs:

"It's ready Auntie Serena!"
"Thanks Jason" she called out to him and pulled herself up using the sofa. "Oh I'm too old to sit on the floor anymore" she groaned and Bernie chuckled as she too got up, hearing a joint in her hip crack and earning a giggle from Serena. The brunette rubbed her back and held out her hand, which the blonde took eagerly and allowed herself to be lead upstairs.
Chapter 31 - the marks of time

Chapter Notes

I did wonder if chapter 30 should be the end but I feel it has a little way to run yet.
Thanks for the reviews and suggestions, more always welcome.

Chapter 31.

Jason was waiting for them at the top of the stairs, his arms full of the fluffiest towels Bernie had ever seen and a shy smile on his face. Serena relieved him of them and asked him what he was going to do now. "I'm going to go downstairs and watch a movie Auntie Serena"
She watched as they touched each other's arms in what seemed to be a comforting ritual, familiar to them both and the young man turned them, grasped her arm in the same way and moved off downstairs.
"It's our version of a hug" Serena explained. "We worked it out after a few weeks of knowing each other as apparently my propensity for physical affection with him can be a little too much, so we compromised"
"So that hug downstairs.."
"Was a total surprise to me too. Told you he likes Dr Bernie very much" and with that Serena grinned and tugged the Major along the hall to her bedroom and closed the door behind them.

It was a soft room, walls the colour of the palest green with a huge bed in the centre. Pale silver wooden furniture gave it a modern feel, the bed was dressed with white linen with a pretty green scalloped edge and some beautiful cushions. There was a pile of books on one side and Serena's robe was hanging behind the door. Jason had thoughtfully drawn the curtains, and put the lamps on so the whole room was bathed in a golden glow. It was so perfectly Serena that Bernie found there was a queer ache in her chest as she looked around.

The brunette opened the door to the ensuite and the heady fragrance of honeyed peaches grown somewhere sunny and harvested at the perfect ripeness filled the air. "My special bubble bath" came the words, "that I use when I need to spoil myself. There been so much intense emotion flying round today, I'd like to try to calm things a little for you."

She crossed over to Bernie and dropped a kiss to her cheek, drawing her in for a hug. Seeking permission she undid the buttons on the blondes jacket and smoothed it off and followed by tugging off the navy hoody until Bernie was in her t shirt and jeans. She bent down and unlaced her shoes and the Major obediently stepped out of them. She stood back up and realised Bernie was freaking out all of a sudden.

"Love, what is it?"

Bernie shook her head, eyes filled with tears again, threatening to fall and Serena recognised another run moment.

"Try to tell me. I just want to look after you."
"I, I... I don't want you to see my scars."

Serena's heart turned over in her chest and she stepped closer to Bernie, bringing her fingertip to
the very top of the IED scar that was poking through the v-neck of her t shirt.

"Not those ones" Bernie stammered out and Serena got it all of a sudden. "Sweetheart, it's okay. I've seen your hand remember. I'm sad that you hurt yourself but I'm never going to judge you for the way you cope."

Bernie looked back at the other woman, so wanting to trust what she'd heard. Then, thinking about how much love and care Serena had already shown her today, she pulled her t shirt over head quickly and drew her jeans down her legs. Then, realising what she'd done, brought her eyes to Serena's, searching for confirmation of what she'd said. The brunette forced herself to slowly and calmly move her eyes down Bernie's now underwear only clad body. Looked at the trail of the IED scar, down and saw them, on the flat stomach and thighs. The criss crossing lines where the blonde had marked her own skin, in all different stages of healing. She looked back up and met Bernie's eyes and gathered her in a tight hug. She felt the trauma surgeon sag against her and they stood for a minute holding each other until Serena took Bernie's hand and drew her into the ensuite. At this point Bernie was so overcome that the woman she loved hadn't looked at her in disgust she was incapable of doing anything for herself so Serena tenderly turned her round and unclasped her bra, allowing it to fall off and smooth her knickers down. Later she'd realise this was the first time she'd seen Bernie naked, but this was a special moment of care for a wounded soul so it didn't even register. Turning her back round she helped the other woman step into the sweet smelling bath and lie back. Hearing Bernie inhale and close her eyes in pleasure made Serena a little teary and sitting on the lid of the toilet, leaned in and kissed the top of her head in affection. Bernie reached out for Serena's hand and together they sat, inhaling the fragrance, not needing words as their hearts found each other in the silence.
Chapter 32 - Bath

Chapter Notes

This is so fluffy it's almost sickly but after 29 chapters of Angst I think we needed some!
Thank you for your reviews.

To introduce the elephant in the room - do you want sex to happen in this at some point or not? I'm undecided whether to write it here or as separate "inserts". Let me know!

Chapter 32.

Serena let go of Bernie's hand to go and find her some pyjamas. They hadn't had the staying discussion really but she was leaving over the brunettes dead body she decided, having seen what happened when emotions got too much. She popped them on the heated towel rail along with a pair of socks and moved back over to Bernie and knelt beside the bath, dropping the lightest of kisses on her head. The blonde smiled dreamily and then remembered where she was and went to sit up.

"Shhh" soothed Serena. "Let me wash your hair?" Bernie nodded and she rolled up her sleeves. Using the jug she kept on the side she poured the warm scented water over Bernie, making sure not to get any in her eyes. She watched, fascinated as the water made the curls drop and the blonde darken a few shades. She reached over to the purple bottle of shampoo and tipped some into her hands, reaching over and starting to lather it in Bernie's hair. Using her fingertips she gently kneaded at her scalp, massaging, trying to get her to relax. A faint moan escaped the army medic and Serena smiled, realising she was enjoying the sensation. She worked the shampoo through every strand and then slowly rinsed it over and over until the water ran clear. She pumped some conditioner out and teased it through the slight tangles, making them slippery and soft and pliable. She rinsed again and squeezed the excess water from Bernie's hair when she'd finished.

The water was starting to feel a little chilly and so Bernie stood up to face Serena shyly. The vascular surgeon wrapped her in the big towel and handed her another for her hair which Bernie twisted up into a turban. They stared at each other for the longest time when finally, the blonde broke the moment by leaning in and kissing Serena, a sweet closed-mouth kiss and said "thank you". The brunette flushed in pleasure and passed the pyjamas over. She took the wet towels from Bernie and stuffed them in the laundry basket as the other woman pulled on the pjs. They were silver-grey and so soft, smelling of lavender and soap and it felt so right to them both that she was wearing them.

They sat together, thighs just brushing each other, on the end of the bed until Bernie leaned her head down and rested it on Serena's shoulder. That act of love and trust made the brunettes heart leap for joy. She wasn't silly enough to think everything was magically okay now, they had talking and crying to do, she knew that. But this perfect moment, that she wished she could somehow capture and bottle, was everything.

To them both. Not that they said that. They sat and Serena felt Bernie's fingers clutch her jumper again, as if anchoring herself to her, so she would be safe. The owner of the bed that they were sitting on wrapped an arm round the shoulders of the woman in pyjamas and they both sighed.
contentedly.

They heard footsteps coming up and a gentle knock on the door.
"Auntie Serena?"
"Come in Jason" she said. Bernie went to move away bit Serena wouldn't let her, kept her close
with her arm round her and Bernie laid her head back down as if the weight of it was too great to
bear.
Jason came in with two mugs of tea and handed one to each of them, both saying their thanks.
"Auntie Serena I know you are looking after Dr Bernie, can you tell me what I should adjust the
dinner time to in our schedule?"

Looking at the clock, Serena realised it was already 6 o'clock, where had the time gone?
"Well it's fish and chips Jason, so can we say 7? I'm sorry it's late love"
"It's fine" said Jason. "Dr Bernie is far more important, even I know that."
A faint sniffle came from the direction of her shoulders and she rubbed the back of the other
woman in reassurance.
"We will come down in a few minutes" Serena said and Jason nodded and went, closing the door
behind him.

"You realise he's given you his favourite mug" Serena said fondly and Bernie's mouth fell open.
"Even I'm not allowed that one. Im getting a little jealous" she grinned, meeting Bernie's
suspiciously moist eyes and winking. Her nephew was doing such a great job of supporting her in
Operation Love Bernie and she hadn't even asked him to.

They drank their tea and then Serena stretched a little.
"I'll need to go out for the food, will you be okay here with Jason?"
"Should I go Serena?"
"Do you want to?"

Bernie thought for a minute. Her head was screaming at her all of a sudden that she was in the way,
that they were just pitying her, she didn't deserve this niceness.
In spite of all that she went with what her heart wanted.

"I'd like to stay, please?"
"Thats settled then, come on" and they went out into the hallway and down stairs to Jason.
Chapter 33 - Organic Chemistry

Chapter Notes

No sex, please we are British!! That was your answer and it was the right one. Just don't want you to stop reading and commenting, I'm loving this story and you all. It's going to keep going the way it is.
Suggestions still welcome xx

Chapter 33.

They reached the lounge to find Jason settled in the sofa they'd had their backs to earlier, absorbed in an old episode of University Challenge. He looked up when they entered, smiled and immediately returned his attention to the quiz.

Serena settled Bernie on the other sofa, pulling her legs up and covering her with the knitted patchwork quilt in every shade of blue you could think of and the blonde wriggled a little getting comfy. The brunette perched on the edge by Bernie's thighs, just looking at her. Meeting her eyes, the trauma surgeon offered a quick smile before biting her lip and Serena could see she was nervous and battling with herself which in turn made her nervous. She considered for a moment taking Bernie with her to get the food, but dismissed it as looking like she was being held hostage and she wanted her to trust that she was trusted.

Keeping her voice low Serena said softly "Will you be okay while I go for food? Shouldn't be more than 20 minutes or so and Jason will be here so you won't be on your own"

The unspoken question hung in the air between them. Will you be here when I get back". Serena didn't ask it and Bernie didn't answer it, just nodding her okay to Serena. She pushed her still damp hair out of her face and reached over to take the brunettes hand, nodding again because she didn't trust herself to speak. The other woman raised their hands to her lips and kissed each knuckle.

She fetched her shoes and her coat and dug her purse out of her bag. Standing in the doorway just looking at them both on the sofas she felt real fear raise its head and she tasted bile in the back of her throat. What ifs? went round and round her brain, not realising the same thing was going on the mind of the woman sat on the sofa.

"Avogadro's Constant" announced Jason loudly, making them both jump. "How can you not know that Peterhouse, Bailey". Serena suppressed a giggle as Jason channelled his inner Jeremy Paxman. She wasn't one for quiz shows really, could never think of the answers quickly enough when Jason was in the room but she enjoyed his enjoyment of the, especially when he was unintentionally funny.

"Carbon 12" came a little voice from the other sofa and both Serena and Jason span to look at her. She shrugged her shoulders. "Chemistry geek". Jason grinned widely and gave her two thumbs up and Serena had to laugh. ". Oh gosh you two. Jason, I want to know yours and Bernie's final score when I get back please."

"Of course Auntie Serena."

Going back over to the other sofa she leant down to squeeze Bernie's shoulder. "I'll be 20 minutes
tops. I've got my phone. Help yourself to anything at all and Jason knows where everything is kept if you're not sure."
"I do" put in Jason helpfully. "I organised the cupboards."

Serena had to roll her eyes at this. Coming home to find the kitchen cupboards arranged by molecular weight of the main ingredient had been a low point of hers and Jason's living together so far, when he'd had a meltdown about her inability to remember whether the molar mass of sugar was heavier than flour or not and messed up his system. They'd agreed to make putting away of shopping his job and though she never quite could remember where the pasta was these days it was such a simple thing to do for him.

She lingered in the doorway just out of sight of Bernie and then took a deep breath and headed for the front door while the other two stated "Germany" in exactly the same moment, with Jason declaring a tied point as the self-appointed adjudicator. She rested her head against the front door and breathed a silent prayer before going through it and closing it behind her.
Chapter 34 - Serena

Chapter Notes

Enough fluff.... ;-} xx

Chapter 34.

As soon as Serena went through the front door and closed it she wanted to go back inside. Sod fish and chips. "WHAT IF SHE RUNS?" her mind screamed and she allowed herself a few shaky breaths and wiped her eyes. "Come on" she reasoned with herself "the faster you start walking Campbell, the faster you'll be back"

She set out down the driveway past her car and Bernie's car behind it, feet sliding slightly in the gravel as she walked. It was a good thing she had done this walk many times because if her brain had had to be relied upon she'd probably have ended up lost, it was too full of Bernie to hold any other thoughts.

Had it really only been 24 hours? Since Bernie had come across the space between them on the floor in theatre and kissed her? "It feels like months ago" she thought and unconsciously rubbed her thumb over her lips. She blushed a little thinking how they'd gone from kissing to declarations of love in 24 hours. Well Serena had told Bernie that. She didn't need to hear it back, it was obvious way before this that Bernie had a hard time with emotions. If they lost patients or argued or even if something was really happy, the Major would often disappear for a little while needing to be alone.

"Is that when she cuts herself?" Serena wondered all of a sudden and a tear dropped down her cheek. Some of the cuts had been clearly quite deep and none of them looked like they'd been particularly well cared for. She couldn't imagine the anguish someone would have to feel to hurt themselves. She'd dealt with people who self-harmed many times on the ward and it didn't scare her. Some people drink or do drugs to cope, some eat or don't eat and some cut themselves. Serena didn't imagine the army were very encouraging of emotional openness and what she knew of Marcus meant she understood that he had not supported Bernie in much, so she'd learned to deal with her feelings in a destructive way. The army medic probably needed some therapy in time, thought the brunette, but she also needs safety and love.

So this is love? Yep. She thought about the way Bernie made her feel when she was present and when she wasn't there. She craved time with Bernie on their own, looked forward to their banter and their solid work together, to cosy evenings out and time with their friends. She looked for excuses to touch Bernie, a pat on the back here, a hug there and any touch from her on Serena made the vascular surgeon giddy. "I've fallen in love before. I do recognise the symptoms."

She'd never loved a woman before. Did that matter? At 51 was this too old to be learning that she was a lesbian? What would everyone say, think? And at all at once Serena realised she didn't care. All she cared about was showing poor, traumatised, gorgeous as hell Bernie that she loved her. Whatever that took, whatever it looked like, she was in.

She found herself outside the chippy and pushed her way through the door into the warm heat of fryer and notes of vinegar and hot oil on the air. There was something comforting in the familiarity of the place, the smells, the banter between the staff and the customers, the crinkle of paper
wrapping around morsels of food. There was a little queue and she lost herself thinking about Jason this time. How utterly incredible he’d been today and how much that showed about their relationship. His routine was everything, his place of safety where he could always find meaning and he’d agreed to everything, leaving even because Auntie Serena had asked him to. They’d come such a long way from where they started out, dancing around each other, Jason having to sit with Hanssen on the roof once, eating his sandwiches because she’d caused such a massive meltdown in him. And here they were.

She got to the front of the queue and ordered quickly, anxious now to get home to the two people she’d left, starting to worry more and more with each passing second. She felt a little overwhelmed, there was so much to talk about and discuss and she had no clue how to even start some of the conversations. Handing over the cash and receiving her change, she gathered up the food and hurried out, heading for home.

"We don’t have to talk about it all in one go" she told herself. "Slowly, slowly."

Will she be there? Oh God, what if she’s done a runner, do I go after her? What state will Jason be in if she has? Serena fervently wished at that moment that she liked jogging or had taken the car. She sped up as fast as she could, getting slightly out of breath and panting. This had been a bad idea, she should have cooked something, ordered take out that would deliver. She had near miss with a little chap on a scooter with his mate on his BMX as the rounded a corner and she stumbled, twisting her ankle a little. Slowed her down and she cursed every word she could think of as she walked into the driveway at last. Breathlessly she put the key in the lock, opened the door and called "I'm home" into the silence.
Chapter 35 - Panic Stations

Chapter 35

The moment Serena had closed the front door Bernie felt the panic descend. When the brunette was near, even before today, her presence was like a weighted blanket, cosy, protective, calming. Without it everything felt floaty and strange and like she wasn't connected to herself or anything anymore. That gave space for memories and flashbacks to invade and she gripped the arm of the sofa as the arid heat of Kandahar rose around her. That small space she'd occupied for days, waiting, waiting. The rope around her wrists and ankles biting and rubbing the skin raw. The door opening wide to the fierce, bright sunlight.

"Rachmaninov. Point to me"

Jason's voice pierces the picture and Bernie shakes herself. Forces herself to focus on the music coming from the TV.

"Liszt"
"No it's Stravinsky"

"Warwick, Deaton"
"Stravinsky"
"That's correct"
"Point to you Dr Bernie"

She smiled faintly at the use of her formal medical title. She'd been either Major or Ms for so long as a consultant that Jason was really the only one to call her Dr anymore and she decided she liked it.

"Mahler" they said, again in perfect sync.
"Tied point"
" At the gong Warwick on 320, Peterhouse 165".

With that Jason snaps of the TV and huffs a little. "Cambridge are supposed to be the best. But not tonight. I got 300 and you got 245 Dr Bernie. You're much better at this than Auntie Serena. I'd like to watch it again with you another time"

Bernie teared up again at that, bloody hell, hadn't she cried enough today? "That would be wonderful Jason."

The two looked at each other for a while, Jason more at Bernie's cheek than her eyes, as always finding eye contact just a little too much. They sat in silence, both comfortable with it but gradually Bernie recognised the young man was working up to say something, she could see him formulating the sentence, checking it out with himself and running it through his "Auntie Serena" filter, was it true, kind and necessary. They were working on adding socially appropriate to the filter but that was much harder work as the autism meant Jason had an absolute respect and need for open honesty at all times. She waited patiently, knowing herself how hard it could be to find the right words and then put them into some sort of sentence.

"Dr Bernie why did you want to leave?"

Oh okay. Right to the heart of it then. No preamble. She should have expected that she thought to herself. Pondered for a moment on how honest to be whilst not ever wanting to lie to this precious
young man who valued truth above everything.

"Well Jason, I thought I'd hurt your Auntie Serena and I got scared and thought she would be better off without me."
"But she loves you" came the instant reply, stealing Bernie's breath, "she told me in her email but I already knew."
"You, you did?" stammered the blonde blushing right up to her hairline.
"Of course. She talks about you all the time, she smiles at you even when she's cross. She knows your favourite things and tried to give them to you. She likes to pat your arm and your shoulder"

Woah. Now this was a revelation to Bernie. If Jason could see it, will his social difficulties then everyone must be able to. The thought of everyone knowing, gossiping, was too simply much for the blonde woman and she threw the blanket off her legs and stood up and moved out of the room. She leaned against the wall for a second and took off up the stairs two at a time.

"Dr Bernie? What's wrong" came Jason's voice, trembling with instantly heightened anxiety. Where are you going?"
"Just to get dressed Jason"

She threw open the door to Serena's room and stood in the little pile of clothes for a second before running into the bathroom, stripping off the borrowed pyjamas and roughly pulling her pants up her legs and over hips. She wriggled into her bra and went back out into the main room, pulling her t shirt over her head. She just fastened the zip of her jeans when Jason came tearing into the room, his eyes wild with fear. She continued to pull her hoodie on and then sat on the edge of the bed to lace her Converse.

"You're leaving!! You can't, Auntie Serena isn't back, I haven't packed, I need to readjust the schedule.."
"Jason it's just me going. You and Auntie Serena are staying here."
"NO IT WILL MAKE HER SAD AND ME SAD AND I DO NOT WANT TO BE SAD OR HER TO BE SAD NO DR BERNIE NO NO NO"

Bernie snapped out of her panic and desire to run as she watched Jason look around desperately. "I've lost him" she recognised and panicked. It looked so similar to her own panic attacks and she thought desperately about how to help him. She took one minute pace backwards and then sprang forward but too late to stop him as he faced the wardrobe and one, two, three times smashed his face into the door. The third time, all the energy drained out of him, she half caught him in her muscled arms and they sank to the floor. Jason immediately closing his eyes and starting to rock. All she could hear was the faint whispered rhythm of him repeating over again "No, don't, not Auntie Serena, no".

What the hell was she going to do now? She couldn't leave him like this, didn't want to. All thoughts of running left her head as she continued to hold him close where they'd fallen in a heap, she was past recognising the fact they were physically in contact and so she held him and rocked him and murmured soft words over him, "You're safe, we're safe, I'm here, I'm not going, it's okay" but the young man stayed lost in his own world.

She heard the key in the lock and the door open and started to cry with relief on hearing Serena's voice call out "I'm home".
"AUNTIE SERENA COME HERE TO ME!"

Jason's guttural bellow frightened both women. Bernie, who was holding him still, in her arms, jumped out of her skin and he clutched at her arms, fingers grasping, unusually seeming to not want to let go of her and then she realised he was physically making her stay on the floor with him. She wasn't scared by that, or scared by him, she recognised he was not letting her leave for the right reasons and she started rocking him again and whispering the same words as before, and he relaxed his grip very slightly.

Serena, hearing Jason roar, dropped the food, her purse, keys and ran up the stairs towards his voice with her heart in her mouth. Reaching the top she saw the only light on in her own bedroom and rushed through the door, stopping dead at the sight of Jason, eyes wild, being held by Bernie in a huddle on the floor.

Forcing herself to move slowly she made eye contact with Bernie who had tears pouring down her face. "It's okay" Serena mouthed, realising at once that Jason had imploded for some reason. She turned her attention to him and knelt down in front of him, holding his arm gently in their hug. She looked over his face and saw a nasty egg shape on his forehead and the beginnings of a fairly decent black eye.

"Jason, I'm here, it's Auntie Serena, it's okay."
"IT'S NOT OKAY"
"Sorry, right. Can you tell me what happened?" she wheedled gently at him, in the lowest, softest tone she could manage.
"I ASKED A WRONG QUESTION AND DR BERNIE IS GOING TO LEAVE AND IT IS MY FAULT AND YOU'LL BE SAD AND NO NO NO NO"

Both a little stunned the women made eye contact. Bernie shook her head ever so slightly and Serena spoke again,
"Jason, Dr Bernie is staying, she changed her mind. It wasn't your fault. Can you look at me?"
"Please Jason" Bernie said. "I'm sorry I made you feel upset. I'm not going anywhere. I promise and I won't break that promise."

Slowly Jason brought his eyes to Serena and visibly relaxed as he reached out for her arm. "Don't be sad Auntie Serena, please don't be sad" he pleaded, now at a lower volume.
"Jason I'm not sad. You're here and I'm here and Dr Bernie is here and we're all here and staying."

Unfortunately, Bernie's thigh muscle chose that exact moment to cramp and it felt like she was moving away from Jason who howled like a wounded animal and dug his fingers back in her skin, and into Serena's where he was holding them both. They both immediately started to reassure him again, echoing each other and Bernie rocked him some more. Then she started to sing, the only song that she could possibly have sung, and after a moment Serena joined in. They sat there together singing to him, feeling his breathing settle and his heart rate slow again.

When they finished Serena said,
"Right this is the plan Jason. You're going to stay here with Dr Bernie and I'm going to go downstairs and get the food and some plates and the ketchup and I'm going to bring it back up here and we'll have a picnic together"
"In your bedroom? You don't like crumbs"
"Well as long as you don't eat your chips in my bed I think we'll manage."

Jason grinned at her at that and both women felt themselves relax a bit. Serena looked over at Bernie who wouldn't meet her eyes. She could hear the self blame loop going round in the blondes head and she reached her other hand out and lifted her chin. "It's all alright Bernie. We're all alright."

Bernie nodded but still wouldn't make eye contact as she cuddled into Jason's side, which he allowed because it meant she was staying.

Serena hauled herself up off the floor using the wardrobe for leverage. She hurried downstairs and went straight to the kitchen gathering up cutlery and ketchup for Jason. She retrieved 3 cans of his Diet Coke from the fridge and picked up the food parcel from where she'd abandoned it in the hallway. She allowed herself to climb more slowly as she had her hands full and moved back into the bedroom.

Bernie and Jason hadn't moved, and Bernie was still crying silently. Serena sat herself back on the floor.

"Right, Jason, help me unwrap the food please. Bernie, do you want ketchup?"

The normalcy of Serena's words moved both of the others into action. Bernie shook the ketchup bottle and poured some into the packet of food she was offered by Jason. They ate in silence, every minute restoring calm. Once they'd finished the brunette gathered up the papers and cutlery and put them on the dresser. She looked at Jason and said

"Jason what do you want to do now?"

"I'd like to go to bed Auntie Serena, I'm really tired"

"Okay love, so you want me to come with you?"

"No I'm okay. I'll see you in the morning."

He stood and repeated their hug gesture and Serena wished that he would let her put her arms round him. As if he read her mind he wrapped his arms around her first and they shared their first full hug in a long time. She found tears starting and blinked them away so as not to worry him. He said goodnight and went to his room.

Serena now turned her attention to her other love, Bernie.
Chapter 37 - the other love

Chapter 37.

Serena closed the door behind Jason and turned round to find Bernie now in her own meltdown. She scooted herself back against the wardrobe and buried her face in her hands. In exactly the same way as she had with Jason, Serena moved herself slowly down and touched her fingertips to Bernie's forearms. Having expected the recoil, it no surprise when it came so she managed to keep the contact between them. The heat was radiating off Bernie and she was visibly trembling, sending vibrations up the brunettes arms.

She took a risk and spoke:
"Bernie, I know you're so upset right now and you have every right to be but try to hear me saying, this was not your fault. Whatever happened, Jason reacts like this sometimes. You did his stitches when he smashed the shed window because he broke the lawn mower and was so upset with himself, even though it was old."

Bernie didn't respond and the trembling increased in its intensity. Serena shoved down her own rising panic and through about how to get through to her beautiful best friend who was so clearly in pieces. Did she try and talk about what had happened or ignore it and talk about something unrelated? In the end she did neither as suddenly Bernie, in an echo of Jason, smashed her own head violently back into the wardrobe twice before Serena realised and managed to drag her away just enough to stop a third hit, even though the army medic resisted her pull. "No Bernie. No." she stood them both up and manoeuvred the trauma surgeon over to the bed to sit on the edge.

"Stay there Major. That's an order."

Bernie looked up then with fire and ice in her eyes as Serena nodded at her and went to the ensuite to retrieve the discarded pyjamas the blonde had previously been wearing. "Let's try this again shall we?" She gently tugged off the hoodie and for the second time that day unlaced the shoes. Bernie seemed to have lost all ability to think and so she took over, gently unzipping her jeans and raising her arms to take her t shirt over her head. Removing her underwear she bundled Bernie back into her pyjamas and sat back next to her. The army medic just stared into space in front of her, the tears had stopped and she wrapped her arms around herself because she was still trembling. Serena rubbed her knuckles lightly over her upper arm to try to impart comfort but she wasn't at all sure Bernie was even mentally in the room with her, when slowly, the blonde turned to face her and the brunette's heart went out at that moment. The other woman's eyes, always so expressive, were wide and all consuming. The depth of the pain took every ounce of Serena's strength not to sob. She made a decision.

"Bernie, I'll put pyjamas on too and we will clear and away and sit down comfy okay? That's the plan. Why don't you go brush your teeth, there's a spare in my cabinet and wash your face and I'll change."

Bernie nodded but made no movement so Serena wrapped her arms around her and kissed the side of her head. She felt Bernie trembling still and kissed again gently. "Go on" she said and squeezed her arms gently and this time the blonde responded by going into the ensuite and shutting the door, giving Serena a moment alone.

She closed her eyes and ran her hands through her hair and yawned slightly, exhausted from the last 24 hours on no sleep. How on earth was she going to manage this? She started to undress slowly, throwing each garment into the laundry pile. She found herself some pyjamas, pale blue cotton with a white floral print and pulled the bottoms over her thighs. She
pulled on the top and started to button it. Her fingers were clumsy and she had to redo several of
the pearly buttons.

She looked at herself in the full length mirror and realised she'd done exactly the same thing,
naked, only yesterday, having decided Bernie couldn't possibly want her like that. She flushed from
thinking about it. She knew what she wanted most of all was Bernie beside in everything, the
mountain tops and the valleys. Sharing everything. If that side of their relationship came,
wonderful, but kisses and cuddles and hand holding, the affection side was just as important. She
wanted to fall asleep entwined in Bernie's arms and wake up in them with lazy kisses. She wanted
them to talk, really talk about everything and anything. She just wanted her heart whole and Bernie,
precious, sweet, complex Bernie was the missing piece.

She moved to the dresser to take off her jewellery, laying her necklace out carefully in its box,
reminding her that Bernie still had on the little bird bracelet and that thought warmed her heart.

Followed closely by a cold hand of realisation running up and down her spine.

The water hadn't started running in the bathroom.
Chapter 38 - Time is no healer

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning.

Chapter 38.

YOU IDIOT. Serena's brain screamed the words and she flew towards the bathroom. She crashed through the door which was fortunately not locked and looked around frantically. Drew in a sharp breath and held it.

Bernie had tucked herself in the small space under the sink. The bathroom cabinet door was hanging open on the wall and as Serena looked she could see the broken pink plastic case of a disposable razor to one side of the sink. Looking down she could see the silver blade winking at her from Bernie's hand, mocking her for her stupidity in letting the traumatised surgeon be in a bathroom on her own with sharps. She hasn't even looked up, thought Serena and her fear came back in the worst way.

Bernie hadn't really seen or heard Serena come in, despite the dramatic entrance. There was so much noise in her head, snatches of what had just happened mingling with voices from time long past, her brain determined to taunt her with things she'd done wrong, people she'd hurt, wounds she couldn't heal, friends she hadn't saved. Everything was too fast and the noise heart, like a migraine all over her head and down every nerve, like fingernails on a blackboard over and over again, and the pain, the mental pain so overwhelming that she'd turned to the only thing that had ever worked. She whimpered as somatic flashes of fingers and fists and feet all over her body, but never silencing the commentary, never relieving the pressure building behind her eyes, came to haunt her in this state of nightmare.

Serena ran a quick check with her eyes only but couldn't see any immediate or life threatening wounds. She had to get that blade from Bernie. Had to. Not wanting to spook her she approached gently, "Bernie" she whispered. "Can you hear me?"

Absolutely zero response. Not even a flicker. The blonde was lost in her mind. "Bernie" she tried again in her normal speaking voice. Nothing. "Berenice Griselda Wolfe will you look at me!"

Being full named seemed to startle Bernie back into the room and she ran her eyes around onto Serena and the off again, memorising every detail she could take in, just as she'd been taught. She'd always done well in observation training in basic. She'd been applauded heartily for realising a combatant, who was actually a staff sergeant outside of the role play, had changed one single button on his shirt being done up. So no chance was she going to stop using those skills. Her eyes settled on Serena.

"Bernie will you let me have that please?"

She shook her head. "Need it"

Serena thought quickly. "What if I looked after it for a while?" She shifted to sit on the floor,
hearing her knee pop as she did. Now they were at eye level to each other she could see how fragile the thread connecting Bernie to the present was and how loud the siren song of her mind must be right now. She held out her hand and the army medic shook her head. "Need it to hurt Serena. Need to punish myself."

Bernie's words were almost monotone and Serena realised she was dissociating slightly: drifting in and out of the now to the past, to outside herself, anywhere where she couldn't feel what was in her mind. The blade flashed in the light of the spots in the ceiling as it passed from hand to hand. And then it happened.

Bernie came tumbling back into the room from the corners of her mind at the sound of Serena sobbing, what? How? Looked down and oh. Dropped the blade on the floor and it made a faint tinkling as it bounced slightly. In less than a fraction of a second Serena, still sobbing had crossed the space and snatched up the blade. She stood quickly and rummaged through the cupboard, taking the other two razors and a pair of nail scissors and fled from the room.

Bernie put her hand to her head and it felt clammy to the touch. She was so tired. Maybe she'd have a little nap. She shuffled herself sideways and lay on the floor. She closed her eyes and waited for sleep to come. Except it didn't because Serena was back, pulling her from under the sink. The brunette was lifting the blondes top up looking at her stomach and ran her hands over her, checking, checking, and that's when Bernie was fully present in the moment.

"Serena, I didn't do it. I thought about it. I wanted to do much, but I didn't. I promise you."

Their eyes met and suddenly for the second time that evening Bernie found herself catching one of the Campbell-Haynes household as Serena did something she hadn't done since she was a child. Pitched forward and fainted clean away as Bernie lowered her to the ground.
Chapter 39 - Connection

Chapter Notes

Chapter 38 was hard to write.
Chapter 38 was too for different reasons.

Chapter 39.

"It's raining" thought Serena to herself. "Why am I outside in the rain?"

She wasn't. She was laying on her side with her head lolling back in Bernie's lap, Bernie's fingers stroking her hair and and her face and Bernie's tears hitting her cheeks as they dropped in the space between them. The rain.

Bernie was in bits but trying valiantly to keep it together, she needed to be the strong one now. Serena had done an incredible job over the last 24 hours for her and for Jason and the army medic recognised the faint as being a basal response to overwhelming and acute emotional pressure and that she simply needed to check her airway and wait for her to come back round. Bernie had wet a flannel under the cold tap of the bath, wrung it out as best she could and placed it on Serena's forehead which was etched with worry even as she was unconscious. She'd undone the top two buttons of the brunette's pyjamas top and rested her hand there, needing the skin to skin contact and the feel of Serena's heartbeat, strong and true, even in the faint.

She sighed audibly with relief as Serena opened her eyes and watched her pupils constrict and dilate again as they adjusted to the light level. The brunette screwed her nose up slightly as she came to and then relaxed as she saw Bernie's worried face above her. She went to speak but lost the words as the blonde covered her face in feathery butterfly kisses.

Bernie couldn't help herself. She poured every ounce of love and care her heart held into those tiny kisses that silently said so much. She helped ease Serena to a sitting position and encircled her with her arms as they sat on the bathroom floor. Serena rested her head between Bernie's breasts and listened to her heart, drumming at first but slowing, slowing, until the storm had calmed and the water was flat again like a millpond.

They sat for a while until age crept up on them and they needed to stretch. Bernie got up first, wincing as her back protested about how many floors she had sat on tonight and then helped Serena to her feet, slowly, not wanting her to faint again. She was briefly dizzy and then it cleared and they went out and sat side by side on the bed.

"Good catch Major" teased Serena and was rewarded with a deep chuckle. "Safe pair of hands those"

and immediately retracted, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean, well I did mean, but not like that and.."

...and then there was silence as Bernie met her lips with her own, gentle, closed-mouthed but lingering and bravely held Serena's hand in hers.

"I've made such a mess of this Serena"

"You have, but it's my mess too. And we can face it, untangle it and sort it together."

Bernie simply stared at Serena drinking in her perfectly beautiful, sincere face as she looked back
at Bernie herself with nothing but love. But then she saw a dark flash pass behind her eyes and looked at her questioningly.

"The only thing I can't cope with Bernie is..."
"SHIT" shouted Bernie's mind
"....if you run"
"HOORAY" her mind chorused "THAT'S NOT BAD"
"I can hear anything, walk through anything with you, take anything you need me to hold, give you everything I have, but I can't go on without you. Well I would go on, for Jason, but I wouldn't mend."

Tears appeared in Bernie's eyes and spilled over, Serena leant in and cupping her face in both hands kissed away each tear as it fell.
"I know we've got so much to talk about, and it's my worst skill. Advanced repair of the splenic artery is a doddle compared to actually articulating my thoughts and feelings. But you make me want to try. For you." Bernie said and then it was her turn to kiss tears away from Serena this time.
"Rome wasn't built in a day Major"
She nodded in relief. Serena got it.

"Darling, much as I applaud this new found openness, I think it'll go better if we have some sleep." said Serena. Bernie nodded and flushed as she realised the "Darling" was her and that she was going to be hearing it frequently from the brunette,
"Now. Where would you like to sleep?"
"Um" said Bernie, having not expected this. "Should I go home?"
"Certainly not. Jason will want you at breakfast for reassurance and I want you at breakfast because I always want you close." Serena said more matter of factly than she really felt. No way. She changed tack. "Well you can have either of the guest rooms, both are made up. You can sleep on either sofa in the lounge, there is a sofa bed in the Conservatory, or, you can stay in here with me. Either on a blow up bed or in this one"

Bernie's mind short circuited for a second. There was nothing she wanted more than to get into her with Serena and lie safe in her arms but how did she ask for that? Turned out she didn't have to.
"Personally, I would like you close, it's been hard today and I feel safer if your nearer rather than further but no pressure"
She'd made it easy. "I'd like to be here, with you. Please."

"Okay" said Serena simply. "Lets go look in on Jason"
They crept out and Serena opened his door. He was flat on his back with his headphones on, mouth open slightly as he gently snored. She moved up to ruffle his hair gently and was overcome with the moment watching Bernie tuck his foot back under the covers where it had snuck out. Silently they backed out, shut the door and went back to Serena's room, closing the door behind them.
Chapter 40 - To sleep, per chance to dream

Chapter Notes

ALL THE FLUFF :p

Chapter 40.

As the door closed, the nerves kicked in. For both of them. Bernie wondering how the hell the last day and a bit had ended up with her about to get into Serena Campbell's bed. Serena wondering how in the world to handle the fact Bernie Wolfe was about to be lying next to her.

They stood together just inside the door, neither one daring to move, not wanting to break the spell. Bernie reached out and linked her pinkie into Serena's who hummed happily as she did do, so pleased, no, thrilled that Bernie, for now was functioning and showing little bits of what Serena knew was in her heart.

"Shall we try teeth again?" asked the brunette nearly causing Bernie to have heart failure until she realised Serena meant cleaning their teeth. She exhaled in a hiss causing Serena to look at her with an eyebrow raised. "My, my Ms Wolfe. I'll be storing that up for future reference" and Bernie went the colour of tomato making Serena laugh. "Plenty of time for that too Berenice". "Not helping" muttered poor Bernie who was suddenly finding the carpet very interesting.

The vascular surgeon stood on her tip toes to kiss the hollow of the army medic's cheek. Bernie chanced a look and saw a tired but happy face looking back at her, which all things considered was a miracle after today. Her thoughts started to darken and Serena took her hand and led her back into the ensuite. They cleaned their teeth next to each other at the sink and Serena put the toothbrush she'd given Bernie into the holder next to hers. That simple gesture made both of their hearts sing a little, the togetherness that represented. Tenderly Serena wiped Bernie's face of salt tracks and a speck of ketchup and then washed her own face, knowing she'd probably had panda eyes for a while.

They moved back into the bedroom and Serena, being the normal occupant of the bed got straight in on her side and stretched out, wiggling as she rested her weary self into the blissful comfort of the sheets. But on opening her eyes she saw Bernie frozen by the side, a peculiar mix of longing and fear written across her lovely face.

Serena said nothing but slipped back out of the bed to take both of the other woman's hands in hers and move her over into the side she'd be sleeping on. Stiffly Bernie allowed herself to be lowered into the bed and watched through her fringe as Serena went back round and got in her side. She cuddled down again but Bernie was still half upright as stiff as a board. Serena rolled her eyes. "Oy up there."

Bernie, who'd been running some sentences through her own version of the "Auntie Serena" filter looked over and smiled nervously. "Try to tell me Bernie"

It tumbled out in a rush, still a little unfiltered, "I'm worried about having nightmares and that you can't trust me to behave and that I'll screw this up."

"Okay, let's break this down. If you have a nightmare, I'll talk to you, wake you if I need to. Jason
had them sometimes too. I can cope.
I trust you to behave because we're both exhausted, not ready for everything that that would bring
on top of everything else and because I know you."
"Oh” said the blonde in a tiny voice. "Thank you."

Serena had to smile. In 24 and a bit hours she'd gone from having her first lesbian kiss, to
declarations of love. She thought back again to the minor moment she'd had thinking about sex and
not knowing what to do and laughed to herself. Here she was in an her inexperienced sapphic glory
and she was having to lead. "Oh the delicious irony in that" she thought.
"Would it help if I said what I was up for at the moment?" Serena asked in a sudden moment of
boldness. Bernie nodded furiously in relief, how did this amazing woman know her so well.
"I'd like a goodnight kiss and to fall asleep holding each other"

She wasn't going to argue. Bernie slid down the bed to Serena's waiting arms and they rubbed each
other's shoulders. They rested their foreheads together and closed their eyes. And then Bernie's lips
were meeting Serena's and it was so soft and beautiful and gentle that the brunette sighed with
pleasure, making the blonde smile.

They wrapped their arms around each other and closed their eyes as Serena snapped the lamp off.
The warmth and peace and safety enveloped them both and they started to drift a little, much to
Bernie's surprise in particular as she never slept very well.
Just as they were about to fall of the edge into slumber Bernie heard "please be here in the
morning” and her last act of the day was to lay her lips on Serena's forehead as together, entwined,
they fell asleep.
Chapter 41.

Bernie awoke with a start. The sky was still black as coal meaning it was probably the very early hours. She listened for what had woken her and then she realised she wasn't in her own bed and freaked out. Starting to hyperventilate she checked her arms and legs weren't tied down. She slowly started to get up when a warm hand shot out from under the covers and stroked her arm. "It's okay, you're safe, I'm here"

Serena. Bernie exhaled and tried to slow her breathing down but couldn't. She started to see stars as she dragged in desperate breaths. Why couldn't she calm down? She started to claw at her own skin, desperate to find relief when there was a hand on her chest and her hand was being drawn under clothes to rest on skin.

"Feel my breaths, breathe with me Bernie. In for four, hold for four, out for four."

She concentrated really hard on trying to count, trying to match the rise and fall of Serena's chest as she measured out her breaths. Slowly, slowly she started to get control and Serena flicked the lamp on to its lowest light, both of them squinting at each other. Disheveled hair, wide eyes, skin blotchy from heat and panic.

"Okay?" Murmured Serena sleepily.
"No" Bernie said and started to cry.

Serena eased them both back down to lie again, switching the lamp back off. Nose to nose on the pillow they could feel each other's breath. The brunette ran her fingertips across Bernie's brow, trying to install safety and calm. Waited for the blonde to relax before kissing the corner of her mouth, her cheekbones, her eyelids and back down to capture her mouth in a full kiss.

Bernie became acutely aware of the placement of her right hand, still pressed between Serena's breasts, where she could still feel the rise and fall of her breath and the desire that flared, just for an instant. She moved it out from under her top earning the faintest whimper from the other woman at the loss of contact. She brought her hand to her own face and scrubbed away the tears. "Sorry. I'm alright. We can go back to sleep"

Serena sighed drowsily, pleased to hear that. She shuffled closer to Bernie who tucked her head under the brunette's chin, and nestled into her. She felt a Serena's hands nudge up the hem of her pyjama top and come to rest on the skin of the small of her back. Offering a kiss to Bernie's mouth which was eagerly accepted she fell asleep again and Bernie, after a while, followed.

Serena woke up next, on her back looking at the ceiling. The sky was still the colour of the darkest ink. Normally a sound sleeper she'd woken up with a weight pressing her into the bed. From where they'd fallen asleep after the last time they'd rolled over. Their legs were so entangled you couldn't really tell where one ended and the other started and Bernie was now partially on top of Serena, curled into her like she was a life belt, face buried into the brunette's neck and her right hand tucked between two buttons of her pyjama top. The surgeon smiled as she brought her hand up to stroke the blondes back gently tracing nonsense patterns, first over her top and then allowing herself the luxury of fingertips on skin, tracing the "I love you" she wanted to tell Bernie every minute of every day.

She thought about that and found her mind drifting to Edward. Much of their marriage had been punctuated by his cheating and drinking and she pushed away a memory that threatened to engulf
her, but she had loved him, hadn't she? At the start, and when they conceived Elinor? Yes. But it hadn't felt like this, ever. Like she could do nothing else ever again except hold Bernie and be thoroughly satisfied with her life. The sting at her absence, the rush of heat when she caught a glimpse of her, the want to give her everything, give the world, the stars and everything in between. No. It had never felt like that. She'd never woken up and felt him wrapped around her like this, never felt connection, understanding and yes, Serena acknowledged, love like this. She briefly toyed with the idea of undoing all her buttons, just so she could have more of that precious skin contact but knew it would freak Bernie out if she woke first, thinking she'd done it. And the thought of Bernie doing it made a stab of desire hit in Serena's belly.

She waited for it to subside and rubbed the trauma surgeon's back again gently, just enjoying being allowed to caress her. Bernie wiggled slightly and pressed her face in a little more, faintly murmuring "mmm S'rena" which made the brunette smile into the darkness as she settled herself again, closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.
Chapter 42 - the morning after

The first thing that Serena noticed was the absence of the weight that had been on her as she fell asleep the last time. Keeping her eyes closed she stretched out like a kitten, luxuriating in the unwinding of muscles and the feel of the bedding in her cosy nest. A smile spread across her face as she thought about the fact she and Bernie had shared the bed, had cuddled, kissed, caressed each other. Anywhere they'd touched each other had only made the bubble of love she was basking in bigger, stronger and more permanent. She knew that today was going to be more than likely just as emotion-filled so she wanted to enjoy waking up slowly like this first. Blindly she reached out for Bernie, hitting an empty space. She wasn't in the bed.

She went from dreamily just conscious to full on alert in less than a second. Had she run? Had Serena done wrong, been wrong, touched wrong? The blood in her veins felt like ice and she broke out in a cold sweat when she heard a little cough come from the bathroom.

Her mind screamed several things at her all in one moment.
"NOT AGAIN"
"YOU TOOK ALL THE SHARPS OUT"
"WHAT DID YOU MISS?"
"MOVE!!!"

The last one she obeyed, stumbling slightly as she extricated herself from the bed and jumped out. She ran and crashed through the bathroom door once more not breathing and in total fear, having no idea how long Bernie had been in there.

She got her answer when she went through as she caught her first sight of Bernie as she was getting off the toilet and pulled her bottoms up in that moment, and then froze as Serena made a less than graceful entrance, breathing hard, eyes blazing and mouth open. They stood still and stared at each other for a few moments and then Bernie turned slowly and flushed the toilet.
"Whoops" muttered Serena as the other woman washed her hands quickly and turned back to face her.
"Bernie, I'm so sorry, I, um, shit"

The shame hit them both. Bernie ashamed that she'd frightened the brunette so much that the thought of her being alone in the bathroom was too much for Serena to cope with. Serena ashamed that she'd immediately jumped to conclusions and hurt Bernie's feelings in the process.

Not looking at each other they shuffled back out into the bedroom and Serena flopped down on the bed in dismay at herself, which Bernie miss-read as worry. "Serena" she said softly, "look at me" Serena blinked and looked up. Watched in wonder as Bernie stepped out of her borrowed pyjamas and stood naked in front of her.
"I want you to check me"
"What?"
"I want you to check me for fresh cuts."

Serena stopped breathing and her heart clenched fiercely at the beautiful, brave woman standing so openly in front of her. How did she show Bernie it wasn't about trusting her, but about needing to
understand, to predict, to care and help.
"Breathe Serena" and she took a shuddering breath and stood up.
She went over to Bernie and did something neither of them expected. She ran her fingertips over every scar, mapping the course of the lines marking her skin, with such devotion and love that it made them both shiver.

Then suddenly Serena started to unbutton herself and undressed so she was as naked as Bernie. "I've seen yours" she said simply and she turned round to put her back towards the army medic whose eyes filled with tears as she she saw the deep angry gashes on the brunettes shoulders and back. "From mum when she was in the last stages" she murmured, sensing Bernie coming closer. The lightest of touches against her skin as Bernie traced the scars with her fingertips and then followed it up with her lips, placing tender kisses on each mark, on each memory. She fetched Serena's robe from behind the door and wrapped her in it carefully. Tugged her pyjamas back on and spun the other woman to face her.

"It's okay Serena" she said and the other woman pushed herself into Bernie's arms. They stood holding each other, not speaking, just wrapping their love around each other.
"I'll make some coffee" Serena said. "Back in bed Major"
Bernie was going to protest when she realised that this was Serena showing her trust, that she could leave Bernie and it be okay and the blonde lost her heart all over again to this incredible human being.
Nodding she slipped back under the covers as Serena opened the door.

"Morning Auntie Serena!" she heard Jason say, "Is Dr Bernie?"
She couldn't quite hear what Serena said back but smiled widely when Jason popped his head round the door, already dressed and repeated his greeting but to her this time.
"Morning Jason. How did you sleep?" she asked trying to contain the frown that wanted to appear at the bruises on the young mans face from last night.
"Very well thank you. I'm sorry I melted down last night"
"Jason, that was my fault, I'm so sorry."
"No" he said simply. "It's my autisms fault. It gets in the way of me understanding things sometimes and I have to hurt myself to make it stop"
Bernie inhaled and realised she understood that better than he knew.

"Jason! I need you!" trilled Serena from downstairs.
Giving her a thumbs up he left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar where it hadn't caught quite shut.
She lay back against the pillow and put her hands behind her head, wincing a little at the stab in her left one. She heard the front door shut and then open and then eventually shut again and presumed Jason was going to work
Cocooned in the warmth she allowed herself to doze off.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to breathe ;-) xxx
Chapter 43 - Mars Bar

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Samm for the idea for this chapter! Dedicated to you xx

Chapter 43.

She came back round from her sleep to find Serena sat on the edge of the bed smoothing her hair. She shivered slightly and realised she was soaked in sweat.
"You were having a nightmare my darling"
Oh. She looked away and felt the dark cloud hovering over them both. Her past, her memories, the unspoken words and the faces that taunted her from every angle. The darkness that was at the core of her being, rotting her from the inside out. She could feel it oozing out, infecting everything and everyone she touched and Serena and Jason were too precious and the urge to run rose its ugly head again.

"I emailed Hanssen yesterday Bernie" put in the brunette, seemingly unaware of the roiling sea that was moving with the army medic, "he's agreed to us having until Monday off".
And there it was, the panic, back in the room for all to see as breath came too quickly and muscles trembled. Only this time she moved towards Serena, not away, seeking that grounding by putting her hand in the centre of her chest and breathing in sync with her once again.

Serena, it had to be said, was knocked slightly off guard by the reaction to her little announcement and struggled herself to breathe normally, but forced herself to block everything out in order to be what Bernie needed, worried about her but delighted how she'd reached for her, not questioning or second guessing. Waited for the Major to calm again and covered the blondes hand on her chest with her own, keeping her there.
"What about that frightened you?" She asked gently.
"I, I. I guess I know it means now we are going to talk. To go to places inside my mind that I've never taken anyone and I'm scared"
Serena nodded.
"I hope so. But it's okay to take your time as well, you need rest and care and love and I want to do all of that for you, with you."

Bernie just looked at the woman in front of her. How could she be this blessed? How could she possibly try to deserve her? The voices started their refrain but she pushed them back out by looking into the eyes across from her, great expressive pools of love that she could and would lose herself in.
"Hold me?"
Her words surprised them both and Serena nodded. Went to untie her robe and then suddenly remembered she was totally naked underneath, her pyjamas still on the floor beside where they were sitting. She kept it on, moved up to the role of the bed and took Bernie in her arms, lying back against the pillows. Wrapped her up in her arms and tried to communicate the depth of her love and care for the woman pressed into her. Kissed her forehead and murmured into her ear, "I've got you, you're safe, I'm here" and felt Bernie fight her internal battles as she did so. Would there ever be a day when they could just lie in each other's arms without a care? Serena chose to believe that there would be.
She smiled as Bernie's hand slipped inside her robe, again seeking the comfort of warm skin. She rolled her eyes a little as Bernie's hand moved and came to rest over her belly button. "What?" said Bernie, sensing the tension and starting to withdraw her hand again. "Well, despite the fact I stripped off for you without a second thought this morning, it's all still new. It's not bad, please don't think that for a second. It's just taking a little getting used to, after all, we only had our first kiss two days ago." She smiled down at Bernie. "You're not doing anything wrong."

They relaxed again, just soaking up the feel of each other's warmth. Serena pushed her nose into the Major's hair and kissed her head, smelling her own shampoo as she did so. "I've got it!" she exclaimed suddenly, making Bernie jump and pull away. "Come back" and the puzzled trauma surgeon did, looking up at her. "We need a safe word."

Bernie actually thought she'd died for a second. A what? This was ground they hadn't been near. She forced herself to smile and say "Have you been reading 50 shades again Serena? Because I don't think I can get poor Raf's face out of my mind after he caught you reading it!"

She was rewarded with a rich giggle from the other woman. "Not like that!!" she blushed and then the biggest flirt in Holby couldn't help adding "yet" in a suggestive tone and poor Bernie raised a hand to her head in bewilderment. Laughing a proper belly laugh Serena went on, "a safe word so that if one of us needs to stop whatever we are doing, wherever we are doing it.."

"How does she make everything seem so suggestive?" wondered Bernie as that flame of desire returned. "...whether it's talking, sharing something, if you, well, if you feel the need to um...hurt yourself and can't tell me or whether we are right here in this bed, both us know that that word means we stop and assess. Together."

Bernie considered this. It was a really good idea, she found it difficult to say much when she was in a heightened state of emotion, so an agreed word that she could force out and then get help sounded like the best thing she'd ever heard. Wriggling herself up she looked into Serena's eyes and then down at her lips before kissing her slowly and gently. The brunettes eyes flew shut and she moaned faintly into the kiss. "You're wonderful" Bernie murmured in her ear before kissing her again. "I'd like a safe word but what?" They sat in silence, both thinking. "What's your least favourite chocolate Bernie? Something you'd never choose?"

"Mars Bar" said Bernie making Serena giggle. "Far too sickly."

The brunette shrugged her shoulders and waited for the realisation to work its way in. "Oh I see, because it's something I'd never eat you'd know straightway."

"Yep" said Serena "I don't like them much either."

"Mars Bar" they both said in unison and collapsed in a fit of giggles, Bernie poking Serena in the ribs to make her laugh harder. And then they were staring at each other with an intensity and a hunger. Serena pulled Bernie to her and kissed her, hard. "That's going to make for some interesting moments in bed" she said and they laughed again whilst both thinking about actually being in bed together and using those words.

Bernie laid her head on Serena and linked their finger. "Serena?"

"Yes sweetheart"

"Don't let me run. I'm really good at running."

And Serena did nothing more than encircle Bernie with her arms and close her eyes and said.
"Envelope 9".
Chapter 44 - Tessa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 44.

Unfortunately what that did was remind Bernie what downstairs, on the driveway, was her little sports car crammed with everything she owned of value and that she'd come here to say goodbye and save Serena from her and she'd got totally derailed by the envelopes and The Plan and everything that had happened. She shot down to the other end of the bed, out of Serena's arms, stripped off the borrowed pyjamas yet again and looked around wildly for her clothes. They weren't there. What she didn't know was that Serena had gathered them up and popped them in a drawer, ever the tidy one.

Then, totally naked, she was lost in her mind. Back THERE. Back in several places actually. Mosul. Kandahar, Basra, her marital home, switching over with each other trying to be the dominant memory.
Kandahar was winning. It always won. They always won. She shrieked as their faces loomed at her, mocking, taunting, shoving each other in front of her. The faces that haunted her sleep and her waking wanderings.

The heat. She was so hot. She scrabbled unseen at her skin, trying to get the heat to move away. The smell of sweat and cheap aftershave, diesel, opium and spice hung in the air and wrapped itself around her. Flashes of Arabic shouted loudly made her jump and twist and turn, trying to find the source of the voice, to silence it. Neutralise the threat. That's what she needed to do.

Serena was startled by the sudden turn of events and was momentarily frozen in place. They'd been cosy and content and she'd said something she thought was reassuring only to have Bernie erupt, strip and now sit with her hands clamped over her ears at the end of her bed trying to make herself as small as possible. She moved down to her and tried to out her hand in her arm but that made Bernie hiss and then open her mouth and scream. Serena had never, ever heard anyone make a sound like this and she was terrified. Should she call an ambulance? She briefly considered but then rejected. Shaking she started to talk, reassuring words but it was soon obvious they weren't penetrating the place Bernie was in in her mind. Bernie shoved her, literally pushed her hands away.

Bernie had other priorities. She was right now running a field assessment. Threat, Exits, Strategy, Share and Action or TESSA as it was known for short. Identify the threat, locate the exits, form a strategy, share it with your men, act. "TESSA" she shouted, "NOW" but no response came. Shit, shit, shit, where were her men? "SOUND OFF!!" Silence. Where the fuck were they? She heard mocking laughter all around her and she span around and around. The sound of laughing grew louder and louder and she couldn't make it stop, couldn't find it. It echoed around and around.

Serena was desperate, she couldn't think of anything. "THINK" she berated herself and jumped back violently when Bernie bellowed "TESSA" in her face. Who was Tessa? What was she doing to Bernie? She'd never heard the name mentioned before.

Bernie looked around. One exit. That was bad. How had she got herself cornered like this. The old man in the corner gave her a toothy grin and rubbed his hands together. She bolted for the exit only to be met by them. She tried to struggle, desperate searching for a solution when hands tugged her backwards and she lost her balance. Hitting the dirt she rolled over, raised her rifle and fired. Once,
twice, three times. And came back to the room where Serena was in front of her with terrified eyes. She tried to signal with her eyes, gesturing wildly but that was working. What should she do.

She reached out for her and Serena shrank away, not realising Bernie was back in the room. She saw what had happened when she had tried to touch the army medic and was unsure of what would happen if their skin connected again. She literally had no idea what to do, there was not even a plan A.

She stayed just out of reach, watching Bernie gesture and flail until she heard her voice whisper desperately.

"Mars bar"

Chapter End Notes

TESSA isn't a real thing but a composite of strategic military responses that I've learned over time.
Chapter 45 - what's the alternative?

Chapter Notes

Big TW on this chapter.
It was a hard chapter to write, kind of a filler but also with its own importance, my first real writers block.

Chapter 45.

Serena near swooned when she heard those two blessed little words. She pushed herself towards Bernie, just stopping herself from launching at her, realising the terrified woman was still naked. She moved off the bed to the wardrobe to fetch a blanket to wrap the blonde in, wincing at the sound of distress as she recognised Bernie thought she was leaving her.

"I'm here, I'm here" she crooned softly and swaddled her in a thick soft blanket. It was dark green, the colour of sunlight on oak leaves and the contrast of that on the blondes skin which felt like it was on fire, made Serena want to weep. She looked so small and vulnerable huddled on the end of the bed in the blanket that would go round her several time.

"Bernie, look at me."
With no resistance Bernie did and Serena could see the terror and the exhaustion.
"Sweetheart, can I put my arms round you? I don't want to frighten you."
The other woman nodded her consent and Serena inched closer to her and slowly enveloped the blanket-clad woman in her hold. "She's shaking" the vascular surgeon thought to herself and brought one hand up to stroke the blonde curly hair that as usual was falling everywhere.
"Darling, you don't have to talk because you used the safe word, but listen okay. I think, watching you, that you just had a horrible flashback and, I'm assuming that normally, you would cut yourself to deal with that."
She felt Bernie's grip tighten and she rubbed her back through the wool softly.
"That's okay but we're going to try something else."

The relief in Bernie's body was tangible. Serena had her, she was safe and wasn't going to add another Kandahar scar. She looked into the brunettes eyes and saw nothing but love and concern.
"We are going to put some clothes on and go downstairs. Jason has gone to work. He came to say goodbye while you were sleeping."

Serena made as if to get up but Bernie's grip became vice like. "Okay. I think you're telling me not to let go of you, because you're scared of what you might do if we're not touching. But there is nothing in here or the bathroom that you can hurt yourself with and I'm going to go to the 6 steps to the dresser and then come straight back. Turn round so you can see me do that darling."

Bernie still wouldn't let her move, clinging to her. So she stood them both up and keeping her arm around the blonde moved them to the dresser. She drew out a different set of pyjamas for Bernie, the palest pink brushed cotton, a simple t shirt and pants set. She unwrapped Bernie from the blanket, dressed her and then rewrapped her as the blanket seemed to be giving her some comfort. The army medic still wouldn't let go of her so it was a little tricky to her herself into a new set as well and then they were ready to go downstairs.
They walked slowly as Bernie seemed determined to maintain contact with Serena at all times. When they got the kitchen door the army medic stopped dead.

"I, I can't Serena"

"It's okay?"

"No, it's...um, it's Mars Bar" said Bernie desperately, rolling her eyes at herself. Serena thought for a minute and the crashing realisation hit.

"Okay Bernie, I understand. Too much temptation?"

The blonde nodded and hung her hand in shame.

"Stay here. Hold the stair rail - just not that one, it's wobbly. Count out loud to fifty for me, as slow as you can and I'll be back before you finish"

She moved Bernie's hands to two of the banisters and waited for her to grip. Then waited again as the trauma surgeon took a deep breath and "1,2,3,4"

Serena shot into the kitchen with a start Usain Bolt wouldn't have sneezed at. Dove into the cupboards and cursed under her breath, who has a kitchen where fucking rice is next to a casserole dish and bread was near the sandwich toaster because not only was the molecular mass important to Jason, so was a categorisation system relating to decimalisation.

"11,12,13"

Ransacking the cupboards she finally found the plastic thermos mug she'd been looking for and then started a search for kitchen roll.

"18,19"

The kitchen was rapidly becoming a scene of devastation when she finally found it with the soup? Who knew.

"33,34" SHIT. She could hear Bernie getting desperate and hurried to the freezer.

"41,42" finishing off she made a run for it back out to the stairs.

"48,49,50" and there were Bernie's hands back on her arms again and a tremble of relief ran through them both.

She took them into the lounge and they curled into each other on the sofa, Bernie practically climbing into Serena's lap in the need to be close. She looked worried as Serena put the mug and the paper between them, not knowing what expect.

"Correct me at any point" she started nervously, "but my understanding of self harm is that sometimes you might cut yourself because you feel numb and need to feel something, and sometimes you might cut yourself because the pain on the inside is so much harder to deal with that pain on the outside?"

She raised her eyebrows in a question and Bernie's eyes filled with tears of relief at the understanding of what it meant. She couldn't speak but nodded her confirmation.

"Okay good. Point to me as Jason would say. So, from what I saw of your flashback" and she rubbed Bernie's arm comfortingly, it's the latter rather than the former you're feeling?"

The blonde nodded again as two fat tears spilled over her lashes and down her cheeks.

"Can we try this? It will hurt but it won't damage or leave marks" She opened the lid of the mug to show Bernie the ice cubes in there. Taking two out she passed them to Bernie and put them in her right hand.

"Make a fist, really squeeze it"

The army medic closed her eyes and tensed her muscles as she held the ice tightly and the pain began to start, the cool burn of skin exposed to something too cold for it to compute. She held it and held it and finally the tension flowed out of her and she relaxed. Serena quickly wiped her hand with some kitchen paper and moved the mug to the coffee table, replacing the lid. Then lost her breath as two strong arms were thrown round her neck and she was drawn into a tight hug.

Bernie rested her forehead on Serena's and looked in her eyes. "Thank you" she whispered over and over again. "It helped?"
"Yes"
They sat in companionable silence with their arms around each other, nose to nose, not wanting to break the spell that had fallen.

"Serena?"
"Yes love?"
"Why is this happening? Why can't I stop these flashbacks?"
"I think your mind is telling you it's time. Time to let me in, time not to be on your own with it anymore"

Serena stopped and drew her head back a little to look at Bernie and took the risk.
"Bernie?"
"Serena?"
"Who's Tessa? What did she do to you?"
Chapter 46.

Serena was not expecting Bernie to laugh at her questions and was slightly taken aback. "What's funny?" She huffed, slightly grumpily and Bernie immediately raised her hand to Serena's cheek. "I'm not laughing at you. Why do you ask? Did I mention it when I was out of it?"

"Actually, you screamed it in my face. I thought you might've seen me but thought it was her."

Bernie dropped her eyes to her hands in disgust with herself. "Is this the end?" Had she damaged Serena one time too many? She looked back up at Serena and couldn't help but lean in for a kiss which Serena returned. She took the brunettes hand in hers and they sat, just kissing gently for a few moments, the care for each other being expressed in the meeting of their mouths.

"Serena?"
"Mmm?"
"TESSA isn't a she, it's an army thing we do in the field."
"Oh."
"I'm sorry."

Serena looked up sharply at that. "What for?"
"For scaring you like that."

And all of a sudden all the breath left Serena in a rush and she started to sob, great, juddering, gasping sobs and Bernie immediately drew the brunette to her, holding her tightly and in an echo of the previous night with Jason, began to rock her gently as she cried it out. Whispered so gently that Serena didn't, couldn't hear it over her tears, the first time she'd said it out loud.

She closed her eyes. And the enormity of that hit her. She had to stop running from this. No one had ever made her feel like this, cared for, loved, safe, desired. She could spend eternity in Serena's arms and it would never be enough time but Serena, she was more than enough. She was everything. Everything. The first thought in the morning and the last thought in the evening. She was the sunlight and the evening star. She was a pearl, a diamond in the rough of Bernie's heart and life. The cornerstone and the key.

She snapped out of her reverie as she realised Serena had stopped crying and was now looking at her. "Sorry Bernie."
"What could you possibly have to apologise to ME for?" She said, exasperated that this woman could think she was anything other than perfect, in all things. "If you think I'm scared of you, you'll close off, not share with me. Run." and with that cried again.

"Time to woman up" Bernie thought to herself.

"Serena?"
"No, please don't."
"Don't what" she asked gently.
"Please don't say you need to go, please, please don't leave me. I know that makes me sound so pathetic but I need you."
Bernie was temporarily stunned. Serena needed her?
"You need me?"
"I do. I'm not whole without you. I love you. I've always loved you, oh I might not have called it that, but every moment of every day is only complete when you're near me and I want to be in your every moment."
"You are"
"Not if you run."

Bernie cursed herself bitterly, how had she got this so wrong, to think that Serena would be better off without her?"
"I want to stop running."
"Then stop. I'll help you."

Bernie took a moment and assessed herself.
"I want to tell you everything. The things that make me happy, the things that haunt me, the scars I carry, the joys of my heart. I want you to see, all of it, all of me. I can't promise I won't think about running, it's my best skill and my first port of call. But I can promise to tell you, and I will. I will change, for you, because of you and how much you have loved me and how much..."

Serena held her breath, this was the most open she'd ever seen the blonde be, the relief of hearing her say she wanted to stop running made every fibre of Serena light up with happiness.

"How much, Serena Campbell, that I love you, with all my heart."

And then they were both sobbing in each other's arms, their tears mixing as they fell. In relief, that having found each other, they were home.
They lay tangled up in each other in silence for a while and Bernie drew the blue patchwork blanket that she'd abandoned the evening before over both of them. She decided to be brave.
"Serena?"
"Bernie?"
"Are you, well, are you sure you, um, can, well, well, hear this?"

Serena immediately responded.
"Sweetheart, I want to hear it, I can and will hear it. I know the safe word if I need a minute, as do you. I want to help you hold the weights in your mind. So, yes."

Bernie laid it all on the line.
"I need to tell you about Kandahar"

It had been her first tour after promotion to Captain. She was in command of a platoon of fresh faced young men and women, sent to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. She had thought she'd know what to expect after multiple tours in Iraq, but the arid, dry heat was totally different. Afghanistan, for all its issues, was beautiful. As a medic her skills were in constant demand on the base just outside the city itself. The insurgents were getting more and more skilled in small arms combat and the placement and detonation of devastating IEDs. She'd seen things there that her mind couldn't let go of, the effects of explosive on skin and flesh and bone, making every procedure a challenge to rise to. The sense of overwhelming loss and defeat when another young life exit the theatre of war draped in the U.K. flag in the back of a Hercules was unlike anything else she'd ever been through.

As a doctor she should have been a non-combatant but she'd entered the army on purpose and trained to fight as well as heal, not always mutually exclusively. She'd stitched wounds and performed surgery on the enemy, and the enemies wives and children when they were brought to her, along with many civilians. She learned a little Pashto while she was there, always wanting to be able to use words of comfort that would be understood and words of instruction that couldn't be ignored.

Serena was listening to the picture Bernie was painting in awe, she'd never heard the blonde speak about anything like this, or so openly and was gripped by the need to urge Bernie to keep going. She traced patterns of love on the other woman's arm as she continued to talk.

Life found a routine, patrols, surgeries, the heat, Meatball Wednesday with the Americans. The desert at night was her favourite. To go out in the dusk where the heat was less ferocious and the stars shone from the heavens over fields of poppies and white buildings. To breathe air scented with cardamom and rose water and hear the chatter of locals as they ate together. Adhan was called...
out to the people by the muezzin from the mosque, followed with the iqama, summoning the
people to line up for the beginning of the prayer and became like a clock,

She'd missed Cam and Charlotte, but she had a purpose here, a reason to exist, to use her mind and
her hands and it was exhilarating. That feel of having been born for time such as this.

She stopped for a moment to look at Serena who was staring at her in rapture at finally getting to
hear about her life before Holby. She linked their hands and they sat in silence for a moment.
"Okay?" Bernie asked, needing the reassurance to be able to go on.
"Dairy Milk"
"What?, just what?"

Serena giggled and Bernie visibly relaxed.
"Mars Bar is our stop word but we didn't have one for keep going. So I picked my favourite
chocolate."
Bernie barked with laughter at that and Serena joined in.
"You're incredible Serena."
"I know." came the response and they laughed again, the break in tension welcome for them both
and Bernie had to kiss her, had to.
"Mmm Dairy Milk" put in Serena when they broke apart and the blonde laughed and kissed her
again.

They hugged for a minute and Serena spoke.
"Can you go on?"
Bernie nodded, took a deep breath and continued.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter carries some big trigger warnings so be prepared and skip it if you're vulnerable.
Chapter 48. Kandahar Scars

Chapter Notes

All the trigger warning on this chapter.
Please avoid if you are vulnerable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 48.

The day it all fell apart had started like any other. Rounds in the morning, some teaching time with
the junior medics in the service and then in the afternoon a routine excursion into the farmland on
the outskirts of Kandahar. They knew the Taliban were trying to resume control in that area so
getting on the ground and meeting the tribal chiefs and local law lords was important, they needed
them to be on the allied side, or at least neutral.

They'd gone out in a Challenger 2 tank and two Wolfhounds which always made her smile. She'd
never used Marcus' name either as a doctor or in the army. The armoured vehicle wasn't perfect but
it made her feel protected somehow in a war that was unpredictable, the name was a comfort.
About 8 miles from the home compound they'd been flagged down on the road. Their interpreter
said the man's father was dying and please could they help. Rolling on they'd reached a small
settlement of about a dozen buildings. She directed her men to run a sweep in line with standard
operating procedure whilst the man begged the interpreter to hurry.

She'd waited for the all clear and jumped down from the 1st Wolfhound with her medical pack.
She was the only medic so asked the interpreter to lead them on, instructing the platoon to maintain
alert 1. She'd been escorted into a building with just one room, where an old man was lying in a
pile of blankets. She introduced herself in Pashto, earning a nod from the man. He rambled a
stream back at her and the words she picked out were pain and chest. She examined him and gave
him some nitro spray when she turned and saw a group of men standing in the doorway, armed
men. In turbans with long beards and rifles.

She needed a minute. Serena was transfixed, not moving, not speaking. Every single part of her
wanted to stop talking, not say anymore. This was too hard, Serena couldn't hear this.
"I'm scared"

Serena drew her in for a close hug on hearing that and then pushed her back slightly. "Of what?"
Bernie balked and said "of you looking at me differently when you hear what I'm going to say."
Serena's heart broke, literally hurt in her chest when she heard those words.
"My Bernie, my wonderful Bernie, NOTHING you tell me could change how I feel about you. I
can't imagine what you'd have to say to change the love in my heart and in my eyes for you."
Bernie decide to go on, tired of being on her own with it.

She'd called to her men and asked for TESSA, but not a single one of them replied. Her blood had
run cold when no one answered her sound off. She did her own TESSA right there. Realised she
was in a room with only one exit - why oh why had she not thought that through, asked for the man
to be brought outside. Looked at him and saw him rub his hands together and grin at her with his
broken teeth showing.
She'd bolted out of the doorway and found herself surrounded by insurgents. They pushed and
pulled at her, hands grasping. She'd struggled and been pulled backwards, that had helped her,
whipped her rifle around and fired off 3 rounds in quick succession into the air as a warning before
hearing the unmistakeable click and a pistol being put to her temple, the kiss of metal cool on her
skin.

She'd dropped her rifle and the crowd jeered, she'd picked up lady in the Pashto but nothing else.
She was taken forcibly back to the room with the old man who was now sat in a chair in a tribal
leader hat. She approached him and started to speak when he'd backhanded her across the face,
splitting her lip. He fired off a stream of language she didn't understand when everything had gone
dark, blindfolded.

She tried to scream but had a rag smelling of diesel forced in her mouth. Her hands and feet were
bound with what felt like electrical flex and she was shoved to the floor. Trying to loosen the bonds
she wriggled, earning mocking laughter. She'd been stripped and searched and then lying in the
dust....

She couldn't. Couldn't say it.
Looked desperately at Serena, pleaded with her eyes for rescue from saying it but they both knew it
had to come out. And she'd never said this out loud, not even on the debrief, not when she'd been
rescued by a passing American patrol. Never.

"They all did it Serena. All 10 of them."

Serena waited, desperate to speak, to end the pain of this conversation but she knew, deep down in
her soul that Bernie had to vocalise this, had to get it outside of being trapped in her mind with it.
She looked with tear-filled eyes back at Bernie who was searching her face for any sign of
rejection or disgust. Only there was none to find.

"They raped me."

Chapter End Notes

Please visit http://www.rsvporg.co.uk if you need support
Chapter 49. She closed her eyes and waited for the tidal wave of panic to ebb. She’d never, ever said these words out loud before, it made it suddenly and horrendously real, and her breath caught in her throat. Fought the dizzying sensations of flashbacks. Counted slowly in her head and when that was working dove for the cup of ice and held a handful, letting the burn creep up and manage the overwhelming need to scream that wouldn't come out. Bernie had felt like this before but never got so close to expelling it all from her. The pain helped lessen the turmoil in her brain and she slowly, slowly looked up.

Serena, meanwhile, was in agony. She had been intuitive enough to know that something catastrophically traumatic was behind Bernie's self harm, flashbacks and nightmare. Recognised undiagnosed PTSD when she saw it full in the face. Never, has she imagined this would be the root. She'd assumed that Bernie has seen and experienced trauma, she knew a little of what had happened in Basra without Bernie telling her, when she'd seen the blonde had been awarded the Queens Gallantry Medal like her father good old Google had satisfied her curiosity. But this? Not in her worst and most vivid nightmare had she expected this. She felt guilty about making the army medic say the words but she knew was that was an important part of healing. The brunette watched her struggle with herself and then dive for the ice and she lost her heart to Bernie. She couldn't fix the wounds, not these ones and it was killing her. She held her breath as Bernie's eyes tracked up slowly to meet hers.

They held eye contact for the longest time. Serena had to restrain herself from reaching across the small space between them to Bernie, but instinctively knew that she needed to allow the trauma surgeon to be the one to initiate any physical touch after that revelation. She was holding herself so still she realised she'd had missed something her best friend had said. 
"Sorry love, I missed that. 
"Serena, why are you looking at me like that? 
"Like what Bernie, tell me what you see." 
"Why can't I see it?"
"What love?"
"Disgust"

And with that Serena started to cry. 
"How could you think there would be? Bernie, I LOVE you. Nothing, nothing that you've said changes that."
Bernie started to cry to, silently and then said. 
"But I'm dirty and damaged Serena. Alex and Marcus didn't know so they didn't see. But you know and you see."
"Shall I tell you what I see?"

Bernie thought about that. Did she want to know? This is she had tried so hard to run, knowing that someday she'd end up telling Serena about Kandahar and the death of anything between them that that would mean.
She had to know. So she nodded and held her her breath.

"I see you. I see the amazing, intelligent, beautiful, fierce and intense woman I have fallen in love with. I see someone who’s thinking about them-self is a little odd because of they've been through. I see the bravest person I've ever met, because I know, I really know, how hard your story was to
tell and how excruciating the final sentence was for you. I see the woman I want to hold, comfort, and love. I see the scars, not on your body, but in your mind and I want to help you find the help you need to start to heal them. I see you Berenice. My beautiful, bests friend, colleague and partner. Or girlfriend or whatever word you want to use to describe this. I see you, but it's not the way you see yourself. But I hope, one day, you'll see you as I see you."

Bernie's mouth had fallen open and she let out the breath she'd been holding and brought her her hands to her face. Serena hadn't rejected her. Loved her, LOVED her. And that moment changed everything, the fear of losing Serena rolled away and she moved across the sofa to eliminate the space between them. Took hold of the brunettes forearms and looked, deep, deep into her eyes and beyond into her soul. Lost all concept of time and space as she drowned in the love she saw and the need to be cared for rose up.

"Serena"
"Bernie?"
"Help me."

Serena cried again at that.
"I'd move heaven and earth if that would change this, if I could take it away, so you hadn't been through that. But darling, I'll be with you and walk through this with you, however you need me to."

Bernie let out a sob and move slightly, seeking permission and then laid her hand on Serena's cheek and dropped a soft kiss to her mouth before curling herself into the brunette to be held. Feeling those safe arms slip round her and them both lay back against the arm of the sofa she gave into guttural sobs that ripped through her body. Listened to Serena whisper over and over that she was safe, she was loved. She was home.

Serena had closed her eyes and held Bernie as her body was wracked with sobs. The letting go, of being on her own with it and crying for the young woman who'd kept it all in and been so hurt. Just sat and whispered words of love, hoping they'd penetrate deep into the broken places, and shine some light in the darkness that had hidden there for so long.

Eventually the blonde calmed a little and hiccups a bit and Serena rubbed calming circles on her back. She looked down to see Bernie looking back at her with wet eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "Thank you for trusting me Bernie."

The blonde nodded, not being able to form words and closed her eyes. Serena inched them both slightly down the sofa bit by bit until they were stretched out together and she sang to Bernie softly as the blonde gave up and fell asleep.
Chapter 50 - Lobster Love

Chapter Notes

A/N - not sure whether to continue. Taking some flak for being too far out of Canon and not faithful to the characters and their identity. Thanks as always to my regular and kind commenters.

Chapter 50.

Serena just held tight, gentle but tight. She'd stay awake just to hear the sounds of Bernie breathing, relaxed and not dreaming for days. Her heart swelled as she looked at the sleeping woman pressed against her. "I love her" she thought and smiled happily before she turned her thoughts back to the day so far. Bernie needed some significant therapy and probably some extended sick leave. Hopefully she would get her to stay with her and Jason but the trauma surgeon was such a proud woman she wasn't sure if she could be persuaded. She began to run her fingers though the tousled blonde hair that was spread out like a fan over her.

The depths of feeling that she had for Bernie was something of a shock. Not unwelcome, not at all, but the speed and intensity of how irrevocably she'd fallen made her gasp a little and Bernie stirred.

"Sorry" the army medic said and went to push herself up and out of the arms holding her.
"I'm not" Serena replied. "Dairy Milk"
They exchanged grins at this and Bernie laid herself back down against Serena, feeling utterly loved and safe for the first time ever, that nasty, stormy feeling of always needing to ready to run had dissipated right there in the arms of Serena Campbell.
"Thank you."
"What for?"
"Being my Lobster"
They both laughed hard at this, having binge watched the box sets separately.
"Bernie"
"Yes Dar, Serena?"
"Am I Ross or Rachel?"
"Which one of us is the bigger nerd?"
"You"
"Oy Ms Campbell!"

They laughed again and snuggled back up together, just enjoying the skin contact and warmth of being at ease in the arms of someone who loved you. Bernie became a little introspective, the emotions flying round were huge and yet they were still managing to laugh and tease gently. She was so desperate not to screw this up, she'd nearly screwed it up, Bernie thought to herself.

Realising the army medic had clammed up a little, Serena wanted to try to draw her back out again, she'd noticed already that the flashbacks Bernie had were in one part fed by overthinking and overanalysing and Bernie was expert level in both, she thought to herself, not unkindly.

"Penny for them" she prompted gently and felt arms tighten round her for a moment before relaxing slightly.
"I need to go to therapy don't I."
Serena kissed the top of her head fondly.
"Yes darling. But I'll help you find one and take you to and from appointments if you want me to."
"I do want you to. Please."
"Then I will. But I need you to hear something okay?"
Bernie pulled away slightly so she could see Serena's eyes.
"You can always, always talk to me about it. As much or as little as you want. I'll never push you away, even if it's in the middle of the night. I can hear it Bernie."
The blonde sighed with relief and tucked herself back under the dimpled chin looking down at her. She wanted to stay in Serena's arms forever, and then a bit longer if that was alright with God, the Universe and everything.

She kept coming back to one thing, replaying it over and around in her mind, thinking about the words, the tone, body language.
"I can hear the cogs turning Berenice. Spit it out for the love of Pete!" She smiled to make it clear she was teasing and waited.

"Serena?"
"Mmm?"
"When I told you, um about what they did you said "you knew, you really knew, how hard it was tell my story."
"Glad to see you paying attention Ms Wolfe"

Bernie stopped, weighing up the options, to speak or to stay silent. Oh hell, she deduced. No guts, no glory.

"Serena?"
"Yes?"
"Will you?"
"Will I what?"
"Tell me your story?"
Chapter 51 - Harvard

Thank you so so much for all the comments asking for this to continue. I did mark it as not being canon from the beginning.

Please note - Trigger warnings for this and probably 52 as well.

Love you all.

Chapter 51.

Serena shivered a little. She'd given Bernie the subtest clue and she'd picked up on it, she knew she would. It had been deliberate. Trying to communicate empathy and true understanding whilst allowing the Major to decide if and when to ask. She wasn't uncomfortable at sharing this. It wasn't something she broadcast but unlike Bernie, this wasn't her first time telling it.

She'd been at Harvard. She'd loved Massachusetts. It's beautiful colours and intense, biting winter. The chance to do her MBA there had been too good an opportunity to miss, despite her Mother's vocal displeasure. She'd found it easy to adapt to campus life, making a wide circle of friends as a social butterfly, many of whom loved Serena, for her cute British accent especially and the way she said things like tomato and vitamin.

She heard Bernie snicker at this and smiled.
"And what are you laughing at?"
"Um, hearing you say vitamin. I'm imagining hearing that as an American and falling in love - OH."

Serena kindly ignored the comment from her friend, just squeezed her shoulder and continued.

There'd been a college ball for Christmas. She enjoyed them immensely, and Jeremy, the guy she sat next to in lectures had asked her to go with him as his date. She'd agreed happily, glad he had taken the imitative. More than ready for a little cross-the-pond romance. She was hoping for their first kiss to happen somewhere beautiful, under the mistletoe that was hung in the entrance to the grand ballroom or even as he dropped her back at the apartment she was living in, in the frosty darkness. Serena knew she was a hopeless romantic but she thrived on the intricate social dance of a new partner.

She'd gone all out to look good, knowing that was what every girl was doing. She had a stunning plum coloured gown with cap sleeves, that cinched in at her waist before falling to the floor, giving her an enviable hourglass silhouette. She had silver-grey wrap and heels, a small clutch covered in crystals. A tear-drop diamond pendant nestled in her cleavage and she'd curled her long hair slightly, so it tumbled down her back in waves. "Not bad Serena" she'd winked at herself after applying her make-up, all soft tones of grey and a dash of plum lipstick to accent the dress.

Jeremy had wolf-whistled when he'd picked her up in his Mercedes. He'd been so perfect, bringing her flowers and opening the car door for her. They'd sat with their friends and drank too much champagne, danced round the ballroom on air and finally, he'd leant in at the end of a waltz and kissed and she was in raptures.

She knew at the end of the night that they would need a taxi, Jeremy had drunk too much to drive
and she wasn't going to risk it. They went to the coatroom to collect her wrap along with Matthew, who'd asked if he could share their taxi. She was slightly annoyed at this, and at Jeremy agreeing.

She'd been thinking about this when the door shut and Matt would stood against it. She looked at Jeremy and instantly went pale. He pulled her to him roughly and started running his hands over her, his breath hot and smelling of alcohol and cigarettes rasping in her ear.
"Stop!"
"Oh come on. You know you want this. You've been wanting it for weeks." he spat out suddenly and she swayed on her heels.
"Why, what, no! Matt, help me!"
Matt smiled at her and her blood ran cold.
"Fucking tease" he whispered at her and she knew what was going to happen, that it was pointless fighting it but all she could say was "no, no, no" on a repeat.
A whispered refrain that trailed off as her dress was shoved up, her underwear ripped off and then Jeremy, there, emptying himself into her while Matt cheered from the doorway.

When he'd finished she sat up immediately and smoothed her dress down. Kicked off her heels and ran, not being stopped by Matt at the door now. She fled down the stairs and into the arms of her friend Lily who had happened to be at the bottom of them.
Lily looked at Serena who was shaking violently.
"I need to go to the police. I've just been raped" and she turned away and threw up in a nearby bin.
Chapter 52 - find a penny

Chapter 52.

She'd gone to the police, who seemed cold and unreasonable. They gone through the motions and collected samples and kept the dress. They'd spent a long time asking her about how much she had been drinking and about her relationship with Jeremy. They'd been slightly more interested when she mentioned Matt having been there as a witness and then Lily had taken her home and she'd had the longest, hotter shower of her life.

Predictably, Jeremy and Matt had backed each other up, that it had been consensual and that Serena had cried "rape" out of embarrassment. When the police told her they wouldn't be charging Jeremy with anything she'd gone home and drunk a fifth of vodka neat, slept for 48 hours and like any self-respecting American would have done, scheduled some therapy.

She'd seen Katie, a middle-aged New Yorker once a week for 4 months. Cried, raged, grieved. Worked out once again who she was, and who she wasn't, her fears and insecurities and slowly, slowly she came to herself. Learned to be around men again, to flirt and it be harmless and to enjoy her sexuality. She'd met Edward and told him, and he'd never used that against her, for all his faults. Was gentle, and waited until she was ready. She'd cried in his arms the first time they made love and he'd held her and soothed her as the memory got a little bit more healed.

Seeing Jeremy and Matt the first time back on campus had been the hardest moment. Seeing their lurid grins and the way they nudged each other. Until Serena's friends had come round her and taken her away, Paul and Michael warning the other two men off. They both failed their modules and were kicked off the course within 6 months and she'd never seen them again.

She became aware that Bernie had moved out of her arms and she looked across to her on the other side of the sofa. Her eyes were blazing, gritted teeth and she had her fists clenched, skin burning up.

"Bernie what did I say wrong? Why have I upset you?"
The blonde practically growled at her.
"I'm going to find them and I'm going to kill them."
"No, you're not.
"I am Serena. I cannot let them walk around having hurt you. I know people who'll help me. I'm going to kill them."
"My big macho army medic, you're not. Come here."
Bernie pounded her legs with her fists, letting the white hot rage subside. She went back across the sofa and asked Serena if she could hold her, half expecting her to say no after her outburst. Serena nodded though and found herself pulled to the trauma surgeons chest in a fierce hug, as if she was trying to hug every ounce of pain out of them both.
"Let me breathe a little" she joked and Bernie relaxed her grip but then jumped up and started to pace the room, her distress palpable.

"Darling heart, you need to calm down."
"I can't Serena. I can't bear that they hurt you."
"Look at me"

Bernie did and saw Serena, who'd stood up herself and come across to be near the other woman. "I didn't hint so you would ask and be upset. I wanted you to hear that on a level, I understand. It was very, very different to what you've been through, but that, I get what it like to have that happen. To give you hope that's its possible to come out of the other side."
She stopped and looked at Bernie who had relaxed her shoulders slightly.
"Do you see me as dirty and damaged now?" she asked gently, already knowing the answer.
"GOD Serena, how could you ask me that? I, I, shit."
"It's okay Bernie. If you don't see me like that then, why would I see you like that?" and the penny dropped in the army medics head.
She rushed into Serena's arms and they both held each other, pouring every ounce of love into every cell in each other's bodies. Tears mingled on their faces and they kissed them off each other's cheeks. Rested their foreheads together and saw their salvation in the eyes that looked back, both so filled with love.
Chapter 53 - Make a plan

Chapter Notes

Just a pile of Fluff. A getting through some time chapter.
Thank you again for your reviews and encouragement. Love you all xx

Chapter 53.

After a while, they would neither be very sure how long, they moved back from each other a little and then, holding hands, sat back on the couch. Serena watched Bernie, she could still see the tension in her legs and a muscle kept twitching in her cheek. Had she done the right thing in sharing? She thought yes, she'd dealt with her own shame and guilt a long time passed. They still stabbed at her at times but that was rare. She could see the shame was still crippling for Bernie, but hoped, prayed to a God she didn't believe in, from a religion that she didn't follow, that He would heal her heart and soul.

Bernie was looking back at Serena, in awe all over again at how amazing this woman was. How she could just let the words come, they didn't get trapped in her mouth like they did for Bernie. She had been serious about killing the two men who'd hurt her Serena so. It wouldn't be that hard she reckoned, but, no, the brunette had said no. That didn't mean she couldn't wish a thousand painful deaths on them and then another one for good measures.

Serena broke the silence.
"Hey you. How are you feeling?"
Bernie considered this for a moment.
"Hungry, dirty, restless."
"Shall we try to do something about some of that?"
Bernie nodded and offered a shy smile.
"Okay my love, why don't we get showered and dressed and then walk into town for some air and I'll buy you lunch?"

A happier Bernie squeezed Serena's hand and acquiesced. Some thoughts struck her and she pulled back a little. The vascular surgeon watched and waited to see if she would offer them or if she needed a little prompting.
"I, um."
"Try to tell me."
"I should probably go home."
Serena rolled her eyes at this and Bernie winced.
"Look Bernie" she began, not all that gently, "can we stop? If you truly want to go home, I won't stop you but shall I tell you what I think?"
"Please"

"It's been a traumatic few days for all of us, no, stop, it's not your fault" she qualified as Bernie geared herself up to apologise.
"That's simply a fact. You find trauma difficult to cope with, even though you're a trauma surgeon, when it comes to your own, well, you hurt yourself and I'm not sure being on your own right now is helpful. Me - I'll spend day and night worrying about you, plaguing you with calls and texts. Jason will spend day and night worrying me about worrying for you."
She took a breath to assess how this was going but hey, in for a penny, in for a pound.  
"We like you being here. It's not a hardship. There's plenty of space. It doesn't need to be complicated or have rules. Well some rules, about times etc for schedules. You can stay till you are ready to go."

She took another breath.

"And besides. Jason and I have already given you your own room"

"Wh-what?"

"I had Jason unpack your car this morning into the guest room next to mine. It's yours whenever you want it, for how long you want it."

She felt a stab of fear as Bernie looked at her with flashing eyes. Had she got it wrong? She just wanted to love on this woman and look after her. She started to apologise.

"I'm sorr..." was all she managed to get out before being silenced by lips pressed to hers, kissing her fiercely but with such love that her head was spinning when Bernie broke the kiss.

"Could you be more perfect Serena Campbell?"

The brunette laughed hard.

"You haven't lived with me yet" and regretted that as soon as it came out. Bernie just laughed but then grew serious.

"I want to be here so much. I feel safe."

"Good" said Serena, satisfied.

"But you should know. I'm a terrible houseguest"

Serena actually snorted at that.

"We have shared an office for a year now and I haven't killed you. Thought about it, planned it, but not followed through" winking at Bernie as she said it.

The blonde laughed.

"That's me trying as well" she giggled.

"Oh god. Offer rescinded. Get out."

Serena teased, briefly suppressing the stab of fear even as she joked with the army medic.

Bernie bit her lip. "Thank you" she whispered in such a soft voice Serena nearly missed it.

"What for"

"For knowing me better than I know myself, for helping me, supporting me.....loving me" she added bravely, dropping her eyes to her hands and playing with a loose thread on the pyjamas she was wearing.

"My pleasure Bernie, honestly. I love you."

Bernie so desperately wanted to say it back but she couldn't make it come. She shuffled closer and looked with big eyes up at Serena.

"Can we add something to our plan?" She asked, voice trembling a little.

"Of course."

"Will you hold me for a bit?"

"Come here"

Serena opened her arms and Bernie all but fell into them, lying back into the warmth and safety of Serena Campbell, her rock, her love and her entire world. Where she wanted to be found over and over again, everyday, forever.
They sat soaking up each other's warmth, Bernie being the most relaxed Serena had ever seen her. She kissed the top of her head and her temple, running her hand across the angular cheekbones of her face. The blonde hummed happily as she stroked small circles on the inside of Serena's forearms, joining the dots of her freckles in a random pattern. They both could have stayed there forever. Apart the rumble that broke the silence, making Bernie blush and Serena giggle. Bernie thought it might be the most beautiful sound and reached to tickle the brunette slightly making her squeal in laughter and push the army medic away, begging her to stop.

"Now I know how to get my way!"
"Please don't tickle!"

Bernie couldn't resist leaning back over and tickling the brunettes sides once more and she laughed and squealed again "Please don't tickle!!"

Then almost imperceptibly the moment changed. The air got thicker and crackles of electricity roamed around them. Bernie, holding herself up over Serena where she'd moved to tickle, Serena looking back up at Bernie like she was the most precious jewel she'd ever witnessed. The army medic's breath caught and Serena surged up underneath her to capture her lips in a kiss so filled with passion, so exquisite that the women both moaned into each other's mouths. That was what woke Bernie up to where she was and what she was doing and panting she moved herself away.

Serena's eyes filled with tears. Was Bernie going to reject her now, tell her it was a mistake? Bernie sensed this, mind-reading accurately and spit out some words "Serena, I want to, but I'll go too fast. I'm not ready to give all of myself yet, and you don't deserve any less"

Serena sniffled but understood.

"Lets go get cleaned up and dressed" she said with a watery half smile.

They climbed the stairs with heavy legs, both wanting to touch and be touched but recognising that they couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't. Serena led Bernie to the room she'd had Jason bring the small amount of stuff up to for her and opened the door, and heard Bernie gasp in delight.

It was a beautiful room, in soft rose pink and the grey of the feathers of a doves wing. A soft bed made in white lined with cushions in the centre, a white wooden dressing table under a large bay window which was framed with silken grey curtains with palest pink tie backs. The room was gentle and feminine and it felt like a haven to Bernie, who's flat was all magnolia and blond wood, impersonal and practical. This was unmistakably Serena and to be given this space as her own was overwhelming. She turned to thank her and noticed that on the chest of drawers along with a pile of towels was a photo of Jason and Serena in a frame. Serena was leaning into the young man as they looked at the camera and they both had wide happy smiles.

She looked at where Jason had neatly packed her stuff and delved into the box while Serena watched. Found her photos of Cam and Charlotte and placed them either side of the photo there. She heard Serena audibly smile and sigh with pleasure and the sounds warmed her heart. She walked over to the other woman and put her hands on her shoulders, leaned down for a simple, chaste kiss. Serena in turn reached up and brushed blonde curls out of the army medic's face.

"Do you mind showering in my ensuite? If you move his bottles in the main bathroom Jason will have a meltdown. I know where they go, so I'll shower in there."

"Not at all"

Serena breathed out relief. There was nothing in her ensuite to worry about. She'd checked and
triple checked this time. They gathered up towels and clothes and went to their separate showers to get clean, both, if they were honest, thinking about a day when they might use the same one. At the same time. And then each turning the water just a little colder.
Chapter 55 - Bernie

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning

Chapter 55.

In her underwear, her damp curly hair falling in her face, Bernie stopped as she caught sight of herself in the full length mirror in Serena's bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed she'd woken up in that morning and looked at herself.

Traced her own scars with her eyes, the IED, the bullet wounds. They were fine, she wasn't proud of them exactly but they were there because she'd served her Queen and her country diligently and to the best of her ability. Still they'd not been a feature of the enthusiastic recruiter she'd sat in front of to sign up, he'd shown her glossy pictures of white sand and exhilarating sports, smiling, laughing faces of young people scrubbed clean with soap and tinged with that healthful red that comes from sustained time in the outdoors, all clean and tidy in their dress uniforms, a few in fatigues, but clean ones, ones that hadn't run the Mile of Mud.

She laughed to herself at that. She'd gone to Sandhurst with her eyes open, military family leaving no doubt about what she'd face. But to some, the Mile of Mud with its lake of infested swampy disgustingness to crawl through, it had represented everything they didn't want and they quit. Not Bernie. She'd loved it, always thrived on pushing her body to its limits and seeing what she could do. That side of her was still there, running miles in full body armour. Lifting weights in the gym, proudly deadlifting double her body weight.

Each tour had taken a little more out of her, left its wounds, its memories, its scars. Basra with the loss of the men closest to her, Kandahar and what had happened there. The places wove themselves into her DNA, had become part of her identity and now, she knew, it was time to unravel that. To separate events from self. "I sound like a bad self-help book" she thought, not one to frequently examine herself. It went against everything she was trained to do, don't rely on your feelings, you can't trust them, facts Major, only what you can observe and verify. Emotions cloud, feelings confuse.

She let her eyes wander down to her stomach and her thighs. The scars of her own making. She lightly ran her finger tips over them, some angry and red, some silvery and faint. The first time she had cut herself she could remember being stood in the kitchen after all the shouting and her head had felt like it was going to explode. Almost without thinking she'd drawn a knife across her stomach and felt the sheer relief of her mind emptying of the pain. She discovered razor blades and sometimes scalpel blades were easier to clean, hide and dispose of. Other than being a little careful in the locker room, hiding them had not been so hard. She knew she hadn't taken the best care of them which is why they, to her, were so ugly.

She'd not seen one trace of disgust or anything like that in Serena's eyes, not at seeing her hand or her stomach and legs. She'd seen sorrow, profound, deep sorrow and then love. Like the brunette wanted to love the scars right off her body and right out of her mind. And god did Bernie want that. She wanted so desperately to be loved by Serena. She adored the bones of the vascular surgeon, and wanted to believe, so wanted to, that she could be loved back, in spite of everything.
Serena seemed to have had no trouble, had said it several times now, terms of endearment now firmly in her defence of Bernie, darling, love, sweetheart and they had made the army medic melt, it felt so simple, so kind and so pure. She was pretty sure she'd never been loved like this and never would again.

And oh how much Bernie reciprocated that love, had loved Serena from afar from the moment they met, tried to run, tried to hide and only fell faster, harder and deeper in love. It made her head swim. She wanted it all and to give it all, but there was still part of her that couldn't, not yet, those words, so meaningful, that she longed to say to Serena every day of her life, needed just a little more time. She wanted that perfect moment when they'd already had so many hard ones.

She thought about The Plan and how Serena had given her all to make sure if Bernie left, that she knew how Serena felt. Would the brunette have come if she'd run? If she'd invoked envelope 9? Yes, she thought to herself, knowing that she wouldn't have involved Jason otherwise. And Jason, wonderful Jason, who Serena loved like a son and would be so easy to love as another son to her, who'd demonstrated how much Bernie meant to them both when he had had his meltdown to keep Bernie here. How he offered such simple care and friendship, compliments about her quiz ability, bringing her stuff in, checking in on her and that hug. That incredible moment of connection when he'd wrapped her between himself and Serena. She was stunned.

"Is this where I fit? Where I belong?" She wondered and the tiniest prickle of fear started to nag at her. What if she screwed up again? What if she hurt these two incredible people. They said running would hurt them most but what if she terrified them too much with the darkness inside her mind, the flashbacks, the nightmares, the rituals to control them. What if they couldn't cope?

She heard Serena call her name and stood quickly, tugged on black jeans and a white shirt, ran her fingers through her hair and went out of the bedroom to see the woman she loved.
Chapter 56. They found shoes and coats, purses and keys, dancing around each other in the hallway as Bernie tied the laces on her converse and Serena used the bottom step to help her zip up her camel coloured knee high boots that she had tucked her indigo jeans into. Teaming it with a cashmere v neck in the tone of the richest chocolate brown and simple silvery drop earrings, she tugged a thigh length suede coat over the top, picked up her handbag and looked for Bernie who was watching her through her fringe as usual.
"Come on you, lets go"

They stepped through the doorway and Serena turned to lock the door and turned the handle to check. It was a brilliant sunny day, sky clear and azure with a blood orange sun at its highest point as they'd reached midday. Notes of frost wound themselves over surfaces that had not been exposed to the sun yet, patterns and lines running over each other like natures mandala. The trees were still hanging into their final leaves, all riotous russets and yellows, the colours of fire mingling with the ice.

They stood just appreciating it for a few moments before Serena tried to take Bernie's hand and felt a stab of sadness when Bernie pulled her own hand away. She looked down at the floor, trying to will the rejection she felt to go away. "Too fast Campbell" she berated herself, when she felt a hand slip itself into the crook of her elbow.
"Sorry." Bernie said simply. "I'm not used to this, this..."
"Openness?" Serena guessed with a slight wobble to her voice that neither of them missed. "Uh huh" They started to walk, down the driveway, hearing the gravel crunching under their feet, Bernie still holding the inside of Serena's elbow. The air felt restoring to the blonde. She loved being outside, with no walls to confine her. She was aware she'd just hurt the brunette and needed to offer some explanation. They reached the bridge over the river. Lined either side with weeping willows and silver birch trees, Bernie slowed to a halt and looked out over the water, the sunlight like a thousand tiny needles on the surface.
"Serena, I'm sorry."
"You said that" Serena replied, gently and not unkindly. "It's just, these are some big steps for us both and I don't want to fuck it up. You've never been with a woman and I had one brief affair, this is new. That's all."
"Darling I know. I know I can be over the top, ridiculously tactile, a bit flirty, yes alright" she grinned and Bernie smiled back in relief. "I know I rush, but it only comes from love" she has to stop to blink away sudden tears as she felt a slightly chilly hand grasp her own warmer one and squeeze her fingers.

They started to walk again, hand in hand, not feeling the need for words as they reached the beginnings of the town. Serena, taking the lead, walked them slowly down the high street, admiring a dress in a window here, laughing at the nativity scene of Henry hoovers in the electrical store window there. Bernie just watched her. Admired her. Appreciated her. She squeezed Serena's fingers again happily and was rewarded by a brilliant smile and a return squeeze. Carrying on, Serena lead them to her favourite cafe and they found a cosy little table in the corner.

It was a quirky little place that Serena adored. Called Maestro, it had very old pasted sheet music on the walls and a piano in the corner that any customer could play. The menu holders were cast
iron treble clefs and the table names were of famous composers. Realising what their table was called, Bernie chuckled and Serena raised her eyebrow in question. 
"Stravinsky. Point to you Dr Bernie" she laughed out and the brunette joined in, realising that she could only be referencing Jason. 
"You never did tell me who won" the vascular surgeon teased and Bernie laughed again. 
"Well Warwick beat Peterhouse, which was apparently a surprise. Less surprising is that Jason outdid them both and beat me hollow" 
They smiled and Bernie bravely offered her palm over the table, hardly daring to breathe. Serena rested her own hand there briefly before pulling out some menus. 

They chose what they wanted and the waitress went off to pass the order to the kitchen. They sat in companionable silence just gazing at each other, when a massive crash in the corner made them both jump.
Chapter 57 - Joanna

"You stupid fucking bitch!"
The words echoed round the cafe which had fallen deathly silent. Both Bernie and Serena had tensed, grasping each other's hands. Looking across they could see a man towering over a woman holding a baby who was screaming now, the only sound being heard.
Without warning he raised his hand and smacked the woman around the head, the connection sounding like a shot before turning round. Bernie and Serena had both got to their feet and Serena found herself behind the blonde who'd pushed her behind herself.
"What are you fucking looking at dykes?" he spat at them before stalking out of the door of the cafe.
Bernie thought very hard about going after him and exhibiting some of her killing skills, but feeling Serena's hand on her back turned her attention back to the young woman.
Kneeling down, she gently laid her hand on her arm and said softly "Hi, I'm Bernie and this is Serena. We're doctors at Holby General. What's your name?"
"Joanna" sobbed out their woman, visibly shaking. "And this is Emily".
"Hello you two. Will you come and sit with us?"
The young woman nodded and tried to stand but the world spun lazily and she sat back down.
"It's okay. Can my partner hold Emily?"
Joanna cuddled her close for a second before very carefully passing the baby to Bernie who in turn passed her to Serena. The brunette immediately began to rock the baby in her arms and accepting the bottle that was passed to her, began to feed the little one, who had stopped crying the minute she was in the vascular surgeons arms.

Bernie helped Joanna over to their table and sat her down. She ran her fingers over her head to check for bleeding and ran a basic neuro-status exam. Satisfied that the young woman was okay physically she took one of her hands in both of hers and waited for the young woman to make eye contact and speak to her.
"He's not always like that, really he isn't, I just get so much wrong and I need to try harder but I'm so tired at the moment because Emily doesn't sleep so well" Joanna blurted out and started to full on sob. Bernie pulled her gently towards her and the young woman laid her head on the army medics shoulder and cried and cried.

Bernie and Serena made eye contact, having one of their conversations without words. Bernie smiled ruefully as she stroked the young woman's back and looked at Serena cuddling the tiny girl who'd fallen asleep. A waitress appeared and brought a box of tissues and a pot of tea which she poured out into a mug for the young woman. Slowly the cafe sounds started to return to normal.

Joanna pushed back from Bernie and led her arms out for Emily and Serena passed her over carefully. She sat back and looked at the two doctors and offered them a watery smile. "I'm sorry. You don't need this."
Both Serena and Bernie spoke together.
"Don't apologise" and grinned at each other. Serena continued, "you know you don't deserve to be spoken to like that and you definitely do not deserve to be hit" she said gently.

Joanna cried again "I don't want this for Emily, I really don't. I just don't have anyone else or anywhere to go and he does love me."

Bernie exhaled. "People who love you don't hit you Joanna. He says that so you won't leave." She looked to Serena briefly for courage before adding "what happens when he hits Emily?"

Joanna's eyes widened in horror as she pulled the sleepy little girl even closer to her chest. "No" she whispered and a tear tracked down her cheek and hit the baby on her head.

Bernie reached into her pocket and pulled out her purse. Rifling through it she found what she was looking for a drew out a little card. "This is a place just outside of Holby Joanna. They'll help you, if you want it." She passed it over to the young woman who saw the details of a women's shelter on it.

The two doctors watched her process and then nod. "Serena please will you hold Emily again?" she asked. "I need to make a phone call."

Serena opened her arms for the baby who made a snuffly sound as she was cuddled into her again. Bernie just stared at the beautiful woman holding the child, almost as if seeing her for the first time as Joanna slipped outside with her phone.

The waitress came over with their food, and asked if they were okay. They nodded and Bernie borrowed her pen briefly and a piece of her note pad for taking orders. Looking over at Serena, the blonde broke her sandwich into pieces so the brunette could eat one handed and then started to devour her own food. They were about half way through eating when Joanna slipped back in. Bernie gave her shoulder a squeeze as she sat down next to her again.

"I'm going to go meet with them" she said tearfully and Bernie drew her back in for another hug as Serena beamed.

Joanna returned the hug and gathered her stuff together as Serena settled Emily into her car seat. Bernie spoke. "This is my number and this is Serena's. You can call us anytime Joanna. You're not on your own." She looked nervously over at Serena as she passed over the piece of paper she'd written their numbers on, receiving an approving nod from the brunette immediately, even though she hadn't asked about passing their numbers on.

Joanna pulled her coat on and picked up the car seat. She kissed both doctors on the cheek and said her thank you'd and goodbyes. She left, tearful but with a purpose.

Serena put her arm round Bernie. "Home?"

"Home"

They pulled their jackets on and went to the counter to pay, but the waitress refused to take their money, saying they'd been so kind, they deserved a little treat from her, winning the waitress two broad smiles.

They walked to the door and went through, starting towards home. They were hand in hand straightaway, walking back towards the bridge when Serena spoke. "Bernie?"

"Yes Serena?"

"Why did you have that card in your purse?"
Chapter 58 - True Colours

Chapter 58.

"Can we not do this here?"
Bernie asked, slightly horrified at the question. She hadn't expected Serena to zero in quite so effectively on there being a significance to the card that she carried everywhere in her purse. She fidgeted from foot to foot where she'd stopped dead, the anxiety plain to anyone who looked at her. Serena winced. She hadn't thought that through and now the fear was rolling off Bernie in waves. "We don't have to do it at all Bernie, you never have to answer my questions just because I ask them". She in turn began to worry at her pendant, the tell-tale sign of her own nerves. "Home?" She asked again and the blonde merely nodded and immediately started walking. Serena realised she'd lost her to her thoughts and also in pace as she strode ahead. Eventually the army medic realised and waited for the brunette to catch up.
They walked in silence, but a silence that spoke volumes. Neither tried to initiate physical contact with the other though they both desperately wanted to.

They got back to the house and Serena clumsily unlocked the door after dropping the keys twice. Wordlessly Bernie shed her coat and stepped into the downstairs bathroom, locking the door. Serena watched her and wearily removed her coat and her boots before heading to the kitchen and flicking on the coffee maker. Looking down at herself she realised the little girl she had been holding in her arms had left a milk stain on her jumper and she dabbed at it with a damp cloth. She made them both a coffee and settled herself at the kitchen table to wait.

Bernie was sat in the bathroom on the closed toilet lid in a quandary. Part of her just wanted to outright lie, or avoid the question but she owed Serena the truth once more. But how much more could her perfect friend hear before she decided enough was enough and the Major was a source of nothing but trouble and to get rid?

She flushed the toilet even though she hadn't used it and washed her hands with something smelling of apple blossom and jasmine. It was a clean, fresh scent and somehow it fortified Bernie a little as she unlocked the door and stepped out, to make her way to the kitchen, following her nose to the dark roast blend of coffee the other woman favoured.

She saw Serena sat at the table, one leg tucked underneath her, mug in one hand and her other drumming a mindless beat on the table. They offered each other shy smiles as Bernie sat and drew the mug to her holding it on both hands, savouring the warmth and smell of the dark, aromatic liquid within.

"You know you.."
"Serena, I..."
They'd both spoken at once and then both fell silent. Serena could see the fear in Bernie's eyes and Bernie could see the concern reflected back at her from the vascular surgeon. "You first" Bernie said quickly.
Serena sighed. "You know you are safe with me?" The blonde nodded as the brunette leaned closer and gathered her courage.

"Serena, I had that card because I was given it by someone. Someone who thought I needed it." Serena felt a shiver go up and down her spine. Was there no end to this poor woman's pain? "It was after I was outed, on Keller, about Alex" and then Serena realised exactly who Bernie was talking about, the fear being replaced by a wave of rage that she struggled to contain.
"Our marriage was never easy" Bernie continued, "always shouting, throwing of things, silent fits
of pique. He isolated me, told me I was useless, pointless, worthless, until I believed him. But after it came out about Alex..."

She'd gone home that night in no small amount of trepidation. She'd supposed to have been trying to fix their marriage. But Alex was too much of a thrill, wanted Bernie too much and fed her love-starved body and mind like a drug. She could smell the whiskey before she saw him and heard the glass smash by her head before she realised it had been thrown.
"So you're fucking your Captain."
A statement, not a question.
"Marcus.."
The first punch to her gut took every ounce of oxygen straight out of her lungs and she tried to inhale, but winded, couldn't.
"So this is why you're so frigid Bernie. You're a fucking lesbian whore."
The next punch, to the side of her head made her feel slightly woozy as she struggled to maintain herself upright.
"Marcus, please" she started again.
"NO" he'd roared. "YOU DON'T GET TO SPEAK." and he'd punched her again and she sank to the floor, not defending herself. She deserved this, she reasoned as he rained blows down on her body.
When he stopped she'd dared to look up and he pulled her roughly to her feet and hauled her over to the door. "Get out" he snarled. "We're done. This is my house, mine. And you don't live here anymore". He'd shoved her out and slammed the door in her face.

"I wandered around Holby all night. I ended up in some cafe and orders a coffee with the £2.50 I had in my pocket and nursed it until they asked me to leave so they could close and the woman, the owner, Lara, pressed that card into my hand as I was leaving. I didn't call them but I did look them up. They're good people."

Serena just stared. No words would form into a sentence for a few minutes until she croaked out "Why didn't you tell me Bernie? Why didn't you come here, why didn't you let me help you?"
Bernie got up wildly.
"Why Serena? Why? Because I'm everything that you despise."
"What! I don't.."
"Why did you divorce Edward? He cheated on you repeatedly. I'm no different, I cheated on Marcus and he ended it. How could I, look you in the eye, knowing you'd look at me with that look you get when you talk about him?"
"Bernie, I wouldn't.."
"You would Serena. You might not mean to but old wounds run deep and you'd see me. Like you're seeing me now. A lying, cheating, bitch, who you are far too good for."

And with that Bernie did the only thing left to her, she turned and ran into the rapidly cooling night.
Chapter 59 - Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter 59.

..Into the back garden of Serena's house. She'd needed air and some space, couldn't bear to see what she'd just described, the loathing. Serena HATED cheaters so she must hate Bernie. What she wouldn't give right now for something sharp to numb the pain. She contemplated picking the lock on the shed briefly before fishing a packet of cigarettes and a lighter out of her pocket. So much for having given up.

She took two quick drags, feeling the nicotine hit instantly and then flung the stick away from her, watching the smouldering tip cartwheel away and extinguish itself. The sun had set and it was pretty dark, an aeroplane buzzed overhead and she could hear the gentle hum of the motorway from a few miles away because of the direction the wind was blowing in.

She sat on a bench under a wizened apple tree, looking at the last windfalls peeping out of the grass and she could smell the dark pink and white cyclamen that was nearby. She brought her hands to her head and pushed them through the curls, tousling them absent-mindedly. She groaned softly as she thought about how she'd just practically yelled at Serena and then stalked out. Surely, now the other woman would see the walking disaster area Bernie's life truly was and not want anything further to do other her. Her mind darkened as she thought about having to pack her car, retrieve her letters from wherever Serena had stashed them or write new ones, finding a new place to exist.

She almost missed the back door opening but the security light came on and she watched Serena nervously come through the door. She shuffled over to where Bernie was sat and stood off to the side. She stayed standing looking at the evening star until she felt a cold hand slip into hers and tug her down to the bench to sit. She stared down at her hands, not trusting her voice, knowing it would crack if she tried to form some words.

"Serena"
The brunette looked up at Bernie, who's heart clenched in her chest at the tear tracks that were clearly visible.
"I love you"
There was a heart-stopping silence as they both processed the words that had come from the blondes lips, a torrent of tears coursing down Serena's cheeks and the rapid rise and fall of Bernie's chest the only clues to what that had meant.
"I'm sorry"
Bernie looked puzzled at that.
"I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't come to me. I'm sorry you had to go through that alone. That you've had to do so much on your own."
The blonde woman shook her head sadly. "It's nothing I don't deserve Serena."
"But that's just it. You don't deserve it, you didn't then either. Edward cheated, multiple times. It wasn't him looking for love and affection, it was about ego and how many women more attractive than his wife he could bed. But that's not what Alex was to you was it?"

Bernie shook her head. "Alex showed me care and affection and love. Yes it was a thrill, the illicit nature of it but she helped me she myself, the me I've spent so long hiding. The danger, the inequality of it meant it was never going to last and should I have done it? No. But there a part of me that can't, won't regret it. That's the part I worry you can't get past."

The blonde sucked in her lower lip, from having been so truthful and Serena could see that she was a little lost, overwhelmed in how much she'd shared again. She reached for Bernie's hand, happy
that the army medic didn't pull away and caressed her knuckles in silence, letting the emotion settle a bit. They made eye contact and Serena spoke.

"If you cheated on me, that's a deal breaker" she said simply. "I can't go through that again. But, I don't think, I hope, that you wouldn't feel the need." Suddenly shy she looked away until chilly fingers caught her chin and gently required her to return to looking at Bernie.

"I won't. You're everything I need and home", Bernie said simply and then they were in each other's arms, crying quietly and holding onto shoulders. They rested their foreheads together and Serena smiled.

"You owe me a pound."
Bernie looked confused.
"You smoked!" Serena giggled as Bernie face palmed. "It was two drags!"
"A smoke is a smoke." smirked Serena.
Bernie fished in her pocket and found a pound coin, pressing it into the other woman's palm.

Serena stood quickly and then pulled Bernie up, drawing her into a quick hug.
"Let's go inside. I've got pesto pasta to start and you've got teeth to clean Major."
"Yes Ma'am" Bernie said formally and snapped a jaunty salute, making Serena laugh as they headed indoors together.
They headed back in and Serena pulled Bernie in for an unexpected hug. They stood holding each other and Bernie felt tears prickle at the corner of her eyes. She'd never ever felt this safe or this loved and for a few minutes she allowed herself not to think, she enjoy being cared for. Was there truly nothing that could phase Serena? She revealed some of her deepest darkest pain, her secret shame and all she'd received back was love and infinite care. And then she was sobbing. Proper, heaving, gasps as her pain poured out of her and Serena just held her. She felt her knees give and she sagged into the brunette who moved them gently to sit in lounge.

The sobs just wouldn't stop and Serena did nothing more than hold Bernie tightly to her chest, those arms making her feel so safe and loved which triggered another round of crying. Bernie was clinging to Serena and she fought her own tears. The pain was so great, seeing the woman she loved hurting. She whispered in her ear, words of love and safety, that she was treasured and precious and beautiful.

Eventually the sobbing slowed and Serena eased them back against the sofa, Bernie's damp and sweaty face pressed into her neck. She waited in the silence, broken only by hiccups and gasps. Wonders what on earth to say, to lessen, even for a moment, the wells of grief in her beautiful girl.

She became aware that Bernie had stilled against her, the flow of tears dammed for the moment and she looked down at her. Bernie stammered out an apology and Serena clicked her tongue in faint annoyance before she realised what she'd done, mostly by Bernie trying to scramble away from her.

"No, no, stop. I'm not annoyed with you. I'm just not needing you to apologise for crying on me. I want you to do what you need to do, to just be. Not to censor how you feel or what you're thinking. Sometimes that will look like tears."

She raised up hand up suddenly to smooth Bernie's hair out of her face and went pale when Bernie flinched away from the contact. She drew back her hand as if she'd been slapped. "Sorry. I won't touch you."

Bernie stared at her in horror. Tried to make some words come.

"I want you to."

Serena rubbed her temples at the beginnings of a tension headache. "Your reaction suggests otherwise" she said stiffly. Bernie sat up properly and moved herself away from Serena. "I can't help what my body does automatically. I didn't choose to pull away."

Serena snorted before she could stop herself. "What's that supposed to mean Serena?" Bernie said in a tight little voice. "Were they fighting?" she thought to herself?

"No, you got scared, decided for me and tried to run. Do you get it Bernie? I. Am. Not. Them."

Bernie could hear the punctuation in every word and pushed herself to standing at the same time Serena did.

"I know you're not."

"So what is this then? Why do you continually try to shield me from you? That's not what I want" Bernie started to pace, bewildered. How had they got here?
Serena was internally horrified. She'd been loving on Bernie and then something had snapped. She wanted to shake her and shake herself. She sat down heavily and put her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry"

Bernie barked out a half laugh.

"What on earth for? For telling me the truth? That every single time I'm with you or around you I do the wrong thing even when I'm trying so hard to do the right thing? Why would you be sorry for that?"

"Because you're worth so much more to me than you think you are and my heart can't take losing you. Even when it's a touch, when you move away from me, my heart shatters all over again that this might be it. That even though I said I'd go where you go, which I meant with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, this will be the time you run so far, so fast, that I can't find you. And I can't...." she dissolves into her own sobs.

Bernie is frozen in horror at what has just unfolded and her mind lets go. Let's go of any other thought than this hurts too much. She walks out through the door and into the kitchen, leaving Serena still sobbing on the sofa. Pulls up her shirt and finds what she needs. She sinks to the floor and puts her back to the cupboard.

Serena calms a little but too late. It's too late that she sees she is alone and is up and running in one moment, calling Bernie's name. Gets to the kitchen just a fraction of a second to late to prevent Bernie drawing her peeling knife across her stomach and dropping it on the floor.
Chapter 61. Triage

Cursing herself bitterly Serena moved slowly over to where Bernie was slumped on the floor with wild eyes. Gently she bent down, picked up the knife and tossed it into the kitchen sink. She focussed her attention on Bernie who had both hands clamped over her wounded stomach and was whispering almost inaudibly. She stilled and strained to hear the words, "Should have used the safe word, going to hate me, going to be alone, worthless, pathetic mess" Serena eased herself down to the floor and sat cross-legged in front of Bernie. Why had she snapped at her? "She bares her soul and you tell her off for moving away you idiot" Serena thought angrily, "This is my fault"

Triage went through her head. Physical, then emotional she decided. "Bernie, can you take your hands away darling?" she intoned softly as the army medics eyes flashed this way and that, not really present in the moment. "Bernie, look at me"
Bernie did what she was told, simple direct speech was best Serena realised. "Move your hands for me"
Slowly Bernie took her bloodied hands away. It wasn't a deep cut but it had bled profusely. Serena looked carefully and decided it probably only needed a dressing, which she went to get along with a wipe.
"You know the drill" she said. "It'll sting."
Bernie nodded, not really capable of speaking. Serena went to work, gently cleaning the cut and dressing it with a long, thin piece of gauze, taped in place. The army medic was trembling and she could see her stomach muscles reacting to her touches. She tugged Bernie's shirt over the dressing and then set to work cleaning her hands, each fingertip, between them, her palms and then she re-wrapped Bernie's injured hand. Practical done, now for the emotional.

She scooted over to sit next to Bernie and laid one hand in her lap, whilst playing with her pendant with the other. She looked over and realised Bernie was looking back, big brown eyes filled with tears and Serena freaked out.
"Bernie, I'm so so sorry. This is all my fault. God, I never meant to make you feel like this..."

"Please don't leave me" The words tumbled into the space between them. The surprising thing was that it wasn't Serena who'd uttered them. The brunette could only stare back at the trauma surgeon in wonder.

"Serena, I'm a disaster. I know that. I have the emotional range and vocabulary of a teaspoon. I should have used the safe word but it went out of my head. I know I can't keep doing this but I can't do this without you. I need you."

The admission moved Serena so very much. She leant closer, silently seeking permission and laid her head on Bernie's shoulder as they sat side by side. Bernie leaned her head down into it.

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"Bernie, I'm sorry for overreacting. I'm scared, beyond scared, you've opened your heart and trusted me like I don't think you've ever done before and I really see how overwhelming it is. It feels like the floodgates are open and I'm fine with it, I am. I won't leave you. Not ever, not unless you ask me to go"

"I don't want you to go. Please don't go. Please, please Serena."

The vascular surgeon could hear the undertone of panic in the words and she acted before she had
thought about it. Shuffled herself down and laid her head in Bernie's lap, where shaking fingers started to run through her short hair.

"I love you" they said in unison and Serena closed her eyes as Bernie leant down for a gentle kiss. She stiffened slightly and opened her eyes again to look at the blonde.

"I'm sorry I made you cut yourself"
and blinked as tears fell on her face from above.
"Not. Your. Fault." sobbed Bernie and Serena sat up and took her in her arms.
"It is, and I'm so so sorry. I'm more tired than I thought and it came out all wrong." and then she was crying too and their bodies relaxed against each other as the tears gave them the release from the tension they'd both been holding.

They sat for a while holding each other. Fingertips caressed arms and cheeks, ignoring the protest of muscles at being on another floor.
Sat and sat until they heard a key in the lock and a familiar voice.

"Auntie Serena! Dr Bernie! I'm home!"
Chapter 62 - Who's hurting

Chapter 62.

She felt Bernie worrying without words as they listened to Jason shed his shoes and his jacket. Serena knew he'd be putting everything carefully in the coat cupboard, hanging his keys on the little hook and taking his backpack to the lounge. She felt Bernie wanting to stand and so they wordlessly got up and sat at the kitchen table, the blonde grasping the brunettes hand like she was trying to fuse their flesh. Watched her trying to find herself so that she could be some semblance of normal for the young man coming through the door.

"Hello" he said and came over to them, plonking himself down next to Serena. She smiled at him and asked how his day had gone.
"I only got one patient wrong today Auntie Serena and really that was Raf's fault because he said Keller when he meant Darwin and how was I supposed to know that."
She smoothed his shirt over his wrist and picked off a stray thread of cotton.
"How was your day Dr Bernie?"
Serena smiled. They'd worked on the reciprocal nature of conversation and was pleased to see him putting into action.
"Oh good Jason, thank you. We went into town and had lunch at Maestro"
"Oh Auntie Serena's favourite. I'm going to watch Pointless now Auntie Serena and then I'll come help with dinner as it is Pesto Pasta and I can do some of that."
With that he went back to the lounge and they heard the music start as he switched on the television.

Serena turned her attention back to Bernie who looked small and tear-stained. "It's okay love. It really is."
"Are you mad at me?" came back w tiny voice.
"Oh Bernie, no. I wasn't mad at you before. Maybe a little bit irritated that you let me in a bit and then run away a bit but that's my issue not yours. You're being so incredibly brave."
The army medic rested her head down on the table, clearly a cross between exhausted and in deep thought.
"Serena?"
"Yes Bernie?"
"Can we...can we...."
"Yes"

They both chuckled.
"You don't know what I'm going to ask!"
"It will always be yes."
Bernie took a deep breath and fortified her courage.
"Can we look for a therapist together please?"
Serena found herself unable to speak so nodded furiously in relief.
"I don't want to do this to myself anymore" and she wept, pulled into Serena's arms.
The brunette just let her cry, feeling herself relax at Bernie's words. Kissed her head over and over in relief and let her tears be absorbed by the soft jumper.

When she had stopped crying Serena suggested she go and sit in the lounge and watch whatever Jason put on for her after Pointless while she started the pasta. Bernie pulled herself up and took herself off and Serena heard Jason welcome her and smiled.
She fetched her iPad from the side and started a Google search, checking for therapists. She found a couple that looked promising, who's websites advised they dealt with PTSD and self harm and one of them also said he had experience of counselling veterans. She saved them to the Notes App to share with Bernie later.

Jason came padding through and over to her.
"Shall we start dinner Auntie Serena?"
"Yes Jason. Wash your hands and then you can locate the pasta"
"I know exactly where it is Auntie Serena. It's on the 2nd shelf in that cupboard."
She opened the cupboard and cracked a grin. Yep. There it was.

"Auntie Serena!"
The note of alarm in his voice made her look up and over at him immediately.

"Auntie Serena are you hurt? There's blood on this knife? Where are you hurt, I call an ambulance, I'll get Dr Bernie, where is the cut Auntie Serena, please, you're hurt, I need to help you. AUNTIE SERENA, DON'T DIE!"
"DON'T DIE AUNTIE SERENA, NO, NO!!"
"Jason! I'm not dying, I'm not hurt! Love, please!"
"YOU'LL DIE LIKE MUM AND I WILL BE ALONE"

With that he started slamming his fists into his head. Serena knew she couldn't touch him because he'd react even more badly. But she didn't have the first clue of how to convince him. The poor young man who'd had it so hard, he'd formed a really strong attachment to Serena and the thought of losing her was too much for him to cope with. She wasn't sure he had properly grieved his mum, so the fear was huge.

"Jason its, oka...there is nothing wrong, I'm not hurt, I'm not cut, I'm not dying. I promise you, Jason? Please love, please?" The desperation in her voice was evident and she could tell that she wasn't getting through at all.

"Jason"
Bernie's voice. She looked over and saw her standing a few feet away, fixed on Jason.
"DR BERNIE HELP AUNTIE SERENA!"
"Jason, can you look at me, listen to my voice."
Bernie was using the gentlest tone she'd ever heard but with a strength and firmness that spoke of confidence and care.
Jason slowly brought his eyes to Bernie's, still pounding the side of his head.
"I promise you, Auntie Serena is not hurt. You trust me right?"
"Yes Dr Bernie" he said, lowering his volume.
"I promise you, Auntie Serena is not hurt, she is not dying"

Jason nodded but then remembered the bloodied knife. "Is it you, are you hurt, ARE YOU GOING TO DIE, AUNTIE SERENA, HELP DR BERNIE!!"
Serena stepped up.
"No Jason, it's okay, she's not going to die. She's fine."
"WHO IS BLEEDING!!"

They exchanged looks. Serena shook her head at Bernie, trying to communicate that it was okay not to say, when Bernie did an extraordinary thing, that made Serena lose her heart, forever to this woman.
She led Jason over to the table and sat him down. She went over to Serena and murmured in her ear to wash the knife which she quickly did and then came to sit at the table.

"Who is bleeding?" Jason asked again.
"I was" said Bernie simply. "But Auntie Serena patched me up and I'm fine now. Serena felt a wave of nausea pass over her, this couldn't end well could it?
"What happened?"
"Jason" Serena started quickly but was cut off by Bernie putting her hand over the brunettes and holding it.
"Jason, you know when you have a meltdown, sometimes you have to hurt yourself to make it feel better?" He nodded, waiting.
"Sometimes I do that too. I got overwhelmed this afternoon and so I cut myself. But not badly, I'm not dying and look, Auntie Serena fixed it"
She pulled her shirt up a little so he could just see the edge of the off-white bandage covering the wound.

Serena stared in utter astonishment, nothing had prepared her for this open sharing from Bernie and she watched Jason relax, a muscle in his cheek twitching as he processed. She needed to speak.
"Jason love, this is a no-share."
Bernie looked back at her, the silent question in her eyes.
"A no-share means we only talk about it with each other and Jason can talk to Michael about it - his therapist."
Bernie relaxed her shoulders in relief.
"I won't tell Dr Bernie. I promise."
"Thank you" she whispered and Serena began circling her skin with her fingertips in comfort. She leaned forward and rested her chin on Bernie's shoulder from behind her back, both looking at Jason.
"Pasta?"
"Come on then."

Serena and Jason both got up. Bernie stayed seated, not knowing what to do, feeling a little unnerved at the speed at which things had returned to normal. Jason announced he was going to the toilet, leaving the two women alone for a few moments. They looked at each other and fell into a tight, fierce embrace.
"Thank you Bernie"
"It's okay. I'm okay."

They stood for a little while longer and then Bernie felt something cold pressed into her palm. Drawing back slightly she saw Serena had put a pound coin there. She raised her eyebrow, looking though her fringe.
"As a one time only, I am allowing you a free smoke, God, I almost need one too"
Bernie laughed and nodded. She did need something and for now a cigarette would be good. She kissed Serena's cheek.
"You're amazing. Thank you for understanding"
She slipped her jacket and shoes on and headed into the back garden, just as Jason returned from the toilet. They gave each other a thumbs up and she closed the door behind her.
Chapter 64 - Eden

Chapter Notes

Had real writers block with this chapter. Hope it's okay.

Chapter 64.

Fumbling slightly she drew the packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and flicked the lid of the red and white packet open. She drew a cancer stick - as Serena had christened them - out and stuck it between her lips. The ignitor on the blue plastic lighter sparked a few times as she clicked it and then a healthy flame was produced. She lit the cigarette, taking an instant drag and felt her jangling nerve endings calm just a fraction. Shoving everything back in her pocket she wandered down the long garden to the wall at the end and rested her weight on it, looking but not seeing over the fields down to the lights of Holby. You could see the hospital from here but she wasn't paying attention to the view.

She rubbed at her face with her free hand as she flicked ash away into the darkness. Wincing slightly at the pull of the tape on her stomach, she pinched the bridge of her nose in an effort to concentrate her thoughts. How had things got so bad again so quickly and then almost instantly been right again. She'd had a mild argument with Serena and that was all it had taken to revert to type. She'd then had the vascular surgeon patch her up and caused Jason a massive meltdown. Then she'd outed herself as self-harming and now they were making pasta and she was losing it.

She took a few deep breaths to quell the rising fear in her. How was she going to do this, to stop? She'd meant it when she said to Serena that she didn't want to hurt herself anymore but what would replace it as the thing that stilled the storms, the thing that helped her feel, something, anything. She head Serena's voice from earlier in her head "Rome wasn't built in a day Major" she repeated to herself out loud, with a chuckle.

Bernie though, despite her inability to ever by tidy, had a stubborn perfectionist streak that ran through the very core of her. Had to do the best, be the best, anything less was a failure, not only was failure unacceptable, it wasn't even an option and yet she failed. Over and over again. Her children. Her husband. Herself. "I don't want to fail Serena" she thought to herself and then a pang of grief hit in the centre of her chest when she thought about all the ways she already had. She took another drag on her cigarette and let the nicotine hit fill her lungs. Even this was a failing, she knew that, despite Serena giving her a free pass.

Her thoughts moved to Jason and his terror that one of them was so hurt, that Serena might die and a hot flash of misery and sadness flew through her body. She'd done that to the poor young man, unintentionally but nevertheless, two meltdowns in as many days caused by her was horrendous. She'd had recognised the unresolved grief in his fear of losing Serena. She had seen it time and time again, particularly on men and women who came back to the theatre of war having lost colleagues and loved ones. It intensified the fear and she'd learned to watch for it and rotate assignments for those who needed a little longer. Her men and women has adored the no-nonsense, get your own hands dirty, I'll do anything I ask you to do Major and she missed those relationships, but she wouldn't trade being there for being right here with the woman who occupied the very centre of her
Had she ever loved like this? No. Serena was magical, she was air and peace and freedom to the blonde who could never, would never get enough of her. A single word, glance, touch has the ability to speak into Bernie, in a way no one else could and no one else ever had. She would never be worthy of Serena, she knew that, but there in that moment, in her own personal Eden, she decided she would try every day to be worthy.

She took a final drag on her cigarette and dropped it to the floor, crushing the residual heat and flame under the ball of her foot. She listened to the sounds on the air, mothers scolding children, traffic going hither and thither, bicycle tyre squeaking under braking. The sound of late birdsong and the whisper of feathers in flight. The sound of her heartbeat and the way it quickened at any thought of the beautiful, amazing, wonderful brunette in the house behind her. This was the turning point she decided. To run towards happiness and love instead of fleeing from it. To allow herself the chance for her heart and her mind to heal. To love and be loved.
Chapter 65 - Pesto and Peacemaking

Chapter 65.
“Red or green pesto Jason?”
“I’d prefer green Auntie Serena, but what would Dr Bernie like?”
Serena smiled, the little moments of consideration that Jason was starting to work into his conversation felt like gold-winning medal moments. His autism meant for some challenges, but they also made him unique, funny and so very special to her.
“Let’s go with green. If she doesn’t like it she can just have some cheese or something on hers”

Jason nodded, satisfied with the answer and the solution to a potential crisis. They were alike in that way, planners, worst-case scenario people and could appreciate the need to have a back-up plan. Jason didn’t particularly like having to use a back-up plan but it was better than not having one and needing one and he conceded the sense in that. She looked over at him while carefully toasting pine nuts in a pan, whilst he put together the food processor to chop the basil which was already filling the air with a fresh and clean smell. He was working up to say something she realised and wanted to help him.

“Jason, remember when it is just you and me, you can say anything, you don’t have to filter, I will tell you if I don’t want to or I can’t answer”
“Auntie Serena, does Dr Bernie have autism like me?”
“No Jason, why?”
“Well she hurts herself like I do so I thought that might mean she was like me.”

Serena smiled softly and reach out to touch the young man’s arm.
“She is very like you in lots of ways. She likes quizzes and documentaries and likes to get things right first time. She also finds emotions difficult to understand, but her own more than other peoples”

She watched Jason process this, moving the pan off the heat so they could cool a little and starting to peel a garlic bulb.

“Why does she hurt herself like that?”
“Why does she cut herself?” Jason nodded to her. “She hasn’t found a way to express her pain and she has lots of things that have hurt her Jason. When it is overwhelming you often hit your head – cutting is what Bernie does. I don’t like that either of you hurt yourselves and I hope that we can find you both ways to talk about what you feel instead of keeping the pain inside.”

They stood together in silence for a while and fed ingredients into the food processor. Jason liked to pulse it so she stepped back and let him work the machine while she started the kettle to boil and tried to find the good olive oil, which she eventually located.

“Auntie Serena – when you feel bad what do you do? Do you hurt yourself?”
“No Jason, well not like that or like you. I cry, shout, sulk, sometimes I drink too much Shiraz, eat too much rubbish. But the only way to feel better is to talk about what you feel and I just have more practice at that than either of you. It is why you go to see Michael and why Bernie will see someone too, to learn to talk. And you can always, always talk to me.”

“Sometimes it is too loud in my head when the fear gets shouty”

She nodded, appreciating that from having witnessed his and Bernie’s respective melt downs, the fear was difficult to speak again.
“We will find a way forward Jason, every time. I am never mad at you for having a meltdown, I
promise you. I love you very much.”
“I love you too Auntie Serena. I was very scared you might die.”

She hastily bit back tears, not wanting to scare Jason.
“I know love and I am sorry. I can’t know how you feel about having had your mum die and
missing her and then having to come to live with me – but we do okay. I will be here for you as
long as I am able and we will make a plan so you never have to be alone if something bad did
happen – is that okay?”
“Yes Auntie Serena, thank you.”

They instinctively touched each other’s arms to hug and offered wide smiles. Jason moved to set
the table and Serena put the pasta on to boil and started a salad. She glanced through the kitchen
window trying to see Bernie but it was too dark and she could only see her own face reflected back
at her. The dark circles were evident under her eyes and she could see the worry lines looking more
prominent. She looked back at herself in slight disgust – what on earth did Bernie see in her? Tired,
frumpy, not thin and toned like the blonde, wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and the grey hairs
that were just starting to peep through at the roots, needing a colour and cut within a week or so.
Bernie was so attractive, she could have any woman on the planet. Did she really want Serena? The
brunette smiled at herself sadly – she hoped she could be enough.

A slight crash drew her back from her thoughts as Jason popped the colander into the sink to drain
the pasta. She heaped the salad into a bowl and passed it to him for the table. She drained the pasta
and added the pesto to it, with some torn up chicken breast.
She took it to the table and went to the back door. Opening it she called out,
“Bernie, dinner is ready” and waited for the blonde to make her way to her. She smiled at her and
went to turn in when a hand popped out and grabbed her wrist, halting her. She turned back to face
Bernie who was looking at her with her smoky eyes and her breath caught in her throat as Bernie
learned down and kissed her. A gentle but firm kiss that spoke of love and hope and promises as
yet unsaid.
Chapter 66 - Dinner and a Movie

Chapter 66.

Every thought went out of Serena's head in that instant, there was nothing except Bernie and the feel of their lips together, a kiss so filled with emotion and words and communication. It was a kiss of connection, of souls meeting in the darkness and finding only each other. They broke apart both panting a little for air and with the unvoiced passion that had just passed between them. Serena held out her hand and Bernie willingly put hers into the warm fingers waiting. They leaned in and kissed again, very gentle, a whisper of contact and their eyes flew shut in order to just feel.

"AUNTIE SERENA AND DR BERNIE IT IS GETTING COLD. YOU CAN KISS LATER"

They came apart again then laughing and blushing in tandem at the totally matter of fact way Jason had accepted their newfound intimacy and love but that food was still more important. Bernie kissed the rosy cheek in front of her and they stepped through the door, passed through the utility room and into the kitchen to sit at the table. Jason was sat in his place already and offered them a smile as they sat.

Bernie's mouth watered as she surveyed the table in front of her, the pasta, salad, bread and Serena settled a glass of wine in front of her. There were matching plates and cloth napkins, the scent of rose and bergamot rising from scented candles dotted around. It was cozy and homely and Bernie couldn't help comparing to her flat, with mismatched crockery that she mostly didn't use, eating straight out of whatever the food came in. She became aware of being passed bowls and spoons and soon she was happily tucking into a feast. Jason started to tell them about his day and how Raf had got him in trouble with Jac Naylor but then got him out of it again and that Fletch was still unconscious but stable and a stab of emotion pricked at Bernie as she remembered how all this had started, the kiss in the space on the theatre floor and she choked a little drawing looks of concern from the other two table occupants. She waved a hand and fetched herself a glass of water and then froze, realising what she'd just done.

"Sorry Serena, I should have asked"

A sigh came back from the brunette but it was Jason that spoke.
"Dr Bernie, you live here. That means everything is yours. Apart from my Copernicus mug. I let you use it this morning but only when I say. And we knock on bedroom doors and wait to be invited in" and with that the young man went back to his food.

Bernie slowly faced Serena who was in turn looking at Jason with a raised eyebrow. She met the blondes gaze and winked at her and Bernie relaxed a little.
"We haven't really had that discussion yet Jason" she heard herself say and then winced as Serena's eyes filled with tears which she blinked away hastily.
"But I am going to stay for a few days at least, if that's okay with you both?"

Jason nodded and Serena squeezed her thigh under the table and they went back to their food again.
"Serena and Jason this is yummy."
"Thank you" the two choruses together.
"Auntie Serena can we watch a film please?"
"Of course love, I would like that. Put your plate in the dishwasher and take Bernie to choose."
Bernie looked up at that and smiled. They rinsed their plates at the kitchen sink, and she followed Jason into the lounge.

Serena busied herself clearing and stacking the dishwasher. She blew out the candles and stood in the muted light from the living room, lost in her thoughts for a while. Bernie said she would stay for a few days, that was a good start. That could turn into forever as far as she was concerned but recognised it was too soon to have that conversation by some way. She thought back to those kisses on the back doorstep and shivered with delight. Nobody had ever kissed her like that and it was going to be the drug that she craved like no other, not even Shiraz.

Catching up her iPad and her wine glass she went through to the lounge. Bernie was sat on the end of one sofa and Jason was fiddling with the remote on the other. She moved over to Bernie and set her iPad and glass on the coffee table and sat down. She looked at the army medic who opened her arms and Serena shifted into them, laying against her slightly. "What are we watching Jason?" she asked absent-mindedly as most of her brain was concentrating on the feel of Bernie next to her and the warmth of being encased in her arms.
"A Beautiful Mind, Auntie Serena. Dr Bernie hasn't seen it." He started the film and settled back on the other sofa.

Serena hummed contentedly as she felt Bernie kiss the top of her head and they settled in to watch. They got lost in the story and at the point of the reveal of the plot twist she felt Bernie gasp in amazement, having not expected Charles and Marcie to be who they were. They continued to watch and she felt some tears drop onto her head from above and tightened her grip on the blonde as they watched the credits roll up.

"I'm going to my room now. Goodnight Auntie Serena and Dr Bernie."
They both wished him goodnight and listened to his footsteps go first to the kitchen and then up the stairs and into his room, the door closing behind him.

They were alone.
There was a moment that passed between them, all heat and tension and want. Then Bernie sighed and drew Serena to her and they laid back against the arm of the sofa, and tangled up in each other, legs and arms intertwine, the brunette laying her head just beneath the army medic's breasts, listening to the thrumming of her heartbeat. Serena wriggled a little trying to get comfy and Bernie sighed again in pleasure, at the weight of the vascular surgeon curled up with her, the smell of her perfume, gardenias and lotus, with some unnamed spice. The softness of her skin wherever it touched Bernie's both igniting a fire and extinguishing the flames with battled within the trauma surgeon.

Serena shifted slightly so they could look into each other's eyes and they got lost in the gaze where time and space and logic and thought ceased to exist. She needed to be kissed and Bernie read her mind, leaning down and pressing their closed lips together, sparks flying off into dark corners as the kiss consumed them. It was both tender and hungry as the two woman moaned against each other's mouths, Serena put her hand round the base of Bernie's neck while the blonde woman put one hand in Serena's hair and the other across her back, clinging to each other as if they let go the other might disappear in a puff of smoke and glitter.

They broke apart needing air and a moment, panting wildly they offered each other shy smiles. Bernie tangled their finger and brought Serena's hand to her mouth, kissing her palm and then the back of her hand, making the vascular surgeon smile wider and her heart flip in her chest. She leaned in and kissed both of Bernie's cheeks and her forehead and extricated herself a little.

"Bernie, I, well."
"It's okay Serena"
"I want to, I really, really do, but slowly?"

Bernie smiled at gently turned Serena round so she had her back to the blonde and tugged her back so she was lying against Bernie's chest. Her hands drifted to Serena's shoulders and she kneaded them slightly, dissolving the tension that had built there. They both sighed in pleasure.

"Serena, there no rush. Gosh, honestly, less than two days ago I was running away, from you, from this. I was so scared. I am still scared, of hurting you, of losing you. If you never touched me or kissed me again in my life, this, right here, would still be the most magical moment of my life."

She had to stop because a lump had formed in her throats and she realised Serena was crying quietly. She moved her hands to her scalp, running long fingers through the short chocolate tresses.

"Bernie, God I want this. You. All of it. But I want to be slow, to hold you, kiss you, wine and dine you. I want to do this right. Because you deserve it. You deserve everything good and lovely and beautiful in the world and I want to give it all to you"

It was Bernie's turn to cry then and she buried her face into Serena's neck, and let fat tears fall.
"I love you" she murmured into the skin and felt the brunette shiver with pleasure.
"I love you." Serena replied and felt herself squeezed a little tighter. They lay there and held each other and Bernie could feel her back starting to stiffen. As if she had read her mind Serena pushed herself up and off Bernie, allowing her to sit up and stand and stretch.

She sat back down, they each took a sip of their wine and Serena picked up her iPad. She looked at Bernie trying to judge what to say and saw the start of anxiety rise in in the blonde.

"No, don't get nervous, it's okay. I did a little research on therapists. I'd like to show you if that's okay"
The colour drained out of Bernie's face and she bit her lip tentatively. She had known Serena wouldn't let this go, and she didn't want her to, she just wasn't sure if she could handle this. She squared her shoulders and nodded, inching her hand closer to Serena and then tucking it under her thigh, needing to be in contact.

The brunette flipped to the notes page and showed her the names and credentials of the ones she'd saved. Bernie listened carefully and admitted that the last one sounded like a good fit. Her heartbeat was too loud in her ears and she started to tremble.

"I know I need this, I know I need to do this but fuck I'm scared" she thought to herself and then she was starting to breath too quickly, flashes started in her brain and she looked around wildly until she caught Serena's eyes. She dragged in a desperate breath.

"Mars Bar"
Chapter 68 - The Silver Sword

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 68

Serena froze for the briefest instant before getting hold of herself. She pulled Bernie close to her and wrapped her in her arms and legs, softly singing, a different song this time, "silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright" for no other reason than it was what first dropped into her mind. Bernie struggled against the hold for a minute and then sagged into it, almost unable to support her own weight. She listened to Serena sing and breathed with her. Bernie was ashen and trembling violently, sweat pouring off her but Serena just sat and held and soothed until the fear departed and a calmer feeling entered the space.

"Well done darling, I'm so proud of you" Serena spoke directly into Bernie's ear, the blonde immediately bursting into silent sobbing, chest heaving and tears coursing down her cheeks. "You did so well to tell me the safe word and you are safe, you're here with me and I've got you" she intoned softly against the other woman as she continued to cry.

Bernie clutched at Serena with her hands, desperate to ground herself, to stay in the moment. "I need a blade" she stammered out and felt Serena hold her even more tightly. "I'm sorry"

"No" said Serena, "no apologies. We're in this together. I know you want a blade but we're going to stay here together and wait until you can manage without one." She drew Bernie downwards so the blonde head was rested in her lap and she began to run her fingers through the tousled curls, unwinding them and letting them spring back. "Close your eyes" she said softly and Bernie trembled some more before shutting them, opening again quickly and then closing them once more.

Serena used her arm to grapple behind her on the occasional table for Kindle she knew was there but rarely used, Catching it up she flicked it on and ran her finger over the screen, searching and then finding. She began to read, out loud, whilst still massaging Bernie's hair and scalp. The beginnings of a story about an escape by a man, named Joseph, from a concentration camp under Nazi occupation. She could tell Bernie had already become lost in the story as her breathing evened and her eyes stopped jumping under closed lids. The army medic turned on her side and kept her head in Serena's lap, listening whilst she read of this man, determined to get out. Of him being hidden by a friendly woman when the soldiers were searching for him, the way they cared for him, fed him and sent him on his way, to find his children."

She read the whole of the first 3 chapters aloud and then needed to stop because her mouth was dry. Bernie sat up a little and passed Serena her wine glass and watched as she took a mouthful. Passing it back she rested the kindle on the table again and Bernie shuffled over and rested her head on the brunettes shoulders, feeling an arm slip round her straight away.

"It's one of mine and Elinor's favourite things from when she was little, that if we are getting on we still do, read aloud. This is another of my favourite books, do you know it?" Bernie shook her head. "It's called The Silver Sword. I think I see you in Joseph and in Ruth, who we haven't met yet."

Serena stopped then, slightly shy. Maybe Bernie would think she was silly but it was all she could think of in the moment.

She felt a kiss pressed to her cheek and looked over with burning cheeks. Bernie offered a smile before looking at her hands.

"Thank you."
"It helped?"
"So much"
"And you're not ashamed of me?"

With that Bernie sat up.
"Why on earth would I be?"
"It's a little childish I guess, but I love books and reading to someone I love gives me such pleasure."
"I love you Serena Campbell. Please will you read some more to me?"

Serena went pink with happiness and nodded, patting her lap for Bernie to get comfy again. Waited until she'd fidgeted and got comfy and continued to tell the story of bravery and hope and redemption that she saw mirrored in the beautiful woman lying with her eyes closed in rapt attention to her words.

Chapter End Notes

The book is called "The Silver Sword" by Ian Serraillier. One of my childhood favourites and you should read it if you haven't x
Chapter 69 - Really Promise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 69.

She kept reading for a while, losing herself as well as Bernie in the narrative as they learned about Ruth, Edek and Bronia, reliving the wonder of the beautiful story. She gradually became aware of two things, a damp patch forming on her thigh where Bernie's tears were soaking in and the raspiness of her voice again as her throat got dry. She finished the chapter and set the kindle aside, leaned down and dropped a kiss to the curly head in her lap. There was a snuffle and then a flurry of movement as Bernie pushed herself upright, using Serena's knee as leverage.

"Are you okay?" They both asked in tandem and grinned at each other. Bernie nodded and Serena said she was but needed some water and they both stood and went to the kitchen, where Serena poured them both a glass from the filter jug. She turned round in time to see Bernie sink to the floor in the middle of the room, put her hands over her ears and start to rock.

"No, no, don't, please. Berenice Wolfe, Major, 11797. Berenice Wolfe, Major 11797."

A flashback. Kandahar? Basra? Or some other hell hole? Serena wondered. She got some ice out of the freezer and sat down next to Bernie, opened her palm and closed it round the ice. It shocked Bernie straight back into the room, eyes wide and wild as she threw herself at Serena, coming to rest sat on her lap, face buried into the side of her neck and arms wrapped tightly around the brunette. The army medics breath was ragged and uneven and she clung to Serena for all she was worth.

"Don't let me go, please, please Serena" she whispered over and over again. Serena held her firmly but lovingly and told her over and over how she was safe, loved, treasured and home. The vascular surgeon shivered a little as a trickle of water went down her back from where the ice in Bernie's hands melted and penetrated her clothes, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was her girl, in her arms, perfectly safe, perfectly loved. She pressed their cheeks together, the blondes red hot against her and held her. A whimper left Bernie as the images started to recede from her minds eye and she felt the fight and the tension come out of her. She felt small and scared and was so grateful for the strong arms around her, for the lap she was sitting in and to be not alone. She pushed back slightly and leaned her forehead to Serena's who looked back with concerned eyes.

"Sorry."

"Come on now. I don't need you to apologise. I'm here and I love you. We will get through this. I promise you."

"Really promise?"

"Really promise."

Serena smiled gently at the question, reminding her of Elinor when she was little, demanding that a promise be a true promise and so she never used those words lightly. She had never promised about Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy or even definitely being home for dinner. She had promised and continued to promise Elinor love and help and a home, that the sun would continue to rise and set everyday, that the stars were always there even if you couldn't see them and that love could overcome anything. She still believed that, recognising how sappy it sounded to anyone else but she truly believed love was enough and that she had enough love for Bernie to be able to promise.

They stayed sat for a while and then Bernie got up and helped Serena to her knees and then her
feet, her legs a little dead from having had the Major sat on them. They drank their water and came together for a gentle hug. "Bedtime I think" Serena said and Bernie nodded and then froze. "It's okay, just sleep." she heard the brunette say and she relaxed again. They turned off the lights and climbed the stairs softly, not wanting to disturb Jason. At the top they paused, silent questions passing between them. Serena jerked her head toward her room and they both entered, shutting the door behind them.

"Bernie, you can sleep here or in your own room, or we can both sleep there. Whatever you need."
"I need you" came the admission back and Serena looked at her fondly.
"Okay, here or your room?"
"Um....here?"
"Wonderful. Go get changed"

Bernie scampered off and Serena began to undress, aware of how tired she was again. The huge emotions were beginning to take their toll on them both and she was so relieved Bernie had opted for here. She threw all her clothes at the laundry basket and found her pyjamas of earlier, drawing them on and then nipping in the ensuite for a wee before coming back out to wait. She turned the covers down, fingerling the scallop pattern in green on the edge of the linen. A faint knock and then Bernie was coming back in, in a set of her own sleepwear, tartan bottoms, soft and fuzzy and a t shirt, khaki with a black star on it. She had tied her hair up and the look of exhaustion on her face was evident. They cleaned their teeth and washed their faces and then climbed into the bed, meeting in the middle. Serena cupped Bernie's face in her hands and kissed her mouth, gently. "Wake me if you need me. I love you."
"I love you Serena."

They turned off the lamps and lay side by side in the dark, their hands linked. Serena turned over, facing away from Bernie and shut her eyes, falling almost immediately asleep. The blonde thought for a minute and shuffled over, laid her head against Serena's back, closed her eyes and waited for sleep to claim her.

Chapter End Notes

The serial number is real and for a B Wolfe
Chapter 70 - Silent Night

Chapter Summary

Pure descriptive fluffy nonsense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 70.

The sky was obsidian, with a scattering of stars like jewels, arranged in complex patterns, Orion hanging low on the sky and Cassiopeia, Bernie's constellation, shone majestically in the night. The moon was at crescent, a reassurance for the traveller and a hope for the lost. The lights of Holby couldn't dim the glory of the heavens as they shone over a house, bathed in darkness at the outskirts of the town. A frost was forming, turning the grass ice-white and revealing hidden cobwebs, spun in haste, decorating gaps in furniture and branches between trees. A fox, burnished amber coat gleaming in the moonlight sniffed the air and made his way towards a delicious smell somewhere far off. An owl hooted and this corner of the world slept on.

Two women, who'd moved closer in their sleep, their bodies refusing any distance their minds might create, lay front to back in dreamless slumber. The soft, clean linen enveloping them in a cloud of warmth as they shared body heat and contact. Moved together when one shifted in their sleep, fingers grasping for skin, the reassurance and familiarity of touch, caress. Love hung over them, watching, as Hope and Faith and Joy chased away the darkness and fear that tried to sit in the corner of the room with them. Not that the women were consciously aware of that, just the need to be close and stay close as they slept, and the hunt of that while they were awake, more than a hint, their every being crying out for the other, desperate to be in each other's orbit and vision and to remain there, only secure in the immediacy of the woman they loved and were loved by.

Faint stirrings in their sleep caused them to reach for each other unseeing, seeking to soothe, comfort and love, even when not aware of it. Their skin, magnetic, only for each other and patterns traced by fingertips. The entwining of legs and the warming of feet on warm flesh where they'd snuck out of the covers, snores and snuffles making their own melody, a ballad of rest. Lips kissing shoulders and hair, resting there, needing to touch velvet skin, all heat and promise. Hands delving under hemlines to trace stomach and hips lines. Coming to rest again, around each other and in the arms of sleep, restoring their bodies and respite for their souls, solace tonight in no dreams or nightmares, just empty space in their minds, and peace reigning.

Whispers of dreams tried to edge in but were refused access, nothing allowed to disturb the sleep of this night, an oasis in days of desert of emotions and experiences, memories not allowed to creep in and taint the perfection of this night, sleeping next to each other, on each other, forever parts of a whole that is only whole when they meet together, in sleep, in love, in any area of their life.

Colours started to creep into the edge of the sky and birdsong started up in the darkness, gentle notes of beauty in the world outside. The hiss and crank of the boiler as the heating pipes grew hot and warmed the chilly air in the house. Floorboards creaked as the house got cosy and wood expanded from where it had been cold. Still they slept on, oblivious to the world starting to wake outside. The lights of cars pulling out of driveways sweeping across the room, illuminating faces
creased in sleep momentarily before being enveloped in darkness again.

The sound of an alarm down the hallway, and feet hitting the floor as the other occupant of the house started his day. The creak and crack of floors and doors and water running in the shower bringing the first elements of consciousness to the room. The shuffling closer and soft smiles appearing on faces as they realised they were together. Lazy kisses to cheeks and to lips and cuddling up into each other. Words slow to come as caresses are languid and gentle, learning skin and eyes and looks. Staring into the depths of irises and pupils dilated in the soft morning light. Whole conversations without words, questions about sleep and nightmares and anxieties, reassured by peace and calm and quiet and love.

"Morning darling"
"Morning you"

Chapter End Notes

Cassiopeia is the shape of a W
Chapter 71 - Rise and Fall

Chapter Notes

The fluff before the angst...

Chapter 71.

They heard Jason go downstairs and the television turn on, Serena had left him a note to say she and Bernie were going to sleep in, and that they'd have dinner later so she didn't feel like it was necessary to get up. She looked across at the blonde who'd shut her eyes again and she smiled at having her close. She tracked every detail of her beautiful face and tried to commit it to memory. "You're staring" Bernie murmured without opening her eyes, voice thick with sleep. "I am" said Serena with a grin and Bernie opened her eyes again having heard it. They scooted closer to each other until they were pressed against each other. Serena stroked Bernie's cheek with a touch so gentle it was barely there and traced her cheekbones, her jawline and her lips with her index finger. Bernie shut her eyes and moaned faintly at the sheer pleasure of being touched so gently and yet the sensation of being explored had other predictable effects and she felt herself get lost in the sensation and then they were kissing. Bernie thought she might explode from happiness at the sensation of being kissed so thoroughly and then her face was being stroked again. She pulled Serena to her and nibbled her bottom lip, immediately sucking it into her mouth to soothe the sensation and was rewarded by a rumbling from Serena that started in her chest and escaped her throat and felt herself pulled to the brunette so her weight was partially resting on her. She could scarcely believe she was getting to do this and she smiled into their next kiss causing Serena to pull away.

"Someone's happy" the vascular surgeon quipped and immediately found herself being kissed again. "Mmmm" was all Bernie could get out and she broke kiss to run her fingers over Serena's face, memorising, as if she were blind, the contours and angles, the creamy skin and the lips of velvet. Serena felt like she was hallucinating at the sensations of being so thoroughly possessed and yet tenderly cared for. She shivered slightly and Bernie stopped and looked at her quizzically. The blonde then lay back down and rested her head on the other woman's chest, listening to her heart rate slow and slow and then feeling arms go around her. She purred a little at the happy feelings that had invaded.

They stayed meshed together for a while until Serena began to wiggle. "I need to pee Bernie" she said and felt rather than heard the other woman giggle. "Off with you" and disengaged from their cuddle. The blonde pouted, adorably, her cheeks puffed out and her eyes wide and expressive. "I'm coming back" Serena threw out and was met with happy puppy eyes and laughed as she slipped out of the bed and into the bathroom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the cabinet mirror before sitting on the toilet, her lips swollen from kisses and her hair all up on ends from fingers running through it. She smiled to herself, she felt rested and reenergised to face a new day.

Bernie meanwhile was already feeling her absence, the warmth and presence of the brunette had rapidly become the pivot point of her world. She turned into her belly and curled herself into Serena's pillow, breathing in the scents of the woman she adored. Those kisses and touches had lit
a fire in her belly and she waited for it to quell. She closed her eyes and let herself doze slightly until she felt the mattress dip and a warm body slip in next to her and start rubbing her back through her t shirt. She smiled as Serena explored her shoulder blades and the hollow of her lower back. She opened her eyes and leaned up for a kiss, soft and gentle.

"What would you like to do today?" Serena asked and Bernie thought about it.
"I'd, well, um"
"Go on"
"I'd like to unpack my stuff" she stammered out and heard Serena audibly smile.
"Wonderful. I'd like to make you breakfast and sit with you while you unpack" said the brunette and was dazzled by the beaming smile from the army medic.
"Also darling, you have a phone call to make" she ventured and cursed inwardly as the sunny smile became a storm cloud of emotion.
"It'll be okay, I'm with you" and she pulled Bernie into a tight hug, feeling her tremble as she did and decided to take a risk.
"Sweetheart?"
"Yes Serena?" Bernie whispered back though the fear, but knowing what was coming.
"What was your flashback last night?"
Chapter 72 - Mosul

A white-hot heat rips through Bernie and sweat beads on her temples and between her breasts. She started to shake and grasp wildly for Serena’s hand, trying to ground and fight the feelings of desperation. She hated her body and her mind in that moment, for betraying her, for displaying her weakness last night for all to see. She had no idea what Serena had seen or heard her say, but it must have been bad for Serena to ask directly. It had been one of the flashbacks where nothing else exists, where present time and space bow to the knee of the past and its volume and strength. Serena’s hand feels like ice in her vice-like grip, and she makes the effort not to squeeze too hard. She wants to change the subject, not talk about this, but that won’t wash, she knows it won’t. The softness of the sheets around her feel suddenly restrictive and she fights the urge to strip her pyjamas off, to try to cool down.

Serena simply waits, seeing the struggle to articulate and the fight. Her hand is being lightly crushed but she doesn’t care about that, only wants to be what Bernie needs in the moment. The heat coming from the other woman is almost scorching, and she wants to go and get a flannel, as if the other woman had a fever. She pulls the sheets away from her to try to get a little air flow going and waits some more. She grappled with herself before saying what she had, that Bernie needed to call a therapist and then asking about this flashback, aware that it might be too much. Her heart had leapt for joy when Bernie had said she wanted to unpack, but she needed to know Serena would push her to do the hard things, even if she didn’t welcome it. “I want her healed and whole” she thought to herself and began to stroke the knuckles of the hand around her own. Suddenly, deep, dark chocolate eyes were peering at her, though blonde wavy strands.

“Mosul”.

It hadn’t been in the news, the army had made YouTube take down the video that had only been up for a matter of minutes, but it was etched into the fabric of Bernie’s mind. She’d been part of a platoon as a 2nd Lieutenant, under Captain Miles Miller, a man she respected and liked. Their 3rd in command was Corporal Darren Taylor, a gentle giant of a man, with a way of motivating their young charges, all of whom were a little too trigger-happy, especially the rookies. He found a knack of reinforcing the rules of engagement with them, making it quiz like despite the deadly serious of lethal force involved. She could still recite them now if she thought about it. The 3 of them had gone into the area having been first stationed in Baghdad. The city was on the west bank of the Tigris, the heat was fierce and Sadaam was not giving up lightly. The pressure to maintain oil routes was huge and the people in the city did not appreciate the presence of foreign troops. Car bombs and suicide attacks were common in addition to the combat with the Iraqi Army 5th Corps. The day to day strain of staying alive was enormous.

They hadn’t seen their captors. They were pulled out of an armoured vehicle which they later learned had had a tracker placed on it by a rogue translator, who’d popped the locks in order for the forces to have access. They were bound, blindfolded and gagged, knocked out for a time with the
sweet stench of chloroform in their nostrils. They were dumped in a room together, with no
windows, just a portrait of the dictator and an Iraqi flag. They were brought water only for 5 days
and were weak with hunger. One by one they'd be dragged out for interrogation. Heard each other
shouting their name, rank and serial number, Berenice Wolfe, Major, 11797. The only answers
they were permitted to give, bound at feet and wrist, held in stress positions, deprived of food, of
sleep.

Until their captors snapped. Lined them up in front of video camera and held a copy of an Arabic
newspaper along with a copy of The New York Times, showing the date. Had each of them read a
statement to camera about the illegal presence of UK troops in Iraq and demanding the immediate
withdrawal. Only Darren had refused to read it, despite the urging of both Miles and Bernie, he
would say nothing beyond the 3 standard answers, maintaining defiant eye contact with the
insurgents. So they held a pistol to his head and shot him at point blank range. Blood and brain
tissue had hit Bernie full in the face and she vomited down herself. She and Miles had been tossed
in another room and couldn't speak to each other, or look. Left for two days until they were on the
edge of dying of thirst, when they were rescued by special forces storming the building. It was
never in the press and Darren Taylor was flown home on a Hercules for a full military funeral. The
procession through Wootton Bassett with the local people lining the streets, paying respects to a
man they'd not known. She and Miles had then gone on a period of leave where they both struggled
to fit back into domestic life and both were pleased to be called up for a new tour quickly. They
never spoke again of those days, but often of Darren, the brave, burly man who'd held his peace
even into death.

Bernie felt her mouth dry after spilling all of that out and looked at Serena who was white and
holding her hands to her face in shock. The blonde was frightened then, had she been too graphic,
overshared?
"Serena?"
The brunette shook herself but couldn't make any words come. She held out her hands to the army
surgeon who took hold immediately, offering each other comfort. Serena raised their hands to her
mouth and kissed each one, making Bernie blush a little and almost miss the croaked words.
"Bernie, how have you survived this?" Serena said in awe.
Bernie shrugged, not really knowing how to answer.
"I'm so sorry Bernie" the vascular surgeon whispered and the floodgates opened. A torrent of silent
tears down both their faces which neither of them moved to wipe away. The connection of grief for
lives lost and lives changed moulding them together, and fusing their hearts as they sat, motionless
in a Flanders field in their minds.
Chapter 73 - Aftermath

They just sat and cried openly, and Serena tried valiantly to get ahold of her tears but found she just couldn’t as she watched the heart of the woman she loved break apart again in front of her as she cried in remembrance of a man she had watched die in front of her eyes. How much pain could one heart possibly hold and had clearly been holding for so long, the words locked inside, only evidenced by flashbacks, that Bernie tried so hard to control but the pressure valve had been well and truly opened and now the contents of her mind had overflowed. There wasn’t enough space for it all to go back in. Their shared kiss had been the catalyst, she could see that now, the army medic had allowed her inside and that meant to all of her. No wonder she had tried to run.

Bernie couldn’t make the tears stop but she wasn’t agitated like before. Letting the words come had given the images permission to move outside, to not be trapped inside her mind any longer. She grieved openly for the first time for a man she admired, for the woman she had been, and for every single injustice that had been forced upon her by another person’s actions. It felt terrifying but so right somehow that Serena was the first person to hear these words, be allowed to visualise these experiences with her, as the only person she had ever truly fallen in love with, head-over-heels, makes no sense, shouldn’t really be but is kind of love. For it to work, and Bernie was thinking forever, even if she couldn’t articulate that right now; Serena needed to know it all. The urge to run was being replaced, piece by piece with a need to be real, raw and open. She felt like she was exposed, as if all her innermost feelings were written on her skin in permanent marker, but if Serena could still look at her with the love and affection she was seeing and it was real, then maybe, maybe this was right where she needed to be?

She watched Serena through her tears, also in her own tears, in empathy and love. Was there really nothing that could drive her away? She allowed a little hope to creep in. Hope was dangerous to Bernie ordinarily. Hope suggested things could be different and particularly in her marriage to Marcus, had not been something she had allowed herself to have. Alex had seemed like hope but had turned out to be a secret shame, despite helping her accept herself. She had known, even at the beginning that she and Alex were not a forever thing. Too many stolen moments in fear of discovery. The sex had been thrilling and exciting and passionate but it was never going to be enough. Not by a long way. Hope with Serena was like a lighthouse in a storm, a guidance, a beacon to the safe shore. It was oxygen, simple, clean air and she could breathe after so long holding it in.

She moved across the bed to her and wrapped her in her arms and they sobbed, noisily in each other’s arms, not caring what they looked like. The sobs came down to gasps and shuddering breaths as they struggled to get control. Bernie brought her hands to Serena’s face and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes as they locked into eye contact. “It’s okay” they both whispered to each other and the tears kept coming, though more gently than a few minutes ago. Serena grasped the blonde’s shoulders and held tightly, trying to communicate safety and acceptance, love and care all in touches. Then they were kissing, gently, the only way it felt to both of them, to express how they felt about what they had shared and how they felt about each other. Tender, sweet kisses, not trying to consume, not full of passion, but love, abundant, beautiful love and they poured it freely into each other through their lips. Serena was the first to speak.

“Bernie, have you ever told anyone any of this?”
Bernie shook her head, no, and Serena cried again.
“Thank you for trusting me to tell me. I am so so sorry you have been on your own with it for so
long. I promise you, you are never going to be on your own with it ever again, not for a single minute”

The trauma surgeon smiled weakly through her renewed tears and buried her face in Serena’s neck, chest heaving again with sobs and the brunette rubbed her back and cradled her there. She would never know what it was like to have lived with the experiences and then the after effects. She offered a silent thank you to whoever was watching over Bernie for keeping her alive, for giving them the chance to be together.

“Thank you Serena. For hearing it and not being afraid to ask me.”
“Always and forever my darling. I love you.
“I love you”.

They eased back on the bed and sat with their backs to the headboard, cuddled into each other, not needing to speak, just soaking up the love radiating from the other. Bernie impulsively kissed Serena’s cheek, making her smile.

“What was that for?”
“I just love you, so very much, and it is such a relief to be able to say that to you and not be afraid”
They smiled at each other shyly and closed their eyes, exhausted.
“Nap?”
“Yes please.”
Unusually, Serena woke first. She’d curled herself into Bernie whilst they slept and just lay looking at her. She closed her eyes and breathed out, long and slow and opened her eyes again. Yep, she was still here, still real then. She wanted to pinch herself. How glorious to wake up next to her love and just watch her. She shuffled closer still, pressing herself against the blonde who fidgeted a little.

“Whassamatter?”

Serena chuckled and started to run her index finger over Bernie’s cheek.

“Nothing my darling. Absolutely nothing at all”

Bernie inhaled and opened her eyes, squinting a little as the room came into focus and smiling when soft kisses were peppered on her cheek.

“Mmmmm”

Serena laughed and continued to kiss every inch of cheek that was flushing rapidly pink and reached out to trace the delicate shell of Bernie’s ear with her fingertip, rewarded by another mmmmm that became a soft moan as the trauma surgeon wriggled a little and pulled Serena flush against and captured her mouth in a hungry kiss. The brunette responded eagerly, letting out a small moan of her own and then their mouths were open and Bernie slipped her tongue inside, caressing the roof of Serena’s mouth, exploring the tastes and textures. They shivered against each other as the vascular surgeon sucked gently on the hot tongue that had invaded her mouth and they put their hands in each other’s hair, running fingers over scalp and through silky tresses, holding onto the back of swan-like necks and kissing, hot, urgent kisses, that spoke of the depths of the passion that had laid dormant for so long until they had found each other and the puzzle pieces fit, unlocking the depths.

They broke apart and stroked each other’s faces, scarcely believing that they could touch each other like this. Leaned in again for more kisses, lazier this time, just lingering in the moment.

“Shall we get some food?” Bernie asked tentatively and was pleased when the other woman nodded. They got up and straightened the covers on the bed, heading for the door when she found herself flipped against the door and having the breath kissed out of her. She felt her knees give and a pair of arms hold her up. Serena drew back and smirked at the effect of a flushed and panting Bernie.

“Jesus Serena!”

“Come on then, I believe I was promised breakfast”

With that she pulled them both through the door and down the stairs. Bernie pulled out a stool and perched on it, still trying faintly to get her breath back, not being able to take her eyes off the hot woman moving around the kitchen, in the usual attempt to find what she wanted. The sway of her hips, the swell of her breasts, Bernie was starting to need a cold shower fairly urgently. Serena was not unaware of the effect she was having and was enjoying the chance to flirt openly. She found some bread and made several rounds of wheat toast and marmalade with cups of her favourite coffee. The blonde inhaled the toast whilst she nibbled at hers, both needing the sustenance. They
finished and Bernie got up and stacked the dishwasher, feeling more at home than she ever had anywhere.

“Well then Major – take me to your bedroom”

Bernie went instantly purple and Serena threw her head back and laughed

“Oh Bernie, you are so much fun to tease! Unpacking?”

Bernie went an even darker shade as she tried to form words and in the end just shrugged helplessly, earning another laugh from the brunette and a squeeze of her shoulder. They headed back upstairs and into the soft grey room Serena had given to Bernie.

The owner of the home went to the head of the bed and settled herself there while the blonde contemplated the pile of mismatched bags and boxes she had brought with her, wondering if she could get away with just stacking them all in the wardrobe but dismissing the idea. She threw a bag at Serena who fluffed the catch and laughed. She started to pull out clothes, jumpers, trousers, some t shirts and slipped off the bed to start to hang them up – some of them for the first time, thought Bernie, who despite being in the army, was a lover of throwing clothes on the floor and keeping them there. She opened a drawer in the chest and tumbled out her underwear, embarrassed at showing them. She needn’t have worried as Serena was preoccupied with a scrub top she had found and was holding to her. She remembered envelope 1 and went over to Serena. “You can keep that” she whispered directly into her ear and felt the shudder of pleasure that passed through the other woman.

“Thank you love” she said and dropped a quick kiss to her mouth before backing away, not wanting to overheat the situation any more than it already was and moved back to the bed, tenderly folding the scrub top before continuing to hang clothes for Bernie who had moved onto the box of books and was cramming them haphazardly onto the shelf in the top of the wardrobe, a mixture of serious medical textbooks and journals, some classics including a full set of Jane Austen and a huge selection of crime fiction.

“Oh my”

Bernie turned to see Serena holding her one and only evening dress, an off-shoulder full length gown in midnight blue with a scattering of crystals adorning the lightly boned bodice and tumbling down to a skirt that was full but not netted. She wasn’t a dress wearer ever really but had needed one for the odd occasion where dress uniform wasn’t appropriate and she would be the first to admit it made her feel like a princess.

“Well we need a date where I can see you in this” said Serena softly.

“Taking me out then Ms Campbell” she said with a wink

“Hell yes, if you are wearing this,” came the instant reply and then having hung it up, Serena moved over and wrapped Bernie in her arms.

“I want us to date. I want us to go to films and theatre and for meals and I’ll even walk for you” she smiled.

“I want that too” Bernie admitted and returned the hug.

“Saturday night” said Serena, “I’ll surprise you, if you let me” and Bernie nodded and they stood together, and kissed, in delicious anticipation of the date and of all that was too come.
Chapter 75 - Homes

Chapter Notes

Thank you all, especially my regulars for continually suggesting, encouraging and loving on me and this story. It means everything.

I will keep posting chapters today and tomorrow at least. Then a brief break possibly until after Boxing Day, but I may change my mind!

Chapter 75.

They finished organising Bernie’s stuff and sat on the edge of the bed. Bernie’s mind was whirring, not really believing that she had essentially just moved in with Serena and Jason, when a few days ago she had convinced herself that she wasn’t ever going to see Serena again, that the brunette hated her. She shivered slightly, thinking of everything this week had brought to a head and the other woman slipped her hand in hers and squeezed, apparently reading the blonde’s mind again. This felt like a home that Bernie had never had, safe, warm, comforting and love, more love flew round this house than anywhere she had ever been. In the touches and looks, the words that were spoken and the glances that didn’t need words. The laughter and teasing, the peculiarities that make up a family and Bernie had never wanted something so much than to be part of it, to stay cocooned in the heartbeat of it all, a steady beat in the face of any challenges.

She’d never been much of a homemaker, not really encouraged to learn domestic skills by her parents, and she’d not needed them in the army. With Marcus they had been able to afford a cleaner and he was a way better cook than she was. She wasn’t really into colours and fabrics and the little touches that made each room in Serena’s home vibrant and soft and alive. She had had great fun creating bedrooms for Cam and Charlotte when they were small, painting murals onto each of their walls, of space and princesses, castles and knights of the realm and finding the perfect furniture for them, the toile and lace trimmed canopy bed for her little girl and a high bunk bed for Cameron with a boy den underneath, with a camouflage net and a spy hole. That had been fun. Hers and Marcus’ room had been a place to sleep, but not a haven like Serena’s room and this one that she had just been given. It had had stripped pine furniture and the biggest bed they could find – limiting the amount they actually had to touch other towards the end and also giving Bernie fair warning when he did want her and she could feel him roll towards her, giving her time to absent herself somewhere in her mind, counting, singing, enduring him until he was satisfied. He never seemed bothered if she enjoyed it and often she heard the words “frigid” and “cold” when they argued. He also didn’t know the meaning of the word “no” at times, but she had just chalked that up to being married and having to do what she had to do.

Serena nuzzled into the side of her favourite person and they cuddled a little. Unpacking had not seemed to faze Bernie as much as she thought it might have. She had loved decorating this room, in the pinks and greys that she had chosen. A few people had used this as a rest stop over the years, most recently Morven, who had stayed for a few days after Arthur’s funeral and who was rapidly becoming an honorary Campbell-Haynes. She was another soul that Serena loved and she recognised her tendency to pick up waifs and strays and love them was sometimes a hindrance but she received so much love in return. Bernie was another lost soul, but she hoped a soul that had come home to roost a while, if not forever, which would be the hope. There was a fierce river of independence running through the Major, the war hero, the woman who didn’t want or need
anyone else and yet she did need Serena, needed her like food and water and oxygen and sunlight and Serena needed Bernie right back.

She felt Bernie’s arms slip round her waist and she turned a little to face into her, resting her chin on the muscled shoulder. She felt the muscles of her shoulder blades and back as she ran her hands lightly up to close them round the long neck of the other woman. Their eyes met and sparks flew to the corners of the room, not only of passion, but of closeness and forgiveness and love, the deepest and purest love either of them had ever felt. She watched the other woman close her eyes and she kissed the slightly trembling eyelids, softest kisses like fairy wings. A perfect moment she tried to capture with her eyes like a photograph but living and breathing and alive.

A shadow crossed the room and she cursed in her head. This had to happen, it was so important, but she knew that it was in meltdown territory. She squeezed the other woman to her and Bernie opened her eyes and immediately bit her lip, anticipating what Serena was going to say and getting in first.

“Please don’t say it”
“You know I have to”
“5 more minutes?” Serena considered the request but reluctantly shook her head.
“It won’t help Bernie, it’s better to get it over with. Like ripping a plaster off” The blonde shook her head violently and started to tremble.
“I can’t do it Serena”

Serena fished her phone from out of her pocket, having already stored the number. She laid it in Bernie’s hand who looked like she wanted to throw it out of the window or at the wall.

“Please, please Serena”
“Darling, I will never force you to do ANYTHING. But you know, deep down, you really know, that you need to do this. Like I said, I will go with you to and from the appointments, I promise you, you never have to do that by yourself. But you have to make this call Bernie. You have to choose to work on this, choose to live, to be whole”

Tears had started in both their eyes as Serena spoke. Bernie nodded.

“Sing with me”
So they sang their song as tears slipped down their cheeks and Bernie touched the little bird on the bracelet she had yet to take off.
Took a deep breath and pressed the green button.
Then immediately pressed the red button and looked up at Serena, stricken by panic. Repeat the process, green, red, green red and started to hyperventilate. Arms immediately went round her and she tried to feel the breaths of the woman wrapped around her, trying to synchronise and control her own breathing as she felt slightly light-headed and the edges of her vision had gone slightly hazy. She breathed in the scent of Serena's perfume and that started to help her come down from her heightened state. Green, red, green red. The panic swelled again and started to rock when she felt the phone removed from her hand and then a hand on each of her cheeks which were burning under the cool skin of Serena's palms. She stammered out some words, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Serena, please, please don't leave me!

Bernie's eyes snapped up at the use of her long name. "I know it's only been a few days but goodness, I love you, I love you. I'm not leaving. I know this is hard, I can see it. You've been more brave than I've ever seen telling me what you have. I will always listen. But I can't be your therapist. I want you to be my girlfriend, my lover, my partner in everything. But this one thing, I can't do."

Serena smiled softly and ran her hands from Bernie's cheeks down to her hands and held, mindful not to squeeze the left one too hard. She raised the army medics left hand and pressed it to her chest, between her breast, covering it with her right, lifting Bernie's right hand to her own chest with her left and laid it there gently. "It's taken 51 years for our hearts to find each other Bernie. They deserve, we deserve, the best each other can be. The best I can be is helping you mend the cracks, to love you well and completely, and be your constant. Do you know how you can be your best for me? Work on your heart, help it heal so it can feel all of me. Don't run from me, run to me. Love me, whatever I do, think or say in anyway you can."

She had to stop because a lump had risen in her throat that no more words could edge around. Still with their hands over hearts they drank the sight of each other in and the love was so tangible it was a presence in the room, of incense and spice, heady and thick, making the bond even stronger, binding them for now, forever and for all time.

Serena let go and picked up the phone again, hearing the sharp intake of breath from the other woman and the immediate tremble that was forced down. "I'm going to dial and put it on speaker but I'm not going to say anything. Only you can. I know you don't want to but I know you know you need to. You can hate me for it right after" and cast her eyes down at the bed, realising that that was a distinct possibility until a hand cane under her chin and cupped it, drawing her gaze back upwards. The liquid fear was evident in Bernie's eyes but there was also a steeliness that she recognised from theatre.

"Good afternoon, Aspen Counselling Services, may I help you?"

An excruciating silence as Serena watched Bernie have an intense struggle with herself. "Take your time, I know it can be difficult to make this call. My name is Claire. Will you tell me yours?" came the voice through the tinny speakers of Serena's iPhone.
"Bernie" she managed to get out and felt tears rise.  
"Lovely Bernie. Well done. Do you know who'd you like to see or would you like me to ask some questions to try to match you with a therapist?  
"Um. I,I," she closed her eyes and took a breath as Claire waited.  
"I'd like to see Phillip please"  
"Fantastic we can definitely do that. First appointments are usually an hour and a half, he could do Tuesday at 11, or Wednesday at 4"  
She looked at Serena for help who mouthed "Wednesday" at her.  
"Wednesday please."  
"Great. Can I take your phone number and your email, I'll send confirmations to both." Bernie gave them to her in a shaky voice, tears truly threatening to fall."  
"Bernie, that's all set up for you. You can bring someone to wait if you need to and if you want to come and have a look round first then pop in and ask for me, otherwise we will see you Wednesday. Are you okay? Is someone with you?"  
Bernie nodded until she remembered that Claire couldn't see that.  
"Yes, thank you."  
"No problem. Take care now. Bye"  
The call ended and Serena pressed red and threw the phone on the table. Dragged a silently sobbing Bernie to her and held her. Kissed her. Told over and over how proud she was, how much she loved her, how it was going to be okay as the trauma surgeon clung to her, letting the tension and anxiety flood out in her tears. It was time.  

To take broken wings and learn to fly.
Chapter 77.

She let the blonde cry herself dry, held close into her chest. It felt like a lifetime of tears were coming out of Bernie in these last few days and she felt honoured in a strange way to be there, to hold her through it, to see them fall and let them be soaked up by her clothes and her skin, to be able to wipe her face and kiss her eyelashes. It was all part of them being real with each other after all. Not hiding thoughts or feelings or emotions.

Bernie pushed herself away from Serena and coughed, rubbing her sore eyes which felt puffy and gritty. She'd never cried so hard or so much as the last few days and she felt faintly embarrassed. Where was the tough persona she cultivated when she needed it? All this crying, the emotions, the spilling her secrets, too much. She couldn't kid herself anymore hat Serena didn't want to know or that it was too much for her, she'd actively poked and prodded at the sore places in Bernie's mind until the release valve was opened and out came the dark side of Major Wolfe. She felt Serena's hands go into her hair, massaging out the tensions and she slumped forward under the touch, feeling short fingernails scratch at her scalp and she moaned softly in bliss as the hard, horrible feeling dissipated for a while and she stretched herself out further under Serena's hands, earning a faint chuckle from the brunette and a renewed working of her her fingertips on her scalp and felt a faint kiss to her temple, making her give a half smile. She laid her head in Serena's lap and sought around blindly to hold one of her hands. "Love you" she whispered and her mouth was covered by a kiss from a leaning down Serena who was so bursting with pride and love for her trauma surgeon that she could barely keep it in. "Love you more" she heard whispered back. "Love you most" and again Serena chuckled and dropped another kiss to rose-pink lips.

She laughed then and rose carefully to sit facing Serena. "When did we get so...mushy?" she grinned out and Serena properly laughed and leaned in for another kiss. "Not good for your big macho army medic image Major?" she twinkled and Bernie beamed at her. "No"
"I'll just have to stop kissing you then won't I!"
"Don't you dare" growled Bernie and practically crash-tackled the brunette as she sought another kiss.

The heat between them rose as they both sought to be dominant in kiss, tongues swirling around each other, desperate snatches of breath as the fought to stay joined, lips pressing together, their bodies flush. She ran her hands over Serena's shoulders and felt opposing hands slip down to the small of her back, gasping as Serena ran her hands over her bum cheeks and squeezed before coming back up to stroke Bernie's face and they broke apart, panting and with hunger in their eyes. "Spectacular" Serena husked and winked and Bernie felt her insides clench, God this woman was the best.

They got off the bed and threaded their fingers together, exchanging more kisses but gentle, closed-
mouth ones. As fired up as they both were, more was a bigger step than they were ready for.
"You need some exercise don't you?" Serena asked and Bernie realised she absolutely did.
"Would you mind if I went for a run?"
"Darling you don't have to ask me for permission. Relax and do what you want to do....okay" she
laughed the last out as Bernie stole a kiss.
"I'll leave you to change" and she went off downstairs to the kitchen and began brewing some
coffee.
She'd just sat down with a cup when her mind went blank. Bernie was stood in front of her in black
compression leggings and a royal blue vest with a racer back. Her was up and she had her trainers
in her hand.

"Are you sure you don't mind Serena?"
She smiled and went over to the blonde and fiddled with the strap on her vest.
"Not at all. Don't get run over because you're thinking about this" and Serena leaned in and sucked
at the skin exposed in Bernie's shoulder, near her neck and Bernie went hot and weak as she licked
the place she'd just sucked and then found herself turned round and heading for the door.

"I love you Serena Campbell" she said and went through the front door, closing it gently behind
her. Serena smiled and blew a kiss to the back of her girl though the door and went back down the
hall to the kitchen.
Chapter 78 - I found

Chapter Notes

Lol at you lot having a moment over Bernie in her running clothes!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 78

She laced her trainers on the step and fiddled with her iPod headphones until the were comfortable
in her ears, tucking the little silver box into her armband. Breathing in the crisp autumn air she
stretched her hamstrings and her calves carefully before walking down the path to the road. She
started a slow jog, wanting to warm her muscles up before going for it and listened to the music
going round in her ears.

"And I'll use you as a warning sign
That if you talk enough sense, then you'll lose your mind
And I'll use you as focal point
So I don’t lose sight of what I want
And I’ve moved further than I thought I could..."

Inexplicably, she found herself thinking of Alex. How she'd been a warning sign that Bernie was.
Or losing her mind but that she'd found herself. Oh it was never meant to last, she realised now.
There was no real depth of emotion and certainly no sharing, of stories, of history, even of a bed. It
had been hands down trousers, fast as you can, wham, bam, thank you ma'am and salute and carry
on. She'd shared with Alex that she was married, well supposed to be anyway and Alex had
shushed her.
"I don't give a shit about all of that" Alex had whispered fiercely. "I just want you, in my pants,
right now."
It had been so sordid, she realised now and unhealthy and yet she couldn't regret finally, after so
long, being able to be who she was and she was grateful for that. She'd been a focal point,
reminding her of identity and that she finally knew what she wanted. But then Alex had got clingy
and whined about a future now that they were out of the army and Bernie knew she didn't want
that, not with Alex. Exciting yes, dangerous yes, love, not really. And she found it so hard to
forgive and forget, that Alex had outed her and had then gone to their house and confronted Marcus
and the children about how Bernie didn't love them, and that was the final nail in the coffin of the
whole tempestuous thing. She was still living with the repercussions, the statements that the
children had written, the loss so completely of. Charlotte and the frost from Cameron. The beating
from Marcus, she still believed deep down she had deserved.

She picked up the pace and started to run, harder, muscles glowing and lungs burning. The rush of
endorphins and adrenaline making her feel alive and sated and free. Bernie loved to run. It was
almost a religious experience for her, where her body could go past the pain barrier and push the
boundaries of possibility.

"And I found love where it wasn't supposed to be
Right in front of me, talk some sense to me
And I'll use you as a makeshift gauge
Of how much to give and how much to take

She had. She'd found Serena, love where it wasn't supposed to be. Her best friend, colleague and co-lead on AAU. Dizzy, head-over-heels, infatuated love. Where all there was was the two of them. It had grown and grown until it almost threatened to consume them. Bernie wasn't sure where she ended and Serena began when they were together. In theatre, on the ward, now at home as well. Yes it was fast if you looked at it on the surface, but it had really just been the last few days. The rest had been a slow burn, that Bernie had fought day after day, convinced she wasn't loved, that Serena couldn't possibly reciprocate her feelings and then she'd simply stopped thinking outside theatre and her body had taken over, seeking what was found, asking for what was given, a kiss, a heart, a love so great she couldn't contain it and so she'd tried to run. But there was Serena and her plan, a makeshift gauge of what it was okay to give and to take, giving words, kisses, time, love, a home, a room, a family. Serena gave so easily and love-starving Bernie soaked it up.

What did she have to offer Serena in return? Love wasn't in question, neither were kisses and Bernie would listen to the brunette till the cows came home given half a chance. She couldn't offer a home anywhere near as nice or stability, but she could offer practical skills, loving Jason, and honesty. Honesty was important to Serena and so she would try to offer that always.

She ran and ran and the miles dropped away until she found herself back at the driveway breathing hard and soaked in sweat. She did her best thinking and processing when running and was eagerly looking forward to a trip to the gym in the next few days to throw some Barbells around. Placing her hands on her thighs she bent over and regulated her breathing. Standing she realised she didn't know whether to go straight in or ring the bell and the fear suddenly paralysed her for a split second until she shook herself and rang the doorbell.

Chapter End Notes

Song is I found by Amber Run
Meanwhile Serena finished her coffee and had a dig round in her kitchen cupboards. She decided to bake a cake and a little shiver of happiness spread over her as she imagined Bernie and Jason tucking in. Serena was a feeder, loving to provide tasty meals and treats for those that she loved. Her creativity had been stifled a little by Jason who rigidly stuck to his meal plans for a week like a military strategy but he was accepting of trying new snacks and treats and a word of praise from him was a special treasure she stored up in her heart for days afterwards.

She'd been on the receiving end of precious little kindness in her life, an austere mother who'd prevented her father from being as affectionate as he'd wanted to be, not to mention concealing the existence of her sister. Edward had had his moments but she'd come to realise any warmth from him was an attempt to assuage his guilt from cheating again. Elinor had never been a particularly easy child and was very much Daddy's girl, and now blew in and out of Serena's life like a puff of wind on a still day, there for a moment, gone until who knows when.

She'd never had friends really that stayed anything length of time. They were there for a season and gone again. Oxford, Harvard, St Mary's, QMC and then Holby General. She'd found her tribe here on AAU and been shown love and care the likes of which she'd never experienced, particularly after she stepped down from being deputy CEO, a pressure that had been too much to take and that had threatened a slide into depression. She had said to Bernie today about an endless stream of broken people coming through the doors and she hadn't just meant the patients. The staff, all of them flawed in their own way, coming together as a blended family and Serena very much the mum. She loved it, watching how the ones in her charge blossomed when she threw them praise, how they turned to her for advice, comfort, care and also honesty, knowing she would always tell the truth. They trusted her and she in turn nurtured them. Jason had been such a good fit after the early wobbles, he found a girl pal in Morven, big brothers in Raf and Fletch and a mum in her. The best times were when they came together for meals, usually here in her home but sometimes elsewhere or snacks on the ward, pizza after a long day. Food was a gift to Serena and she loved giving it and being appreciated for it.

She dug her apron out of a drawer and chuckled as she always did at the sight of it. Adorned with a picture of her and Jason when they'd baked biscuits together and the red words "Auntie Serena's apron" on it, a birthday gift from her beloved nephew. Pre-heating the oven she set up her cherry-red Kitchenaid and turned it to cream butter and sugar while she sifted flour into another bowl, loving the low hum as the whisk turned in the handled bowl. She'd decided on orange and date cake and she selected spices to match, cinnamon, ground cloves, nutmeg. She chopped fat medjool dates, popping one in her mouth and savouring the dark sweetness as she zested several oranges and juiced them. Adding eggs and ground almonds along with flour, then carefully, little by little adding the juice let down with a little water so the mixture didn't curdle. She greased two tins and divided the mixture evenly between them, smoothing it round with a spatula. Satisfied she popped them in the oven and then began to wash up the utensils she had used.

Her thoughts turned to Bernie as the kitchen began to grow warmer and the fragrance of citrus and warm spices filled the air. Bernie who had shown Serena affection and attention from their first meeting over her stupid car. The coffee and pastries in the mornings, sandwiches at lunch, Shiraz at Albies and the odd dinner here and there. The welcome back care package she had put together after her suspension. The reassuring looks and words when she was frazzled, the quiet confidence boosting, especially in theatre, the unofficial debriefing they did at the end of long days or when
their paths hadn't crossed where Bernie always agreed with Serena's judgment and handling of people and situation.

The arm round her in the peace garden after Arthur's death. The quiet comfort where she'd finally felt free to drop her guard and cry. The taking on some of the pressure of coping with Jason that Bernie had just quietly and unassumingly taken him under her wing. The arm wrestle that she'd clearly thrown for no other reason than to make Serena happy, as evidenced by her strength later that day in theatre with the tap, that was love. Love was kind, brave, gentle, easy and Bernie couldn't really see how well she had loved Serena these past months. All she saw was the hard times, the difficult bits, because she didn't yet believe in the possibility of a happy ending, how could she with all she had been through? Serena did though and her happy ending was would continue to be the big macho army medic who'd stolen her heart.

The timer rang on the oven and she donned red and white stripy oven gloves to transfer the cake to a wire rack to cool, leaving the tins to soak for a while in the sink. She dusted the top of the cake with icing sugar and edible silver glitter and sighed with pleasure at her creation for the woman she loved.

The doorbell rang and puzzled, she went to answer it.
Chapter 80 - Images

Chapter 80.

They both froze when she opened the door. Serena lost the plot for a second as she took in the sight of a heavy-breathing Bernie, flushed a rosy-cheeked red, panting and soaked in sweat, blond curls plastered to her head. An image of her looking like that, naked in bed, popped into her mind and she was robbed of the power of speech and she felt certain parts of her own body prepare themselves in anticipation.

Bernie, breathing hard and blinking sweat out of her eyes, took in the sight presented back to her. A smudge of what looked like flour on Serena's cheek, eyes shining and beautiful full lips slightly parted and looking exceptionally kissable, the tiny nibble of her lower lip, and then Bernie looked down further and creased up laughing.

"That apron" she gasped out as tears of mirth sprang up in her eyes, "is fabulous. I have to have a picture" and she pulled her phone out of her zip pocket on her leggings and snapped a photo before Serena could stop her. "That's so going to be my new background" laughed Bernie and dissolved into helpless giggles.

Serena huffed slightly at being made fun of. "Why are you ringing the bloody bell?" she threw at Bernie who stopped laughing at looked at her quizzically.

"Errrr, politeness?"

"You can just walk in Bernie, it is allowed," she snapped and she withdrew into the hallway, trying to collect herself from extreme arousal and humiliation at the same time. After half a beat Bernie quickly followed her in and shut the door behind her, following Serena down to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry Serena. I didn't mean to tease so it would hurt you" she stammered out. "Here, delete it from my phone so you know it's gone," she passed over her phone and another thought hit her. "I wouldn't ever have shown anyone without your permission" and watched in horror as tears welled up in the brunette and spilled down her cheeks. "Serena, please!" she said desperately, going over and putting her hands on the shoulders of the vascular surgeon. "I'm sorry."

Serena stayed at arms length for a moment and then, still crying hard, moved into Bernie's strong arms, to be held as she cried it out. Bernie held her tight and sat them on a kitchen chair, Serena on Bernie's lap with one leg either side of the army medic, tucked into her chest as the tears continued unabated. Bernie began to feel frantic, what on earth had triggered this? Serena was normally the first to tease right back but clearly something was not right. She put her hands on either side of Serena's face, pulling her away slightly and kissed the corners of her eyes and the tear tracks down her face, smoothing her thumbs over the lines on her forehead as she whispered "love you" over and over into her ear.

Serena took some big gulping breaths, trying to speak but her throat will still closed with tears and emotion. She settled back into Bernie's chest and let herself be rocked by the trauma surgeon, listening to the chorus of love being repeated in her ears. She tried to get control, pushed away from Bernie a little and felt her face wiped gently with a tissue. She began to wring her hands between them until they were covered by Bernie's calloused ones. She forced herself to make eye contact and saw confusion and questions in the hazelnut eyes looking back at her, searching her eyes and her face for clues to this meltdown.

"He did" she managed to get out and the tears started again. She got off Bernie's lap and started to pace round the kitchen, back and forth, while the blonde remained rooted to the chair. "Edward." She saw the shadow pass across Bernie's face and carried on.

"He took photos of me and passed them round. Some just silly, of me in stupid jumpers or making
faces at Elinor. But some I didn't know about, of of...me naked or in my underwear. He said that he needed them as insurance in case I ever tried to leave. When I did, he passed them round his mates and some ended up on the Internet. It's why I don't have social media. I couldn't bear to see them.”

She had to stop them, sobbing so hard she felt nauseous. She closed her eyes feeling so ashamed. "Serena, come here?"
She shook her head, and kept her eyes closed. "Serena, darling, please come here to me"
Her eyes shot open at the term of endearment and she searched Bernie's face, looking to see if she was about to be mocked. All she saw was love, and when Bernie opened her arms she ran, actually ran to her and threw herself on Bernie's neck, big noisy sobs breaking out again.

Bernie was furious, with Edward and with herself, but she pushed it away, nothing being more important than offering Serena comfort right now. She caressed her hair and crooned words of love and appreciation over her until the crying calmed a little. "I'm sorry Serena" "Not your fault" "No, but I shouldn't have teased." Serena sat up at that. "I want you to, I like it when you tease me. You didn't know, how could you?"
Bernie nodded at that and they wrapped around each other, just cuddling close, for minutes in silence.

"Okay?" "Okay." "What smells amazing?" "I baked you a cake" "God you are my perfect woman."

Bernie leaned down and captured Serena's mouth in a kiss, gentle at first and then they opened their mouths, and Bernie tasted the intense, dark sweetness of the date that Serena had eaten earlier and chased the taste round her mouth until their heads were spinning. They broke apart and rested their foreheads together.

"You need a shower Major then you can have a piece. Of cake." she added and winked trying to reestablish the banter. Bernie poured and Serena kissed her. "Off you go" and Bernie did as she was told, leaving the kitchen, not seeing Serena slump at the table and put her head in her hands.
Chapter 81 - Role Reversal

Chapter 81

She came straight back into the kitchen, with that sinking feeling that she'd missed something, the butterflies in the pit of her stomach, the instinct she'd learned to trust the hard way, kicking in, telling her, no demanding of her, that she go back into Serena. Held her breath as she saw the woman she loved slumped over the table with her head in her hands. "Bugger" she thought. "Shouldn't have left her." She moved quietly across the kitchen, the brunette giving no sign that she'd heard her return and her heart broke a little as she listened to the muffled sobs as the vascular surgeon cried into her own arms.

She cleared her throat gently to clue Serena into her presence and knelt down behind her, wrapping her arms round the sobbing woman's waist, laying her cheek against her back. That made the brunette cry all the harder but she just knelt there, keeping her close, trying to communicate love and warmth through her hug. Eventually Serena sat up and turned round, pulling Bernie up to sit on her lap in a reversal of their embrace of earlier and Bernie tried to sit lightly and just surround her in her arms, waiting for the tide to stop and for her breathing to slow.

Bernie looked deep into Serena's wet eyes, holding her chin softly to keep her there.
"What aren't you telling me?" She murmured and then "it's okay, it's okay" as her beautiful girl broke down again. She racked her brain, what else could it be? Who might have...OH.
"Serena. Look at me"
Serena shook her head and closed her eyes, chest heaving.
"Are you scared that he might show them to me?"
Serena nodded her head and then exploded into tears. Bernie's heart melted and she started to kiss the soft brown hair on the top of Serena's head.
"Darling Serena, why on Earth are you scared of that?"
"Be, be, because yyy you..."
"Go on."
"Yyou'llthinkI'mdisgustingandyouwon'tlovemeanymore" came out in a rush and then there were no more words, just wracking sobs.

Bernie gaped. What? How even? "You bloody idiot Wolfe" she thought to herself. "Of course she'd think that. You've spent the last few days trying to run from her and you didn't even know about this then." She had to make this right. Now.
"Beautiful, please look at me?"
More head shakes.
"Okay, that's okay. Just listen then."
Serena nodded and tucked herself under Bernie's chin.
"Firstly. I love you. I love you. No idiot man is going to change that. Secondly if Edward and I are ever in the same room, only one of us is coming out intact. Me." Serena shivered at the intent behind the words and Bernie stroked her back.
"Thirdly, I thought you were bloody gorgeous in that apron, in scrubs you so funny things to me and those shirt and vest combinations make me weak at the knees. I want you so much it physically hurts. I want us to take it slow but God if you need me to I'll carry you upstairs right now and show you how much I want you. No photograph could change that. You, the living, breathing, sexy as hell Serena Campbell in the flesh or some photo by a man who never deserved you, ever, what do you think I'll do?"
Serena shook her head, slightly incredulous at the words she was hearing.
"I'll show you, with everything I am and everything I have that I worship your very essence
"You tried to leave before you knew" came the quiet little reply and Bernie kicked herself.
"That was never about me not wanting you. Christ, you kiss me in the cheek and I'm a hot wet mess, the thought of being with you, making love to you. You have no idea how much I want that, want you. Me trying to leave was about trying to protect you from me. That's the only reason."

Bernie felt Serena's cheek grow hot against her chest as she blushed and she stroked her hair again. "I'm old and grey and flabby and wrinkly Bernie" and stiffened as Bernie laughed.
"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen Serena."

Serena looked up sharply at that, met Bernie's eyes and saw only truth and love there.
"I'm sorry"
"What?"
"I'm sorry I lost it over this."

Bernie practically crushed Serena to her chest.
"Don't you dare apologise to me for this. We said, honest. I never want you to hide things from me, and I don't want to hide from you. This is unconventional, scary but never doubt that I love you and I want you."

Serena cuddled back in.
"You still need a shower" she said and Bernie chuckled.
"I do. Come sit with me and talk to me while I do?"

Serena nodded and Bernie carefully got off her lap, threading their fingers together. They shared a gentle kiss and Bernie tugged Serena through the kitchen door and upstairs to the bathroom. She set the shower in Serena's ensuite running and sat the brunette on the closed toilet lid. She fetched the dark green blanket from the bedroom and wrapped the woman in it and without a care, stripped off and got under the spray.

Serena couldn't process that Bernie had just done that. She was too lost in her thoughts about what they'd just shared. She huddled the blanket closer around her and listened to the water running. The sweet smell of apples and mint rose into the air that she recognised as the scent of Bernie's shampoo and she breathed it in deeply, a comforting smell. She thought over what Bernie had said to her, the anger at Edward but the overwhelming love and need for her that the blonde had expressed. "Nobody has ever wanted me like she does" Serena thought to herself. She'd called her beautiful, twice, said how Serena's presence and touches and kisses made her feel, and suddenly the brunette felt a great rush of love, at the amount of words Bernie had said and what she'd done, how open she'd been about her feelings. She had to say something to her.

"Bernie?"
"Yes love?"
"Love you."
"Love you more"
"Love you most"
"Nuh uh."

And with that the fear broke and the love took over. It was okay. She was loved, Bernie was here and all was right again for now, in their little world of each other". 
Chapter 82.

Bernie scrubbed viciously at her scalp as she thought dark thoughts about Edward. How dare he. How DARE he do that to her Serena, to the sweetest, kindest, most amazing woman in the world. He didn't really need his testicles anymore, she reasoned. He could still work if she kneecapped him as a special Bernie bonus. She soaped her body up, cleaning the sweat from her run and rinsed, the bubbles falling away and running down the drain, taking some of the raw anger with it, though she was deadly serious about causing Edward pain. She didn't like that side of herself, the one willing to hurt but no one hurt the people she loved. No one. She flicked off the water and squeezed the excess from her blonde curly hair before opening the shower door.

Serena opened her eyes and gasped before she could stop herself at the sight of naked Bernie in front of her, who had tilted her head and was giving her a gentle smile and she flushed a deep, dark red and closed her eyes again, not wanting to pry, but that image being burned on her retinas. It was the first time she'd seen Bernie undressed without trying to be her caretaker or to check her scars and a wave of pleasure washed over her as she wriggled on the toilet seat.

"Serena" came the soft, low tones of the woman causing the feelings.
"Yes Bernie?" she stammered out, eyes still screwed shut.
"You can look. It's okay"

She didn't think it was possible to get any redder but she felt the heat rise again in her face and across her chest. She took a minute to breathe and slowly opened her eyes, and fixed them on Bernie's throat. Her beautiful neck, the silvery scar that bisects it. The hollow at the base that Serena longs to kiss. She moves her eyes up to Bernie's mouth and longs for kisses, finally making eye contact and seeing Bernie's expressive eyes, with love and kindness but also a heat, a desire that is reserved just for Serena. She smiles and nods and Serena lowers her eyes, taking in, drinking in the sight of taught muscles and perfect skin, even with the scars, Serena sees absolute perfection. Then her beautiful breasts, round globes of creamy perfection, with rapidly hardening nipples and Serena tunes out of the world, wanting to know how they'll feel in her fingers and in her mouth.

She can't look anymore as the desire fills her so completely and she closed her eyes again and shudders, just a little, hearing a soft, low chuckle from the army medic and a rustling as she wraps a towel around her body and Serena remembers to exhale, her breath coming in a noisy rush. Inhaltes again quickly as Bernie presses her lips to Serena's in a sensual kiss, not urgent but full of the beauty of the perfect moment they've just shared.

She moves out of the ensuite and stays in her bedroom as Bernie gathers her running clothes and goes to her own room to dress. Fiddles with the edge of the covers, shuffles through the items on the dressing table, not really seeing or thinking, marking time until the blonde slips her head back round the door and comes into the room and wraps her arms around the brunette for a long and close hug. Shivers as kisses are pressed to her temples and the connection between their two bodies as they hug.

"I believe it was stated that I could have a piece after my shower" Bernie intones softly and giggles as Serena's mouth drops open. "Of cake" she adds and falls into giggles, the sound of which make Serena's heart feel lighter than it has in months, maybe years.

"Come on then Major" she says and steals a quick kiss before leading them back to the stairs and down into the kitchen.

Bernie's stomach loudly rumbles at the sight and smell the cake, making Serena turn round and
look at her with one eyebrow raised causing Bernie to shrug and spread her hands. The brunette cuts a generous slice for the trauma surgeon and transfers it to a blue and white cake plate and passes it over with a little cake fork with a white enamelled handle. This forces Bernie to more delicate than she really wants to be but she dutifully cuts off a small piece and pops it in her mouth. Closed her eyes and moans at the sweetness and orange tang. Opens her eyes to Serena's satisfied smiles.
"Oh my word. Marry me"
They both stare for a half second before collapsing in laughter.
"It's seriously that good Serena." and watches as her girl flushes slightly and blossoms under the praise.
They both eat the cake and hold hands and Bernie sighs with pleasure at the joy of it.
"Film?" Serena suggests and Bernie acquiesces immediately.
Serena picks out one of her favourites, The Devil Wears Prada and they nestle into the sofa and each other to watch. Stealing kisses and caresses until Bernie lays backs against the arm of the plush sofa, drawing Serena with her who settles, practically lying on top of the blonde. They pull the blanket of blues over them and watch, encased in each other's arms. No place they'd rather be.
Chapter 83 - Meryl

Chapter Notes

Filler. Writer block with this a bit.

Chapter 83

They watched the film wrapped up in each other. Feeling the laughs that punctuated the moments of comedy as their bellies were pressed together. It felt so right to lie together like this, like the two right pieces of the jigsaw had finally come together to make the picture whole. Nothing missing, no gaps, edges all filled in. Maybe it didn't look like the picture on the box that either of them had thought would be there but they found that it didn't really matter. Their hearts were entwined now and it meant everything to them both.

Serena spoke, "God I fancy Meryl Streep. Why have I never seen that before?"
Bernie inhaled, momentarily stunned and then burst out laughing. "What?" the brunette said, half jokingly but also half grumpily.
"You've been with a woman for all of 5 minutes and now you're telling me I have competition?" sniggered Bernie.
"Well, if Meryl were actually here.." snarked Serena and winked at Bernie who pulled her into a hot kiss.
"She wouldn't get chance, not with my woman" said Bernie, in a jokey tone but deadly serious at the same time.
"I am, you know" said Serena in a suspiciously watery tone, "yours."
Bernie felt tears go down her face as she hugged the precious woman in front of her close.
"Good. I'm yours too" she returned, closed her eyes and felt Serena kiss the tears from her face.

They snuggled down again, laughing at the ridiculous errands Miranda sent Andy on, but both acutely aware of being pressed against each other and having to concentrate slightly harder than normal. Bernie flushed as Serena reached up to very gently stroke her face as the film credits rolled up, neither one wanting to move. She looked down into the wide, expressive eyes looking up at her from where Serena was nestled in her chest and sighed with pleasure.
"I never thought I'd get to do this with you"
"Cuddle?"
"All of this, cook, eat, cuddle, watch films, talk, kiss, everything."
Serena laid her hand on Bernie's breastbone and rested her chin on it. The blonde could almost see the cogs turning.
"Are you, well, glad?"
Bernie half sat up, pulling Serena with her and took her face in her hands,
"This, no, you, are everything I've ever wanted" and leaned down to kiss her mouth so gently it was barely there. Serena made a note of happiness as they settles into each other again, content to just lie. Bernie was in raptures at having Serena's weight pressed against her, it felt safe and cosy and she'd never felt more loved or trusted in her life.

The shadows gathered in the corners of her mind. Not allowed to be this happy. It will all go wrong. Nothing good happens to you. You'll fuck it up. She tried so hard to push the fears away but she knew she hadn't succeeded when Serena suddenly sat up and looked straight at her.
"What's wrong?"
"N, nothing"
"That Major Wolfe, is a lie. You've gone all tense and your skin is icy and sweaty at the same time. I don't want you to lie to me when there is something wrong. I'm not a child." Serena hauled herself up and off the sofa, with a disappointed look on her face. "A lie." she hissed at Bernie and went out into the hallway and through the kitchen door, leaving a reeling Bernie all alone in the lounge.

Would she ever learn that Serena could see through the mask and the walls she put round herself? Thought back to the time with Cameron and trying to keep the truth from Serena then, when it would have been so much better to just be honest with her. How much heartache she could have saved them both, even in these last few days if she had just admitted to fear instead of trying to run from it. Suddenly she was hearing the Padre in her head from her last tour. He'd spoken in one of their Sunday services held on base about God not giving a spirit of fear. She wasn't sure where she stood on belief in God but that had stayed with her, that fear wasn't given. It was a learned response in her, she knew that and there had been so much of it in her life, that ignoring it, denying it became the norm, fear is for the weak was the message engrained by the army and was something she took to heart.

She got up off the sofa and took a deep breath, ready to go to the kitchen when the front door opened and closed again.
"Auntie Serena?"
"In the kitchen Jason" came the reply and Bernie cursed, hearing the soft padding of Jason's feet going to her, before they'd had chance to talk.
"AUNTIE SERENA WHY ARE YOU CRYING?"
Chapter 84.

Bernie didn't want to hear the answer that Serena gave Jason so she bolted upstairs and into Serena's room, kicking the door shut behind her. Breathing wildly she sat on the edge of the bed and held her face in her hands. Fuck. Why had she lied? Again? Why could she not get it through her thick skull that Serena neither wanted nor needed her protection, not from Bernie and not from the truth. Two fat tears squeezed out from under her eyelids. "Told you so" whispered her mind wickedly and she grabbed Serena's pillow and hugged it to her, inhaling the scent of Serena, comforting and calming. She got off the bed, taking the pillow and slipped out of the room and into her own. She sat in the centre of the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

Downstairs Serena collected herself at Jason's words. He'd come right over to her and she grasped his arm, feeling the softness of his downy blue jacket.
"It's okay Jason, I'm alright."
"Tears mean you are sad"
"I am sad but it's okay to be sad my love."
"What happened to make you sad?"

Serena thought about this for a moment. She was always honest with Jason, but sometimes she realised suddenly, she lied by omission and that thought rocked her. Was that any better than Bernie choosing to say she was fine instead of saying what was actually going on. Another wave of tears rose and she forced them down.
"Jason, Bernie and I had a small fight. That's all."
"Don't you love each other anymore?" he asked, distress written all over his face.
"Of course we do" she said, faintly hoping Bernie was listening, "Nobody gets on all of the time. Sometimes we argue don't we, but we still love each other."

Jason thought about this. She could see the thinking process written over his face.
"When we argue you make me pancakes. You should make Dr Bernie pancakes" he said simply.

Serena smiled and nodded.
"Okay Jason. Are you okay with pancakes for dinner then?"
The young man nodded happily.
"I'll get Dr Bernie" he stated and started for the door.
"Flour?"
"4th cupboard, bottom shelf" and he left the room.

She chuckled. Pancakes then. She plucked a frying pan from the hooks and set it on the stove. Finding the flour exactly where Jason said it was, she set about pulling together a thick batter. It was just an argument, she told herself, all couples have them. A shiver of fear. The same question as always. What if she runs. Serena shook it off and set about finding suitable toppings for pancakes. A longer job than it should have been. Molecular weight of lemon juice?

Bernie heard footsteps on the stairs and knew it was Jason, not Serena by his gait. Going to his room she thought was surprised when he knocked on her door.
"Come in Jason"
He shuffled in and sat straight down on the edge of the bed.
"Did you have a meltdown Dr Bernie? Did you hurt yourself?"
She was slightly taken aback.
"No Jason. Auntie Serena and I had a, a disagreement. I told a lie."
"Why did you lie to Auntie Serena? It's bad to lie."
"It is, I know that now. I told her I was okay when I was scared and that was my lie."
Jason cocked his head and looked directly into her eyes briefly before looking away.
"You're sorry aren't you Dr Bernie."
A statement not a question.
"I really am."
"Auntie Serena is too. She's making you pancakes. We eat pancakes when we've fought and make up"

Bernie cried a little at this and felt Jason grasp at her arm slightly. His hug, and then he tugged her to her feet and let him lead her downstairs. They entered the kitchen and Serena turned to look at them.
"Sorry" they said simultaneously and tentatively smiled at each other.
"Hug each other then" Jason said and he left the kitchen for the TV.
They looked at each other and Serena opened her arms. Bernie practically fell into her.
"I was scared. My head was telling me I was too happy and I'd screw it up and I didn't want to tell you and break the moment and have you be mad at me and and"
"Sshhh" said Serena gently. "I'm sorry I got cross. Please tell me whatever you feel, whenever you feel it. I'm a big girl Bernie. I know you're scared, your body tells me it faster than your mind."
They held each other close, love and forgiveness exchanged in the hug and sweet kisses between them.
"Pancakes Auntie Serena!" came the call from the other room and the two women laughed, kissed again and started to cook, harmony restored.
Chapter 85

They ate their pancakes holding hands, despite Jason reminding them it was an inefficient way to eat food that needed a knife and a fork. They managed, not wanting to relinquish contact. Lemon and sugar for Bernie, maple syrup and banana for Serena and an envious mix of Nutella and whipped cream for Jason who dug in with relish, positively gleeful at getting pancakes without having been involved in the argument that ended in them. He kept making eye contact with Serena and looking away again and eventually the brunette realised he was trying to speak but the filter was getting in the way.

"Jason" she began "are you filtering because Bernie is here?"
The young man nodded, mouth full.
"How about we extend the rule to Bernie - that here, at home, you don't need to filter in front of her. Bernie is that okay with you?"
The blonde nodded immediately.
"Jason, I'd like it if you could trust me enough to do that" she said simply.

They watched Jason process this as he continued to eat his pancakes. Not rushing him just watching, still hand in hand. Finally he spoke.
"Auntie Serena, I need some reassurance."
"Go on love"
"If you and Dr Bernie stop loving each other does that mean I won't see her anymore?"
The two women looked at each hurriedly, having a conversation by eye alone.
Bernie spoke first.
"Jason I know you asked the question to Auntie Serena but can I answer?"
"Yes Dr Bernie that is acceptable to me"
"I love your Auntie Serena. More than I've ever loved anyone besides my own kids. And I love you. I'll always want to be in your life. If you'll have me."
Serena tested up at those words as she watched Jason process.
"Auntie Serena this one is for you."
"Okay"
"If you don't love Dr Bernie anymore would me seeing her make you sad?"
Serena put her fork on the table and squeezed Bernie's hand.
"Honestly Jason, it might do. Because I can't imagine how not loving Bernie would feel. But I will never stop you seeing her love. I promise that right here, right now."
"Okay. I'm going to watch TV. Are you coming?" Jason said, getting up and putting his plate and cutlery in the dishwasher.
"I think we might go upstairs to talk if that's okay with you?"
"Of course. Goodnight Auntie Serena. Goodnight Dr Bernie."
"Goodnight" they chorused and watched him go out.

They sat holding hands and Bernie stroked the back of Serena's with her other hand. They got up and cleaned up and headed upstairs. They both hesitated at the top and Serena took the lead opening her door, beckoning Bernie through, when the blonde woman squeaked and ran to her own room, making Serena inhale sharply, when Bernie came back, sheepishly bearing a pillow.
"What?"
"I um, borrowed it. Earlier."
"Why?"
"Because it smells of you and I needed to be close.
"Oh Bernie"
"I'm really sorry Serena."
"Go get changed and come back? I want to snuggle you."
Bernie blushed and nodded.

Serena slipped out of her clothes and into her pyjamas. After washing her face and cleaning her teeth she came back into the bedroom and slipped under the covers. Bernie bashfully slipped in, and went straight into the ensuite to clean up and do her own teeth. Coming back out she drew back the covers and got into the bed. Serena drew her over to the middle and Bernie stiffened for a moment and then relaxed, laying her curly head on Serena's shoulder.
"I'm so sorry Serena."
"S'okay"
"No it's not. I don't mean to lie. It's not trying to deceive you, but to protect you."
"I know and I overreacted. I'm sorry. If you need to be close to me then you just have to ask me. I'll always hold you, kiss you, love you. I'm warmer than my pillow"

They stared into each other's eyes and then kissed, softly, slowly, just the whisper of contact between their lips. Serena moved closer and they crushed their lips together in a raw wave of passion. Bernie moaned and Serena licked her bottom lip, before slipping her tongue into Bernie's mouth, swirling around the army medic's tongue, eliciting further moans. Hands came up to tangle in hair, to cup the back of necks, to trace lines on faces, all the time, kissing, deeply, savouring taste and texture of each other's mouth. Serena slipped her leg between Bernie's and they broke apart, panting and staring deeply into each other's eyes.
"Not yet Serena"
"I know. But I want you even so"
"I want you too. Kiss me"
They kissed again, deep and long and then cuddled into each other to fall asleep slightly frustrated but prepared to wait, because of their love for each other.
Chapter 86 - In the still of the night

Chapter 86

The moon hung low in the sky, mostly in shadow from the thick clouds covering it. Frost tendrils had appeared on exposed surfaces and there was no breath of wind. It was trying hard to snow but the conditions were not quite right, the sky felt pregnant with the promise of winter. A cough of a passerby and the clicking of their footsteps faded into the darkness, and the tinny hiss of music coming through headphones as a nephew slept on his back, mouth open and snoring a little.

Suddenly Serena snapped into consciousness, sitting bolt upright trying to figure out what had woken her so abruptly. Another moan and a twitching pair of legs from the bed beside her, a stream of what sounded like Arabic and a sob. Bernie was having a nightmare. She thrashed about again on the bed and then stillled, whimpering like a wounded child. She was reaching out blindly for something unseen and unheard and cried out again. Serena could hear the torment and desperation in the wordless sound. She watched the flickering of Bernie's eyelids in the single shaft of light coming through the curtains. She could see the film of sweat coating her face and the bed was vibrating almost, as the army medic trembled with fear. Serena debated what to do. Should she try to wake Bernie or just let her ride it out.

In the end she didn't get chance to do either as Bernie, still asleep, leapt out of the bed and shot into the corner of the room. Serena turned on the bedside lamp to its lowest setting so she could see the trauma surgeon, who was squat down low and had her arms over her head, trying to protect it from some invisible demon. She flinches as if she has been struck and still all Serena can do is watch, frozen to the bed by her own fear of how not to make it worse. Bernie is still whispering in a language Serena doesn't know, can't interpret. She drops to the floor, belly pressed into the thick pile of the bottle green rug and raises her head. Looking out over landscape for the threat. "Fire at will" she calls, in English, and appears to be behind a rifle of her own, shooting the enemy and rallying her troops. She stills again and Serena thinks maybe she is done and comes across the room to her. She wants desperately to touch Bernie, rub her back, kiss her face and her hair but realised that might be an issue. Kneeling first, Serena lowers herself to lie on her stomach next to Bernie and whispers her name. It seems as though she hears as two dark brown eyes meet her own but there is no flicker of recognition and she's greeted by a series of military commands, to stand by and monitor the movements of the Mujahideen and Serena realises this dream is set somewhere in Afghanistan, and briefly prays that it won't be Kandahar so that Bernie won't have to relive the man after man raping her that she'd experienced there.

She watches still, trying to just be there with Bernie who unexpectedly shouts "INCOMING!" and then throws herself on top of Serena's back, closing her arms over both their heads. All the breath leaves the brunettes body, Bernie had not been very gentle and she blinked at the pain in her diaphragm as she tried to suck in some air. "Bernie" she whispered, wheezing a little. "It's okay, it's me, Serena. You're safe, we're in my bedroom in Holby and it's just a dream. You're okay."

Bernie rolls off of her and to the side, resuming her earlier position of looking through a rifle sight. Serena continues to whisper and Bernie lays her head on the rug and the nightmare appears to be over. The brunette pulls herself sitting and leans back against the bed frame, still a little winded. She needs to pee badly but she forces the feeling away, not prepared to leave her girl alone. Gently she starts to stroke the hair of the other woman, knowing she can't spend the rest of the night on the floor, not with her back. Woozily Bernie starts to come round and half smiles at Serena before realising they are on the floor in the freezing night.
A thousand questions flit across Bernie's face only to be replaced by a look of pure anguish as she realised that they were on the floor because of her. Serena was panting slightly looking back at her, the whites of her eyes shining with fear as she looked back at the Major.
"Goddammit" Bernie exclaimed and bolted for the bathroom, closing the door behind her and then slumping down against it.
"Bernie?"
"Go away"
"Please darling, it's okay"
"It's not Serena. It's all too much."

Serena felt the sadness coming though the door as she stood by it. Poor Bernie, whose mind was a vast chasm of pain.
"It's not too much for me Bernie. I promise."
A sniffle answered her and the vascular surgeons heart clenched.
"Please come out?"
"I can't. I can't face you."
Serena took a deep breath and thought for a minute.
"What of I get back in bed and turn the light off? Would you come out then?"
Silence for a few heart-stopping moments before a muffled "okay" came through the wood.

She crossed the room and got back in bed on her side, tapping off the lamp. Shivering a little she drew the covers up to her waist and lay on her back and resisted the temptation to fly up when the door to the ensuite cracked and a shuffling figure crept over to the bed and sat on the edge, facing away from her.
She reached out and linked their little fingers, closing her eyes and heard a stifled sob before in a rush of curly hair and damp skin Bernie was on her, crying quietly into her neck.
"M'Sorry"
"Don't be. Not for this. Not to me."
She stroked her fingers over the furrowed and flushed forehead, dropping kisses where her fingertips had been, feeling the blonde's breathing even and her fall back to sleep pressed against Serena. The brunette continued to soothe as she felt her own eyelids grow heavy and she tumbled back into sleep once more.
Chapter 87 - Waterworks

Chapter Notes

My heart hurts after that episode. This chapter hasn't helped.

Chapter 87

Only to wake exactly 7 and a half minutes later with a screaming bladder. Oh yes. She'd needed to pee. But now what? How was she going to extricate herself from the bed without waking her love? She tried to ease Bernie from her body but it was like being curled up with a heat-seeking missile. Every time she shuffled away a little the blonde reached out and wrapped her up again, some sleepy sixth sense telling her Serena was missing and to mount a search and rescue mission immediately. In the end Serena made a break for it and pushed Bernie off, slightly harder than she'd intended but it gave her the gap she needed and she flew into the bathroom, not bothering with the light and...well yes, relief. Washing her hands she opened the door and was dazzled by the bright overhead light being on. Momentarily blind she screwed her eyes up and cracked the right one open a little, then the left one and then eyes fully open, her brain needed a moment.

Bernie was sat bolt upright in the bed, awake and wild-eyed, clutching the duvet to her chest in alarm. Serena hurried over and was horrified to see the unshed tears shining back at her.

"Bernie what's wrong?"
"You weren't there!"
"Darling I had to pee."
"I thought, I thought..." Bernie couldn't go on.
"What?"
"That you'd left me!"

Serena tutted at herself inwardly, she should have just woken Bernie instead of trying to leave her to sleep after that nightmare. Bollocks.
"Bernie, I had to pee and you'd just gone back to sleep. I thought I could make it there and back without you realising but my stealth commando ninja skills are a bit rusty" she quipped, trying to inject some humour back into the situation and lift the mood which was all tones of red alert and set phasers to stun. It didn't work.

Bernie began to wring the duvet between her hands with nervous tension. She knew that it was perfectly logical for Serena to go to the bathroom and come back again. She wasn't being clingy. The fear part of her psyche was simply too strong to allow rational thought process and all she could see in her minds eye was Serena leaving her and she began to breathe too quickly. "CUT YOURSELF" screamed her mind. "MAKE THE PAIN STOP!!!" She nodded as she agreed with that course of action and surprised Serena by getting out of bed. "Mars Bar" whispered a small voice in her head but it was simply not loud enough to make its impact known.

Serena followed her out of the bedroom as Bernie slowly shuffled out on the landing and stepped on the creaky floorboard. Jason's light snapped on and she heard his feet hit the floor and the squeak of his bed frame as he got up. The army medic started to head down the stairs as his door opened and his curly bed head appeared.
"Auntie Serena? What's wrong?"
Serena couldn't speak and she watched him observe and conclude as they started down the stairs after the trauma surgeon.
"Is Dr Bernie alright?"
"I don't know" she managed to whisper and then abruptly she realised what was happening.
"Jason! Help me!"
They ran down the stairs and caught up with Bernie just as she got to the entrance of the kitchen.
Serena span her round and recognised the vacant look that meant Bernie was operating somewhere from deep inside herself.
"Jason, I need you to come sit with Bernie okay?"
He nodded, eyes wide as he tried to process what was happening.
Together they walked Bernie into the lounge and sat her on the sofa. Serena wrapped her in the patchwork blanket and bade Jason sit beside her.
"I need you to make sure she stays here Jason. Can you hold her gently if you need to?"
"Yes Auntie Serena, I believe I can."
"Well done Jason. I'll be right back."

She ran into the kitchen and rummaged until she found a bin liner. Started dumping every sharp thing she could find into it, knives, tin opener, food processor blades, scissors, sharps from the first aid kit, her pin cushion and more until she was as certain as she could be that it was safe. Scooping up her car keys she unlocked the front door and the boot and dumped the bag inside, locking it again and then coming back inside. She went back to the kitchen for ice and then through into the lounge once more.

Jason had his arms around Bernie who was sat like a statue.
"Well done my loves. Jason are you okay?"
"Yes Auntie Serena. Shall I go back to bed now?"
"Yes love. Thank you for your help and I'll talk to you in the morning."
He shuffled out and closed the door behind him thoughtfully.
Serena unwrapped Bernie's hands from blanket and forced ice into her right palm, then closed her first for her and squeezed. The shock jolted Bernie back from the recesses of her mind and she looked at Serena desperately.

"It's okay Bernie, it's okay"
The blonde nodded, exhausted by the nights events. She blinked with heavy eyelids and rubbed at her nose with her left hand. Wordlessly Serena pulled her to standing and wrapped her in a long hug before taking them both back up to bed. Jason's light was off and they tip-toed back into Serena's room and shut the door. The brunette got straight into bed and watched Bernie go round to her side and tentatively get in.
"Come here? Please?"
All the right left the blonde and she moved over, laid her head in Serena's chest, over her heart and clutching at her pyjama top like she might never let go, promptly fell asleep again. The vascular surgeon sighed, snapped the light off and tried to follow suit, eventually succumbing to slumber.
Chapter 88 - Steamy Windows

Chapter Notes

I was so heartbroken after last nights episode that I basically have written you some very soft porn without plot.

Never written like this before. I'll be a wreck when they finally make love.

Chapter 88

Somewhere in the background she was vaguely aware of her phone vibrating with a text. She chose not to worry and went back to sleep.

Somewhere a bit closer she heard the closing and opening of doors, the hiss of water running and the smell of porridge oats. She chose not to worry and went back to sleep.

Her body tensed and relaxed as she heard the front door open and shut and the key turn in the lock. She's heard Jason whistling the theme tune to Worlds Strongest Man. She chose to smile and drift off again.

Finally when her brain decides she's had enough sleep she feels oddly warm and feels good. Bernie is snuggled into her side and Serena covers the blonde's hand with her own and gently kisses a trail down her temple, across her cheekbone and her throat. Bernie cracks an eye and then stretches, making Serena stiffen. She's heard Jason whistling the theme tune to Worlds Strongest Man. She chose to smile and drift off again.

Bernie's cheeks flame hotter than either of them have ever seen anyone blush and a babble of apologies try to come but they won't. Mainly because Serena is kissing Bernie and Bernie can't do anything but kiss back. Serena won't let her remove her hand and so boldly, she squeezes ever so gently and hears Serena's breath catch in her throat.

Bernie takes a moment. Serena is showing no sign of wanting her to stop. Very carefully she moved closer and pressed her lips to the back of Serena's hand covering hers and then as she kissed the creamy skin she squeezed again and a tiny moan escaped the brunette. She felt Serena's nipple harden in her palm and she bunched her fingertips around it to pull at it slightly, making it bigger and harder. Serena's eyes are wide and dark and she removes her hand from on top of Bernie's, grabs at the back of Bernie's head to pull her in for a fierce and bruising kiss, full of passion and want. Their tongues swirl around each other, tasting, duelling, exploring and they break apart, panting and desperately dragging in oxygen in the thick heat surrounding them.

Bernie circles around Serena's taught nipple with the fingertip of her index finger through Serena's pyjama top and triggers the sweetest moan from her girl that she's ever heard in her life. Serena arches off the bed into the touch and groans as Bernie pulls at it again, the sensations coursing through her unlike anything she has ever felt as those clever surgeons fingers tease and touch and torture and tempt. She hears herself practically growl and imagines what it would feel like to have her nipple in Bernie's mouth. She wants to touch Bernie and pushes her back slightly, asking the question with her eyes. Bernie nods and when she faltered slightly, she took Serena's hand and placed it to her own breast, hearing Serena inhale sharply as she felt her for the first time.
Bernie lets a tiny moan escape as she feels her own nipple respond to the touch and smiles fondly at the wonder in Serena's face as she explores this new sensation of touching a woman. The amazement in her eyes as she watches and feels Bernie's nipple grow big and hard under her vest. The delight in the softness and sensuality of the reality of touching another woman, so different to anything she'd ever experienced and Bernie in that moment sees into forever with this beautiful woman that she adores. They touch each other, speeds and pressures and textures varying, gasps and moans escaping as the fire inside them and between them burns all the hotter and brighter, stoked by their love and touches, skin igniting where it meets skin.

Their eyes lift and meet and Serena fills up with tears at the beauty and perfection of it all. They lift their hands to cup one another's faces and soft gentle kisses are exchanged. Whispers of kisses, like gossamer and silk, speaking of purity and tenderness, receiving love and utter devotion from the other.

"I love you Serena."
"I love you Bernie."

"Serena?"
"Yes darling?"
"We probably should talk."
Chapter 89 - Misunderstanding

Chapter 89.
Bernie wasn’t expecting Serena to sit bolt upright at her statement of needing to talk. She’d half expected a gentle smile and encouragement – after all, verbal expression and the want to do so was hardly a common occurrence from her. This, fear? What was that from? She tried to take Serena’s hands and when they joined she could feel the brunette trembling.

“Serena, sweetheart, why are you scared?” she whispered in disbelief.

Serena shook her head and a single tear spilled over her lower eyelid and down her alabaster cheek. Bernie caught it in her fingers and drew it to her mouth, kissing the tear from her hand.

“Did, did…”

“It’s ok, take your time”

“I can’t say it”

Bernie thought for a minute. How did Serena encourage her to talk? She shuffled nearer to her and kissed her oh-so-gently on the forehead, feeling a puff of breath leave the vascular surgeon.

“You can say anything to me. Anything”

Serena swallowed heavily and looked at Bernie’s throat, trying to summon some courage.

“Did I, do it, wrong? Did you not like it?”

Bernie gave her a puzzled look before the penny dropped and her mouth opened in astonishment.

She pulled Serena to her chest and cradled her.

“God Serena. I LOVED it. It felt incredible. You make me feel incredible when you touch me.”

She felt Serena sag against her in relief and the drip of tears down into her cleavage. She let her cry a little and then pushed her back so she could look at her.

“Did you like touching me? And me touching you?”

Serena nodded fervently. “I’ve never felt anything like that. I feel loved and wanted. But I want to do it right. I want you to like it.”

“I do like it. I can’t wait for you to do it again. I love kissing you and, and, and holding you and you kissing me and holding me and touching me. I want it all Serena, don’t take my not wanting to rush as not wanting you. You’ve never been with a woman and I had the briefest of affairs. We never even slept in a bed together,” said Bernie to a wide-eyed Serena. “I love you, I treasure you. I want to get it right for you.”

Fresh tears came out of Serena as she tried to make sense of it all. “I’ve never loved or been loved like this. It’s incredible but it’s really scary. I am so scared, so very scared of hurting you and losing you.”

“I’m scared too Serena. I can’t lose you. I won’t survive it. Which is why I wanted slow.”

They cuddled together, sat in the middle of the bed, Serena still with her head on Bernie’s chest, their breath and heartbeats totally in synch with each other, relief palpable in the air. Serena spoke up suddenly.

“What did you want to talk about Bernie, before when you said?”

Bernie took another deep breath. She had already talked a lot for her but she knew they still needed to talk some more. Talking was important, not just to Serena, but to any relationship. She needed to work on it with Cameron and Charlotte too.

“I wanted to apologise. For last night. I freaked us all out I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Come on now. No sorry is necessary. I’ll check in on Jason – oh he has gone already. I’ll talk to him later but if he was worried he’d have bust in here earlier,” she smiled.

“You have to be able to go and pee in the night without me having a meltdown though” Bernie whispered softly.

“Yes, but that will come. It’s about trust Bernie. You do trust me, I know you do. But there are parts of your mind still in protect and serve mode. They need more reassurance and I am happy to
give it. I’m sorry I didn’t wake you when I went to pee. I was so busting I couldn’t wait any longer” and they both giggled. “I will know for the immediate future that if I need to get up, especially after you have had a nightmare, that I need to wake you.”

Bernie looked down at Serena, hating that she needed to ask the next question.

“Did I, did I hurt you? When I was asleep?

“You knocked the wind out of me a little when you were saving me from what I think was enemy fire. But that’s all. And its fine Bernie” she said, slightly sternly before Bernie could launch into a million apologies.

“Jason held me.”

Serena smiled and nodded. “He is amazing my nephew.”

“He told me not to be scared, that he was there and that you were coming back soon and you would make it all alright again.”

Both women got a little teary at that. Jason had adapted so well to Bernie’s presence in their lives.

“Serena?”

“Yes love?”

“Can we, can we maybe, if it’s okay with you, get him a thank you present today?”

Serena smiled. “Of course we can. I’d like that.”

The remnants of the tension in the air dissolved as they thought about Jason. Serena suddenly squeezed Bernie really tight in their hug and looked up at her beautiful chocolate eyes.

“You know I love you. You do don’t you?”

Bernie beamed and nodded. “I love you Serena. I know it took me time to say it. I love you.”

They sat for a while longer in each other arms and then discussed getting up. Bernie jumped in the shower as her hair took longer to dry and Serena went and made coffee, both requiring caffeine. She brought it up to the bedroom just as Bernie was towelling off her hair and Serena moved in for a quick kiss before going for her own shower. Bernie finished off and went to make toast, bringing it back up as Serena applied the last of her make-up. They finished off and got ready to leave the house.
Chapter 90 - Presents

Chapter Notes

Filler. Not very happy with this chapter. Sorry.

Chapter 90

They had a lovely morning, shopping, coffee, shopping, lunch, before wandering home hand in
hand, this having been instigated firmly by Bernie, after the last time she'd pulled away from
Serena, well she wasn't going to let that happen again. They'd laughed and teased, swapped stories
and stolen kisses and it felt cosy and comfortable and just somehow right to each woman.

When they got home, removing shoes and coats Serena pounced on Bernie, licked her lower lip
and sucked on it before kissing her, hot and deep. After a few moments Bernie was forced to break
the kiss to consume oxygen having been unprepared for how thoroughly she had been about to be
kissed. Serena chuckled and winked and set off to the kitchen leaving flushed and panting army
medic in her wake who after a few moments gathered her shopping bags and followed.

Serena had her back to Bernie and was measuring coffee into the machine. The blonde quietly put
her bags down and crept over to the brunette who was humming slightly as she scooped dark roast
coffee out of the mason jar with a little metal scoop that went clattering onto the work surface as
Bernie ran her fingertips from the nape of the lovely neck in front of her down the whole length of
Serena's spine and back up again. Serena moaned at the touch and shivered with pleasure as Bernie
wrapped her arms around her from behind and began to kiss her neck, making her knees weak and
her pulse jump. She moaned again when the blonde sucked slightly under her ear and swivelled in
her arms to capture her in a bruising kiss, all heat and passion and want. Bernie stepped back as
Serena broke the kiss this time to pant, winked and gathered her bags to the table.
"I all" she husked and grinned as Serena laughed.

She drew out the presents she'd bought for Jason and a small roll of
Sellotape.
"Can I have some scissors please?" she asked Serena who opened a drawer and balked.
"Um" said the brunette, desperately trying to think of a way out of this.
Bernie looked up. "What's wrong."
"Well" said Serena, "um, last night I may have, did in fact, put all the sharp things away"
"Okay. Where?" asked Bernie.
"In the boot of my car"
"Sorry?"
"In the boot of my car" said Serena sheepishly and began to fiddle with her pendant, not daring to
look at Bernie in case she was angry.

She heard the trauma surgeon get up and closed her eyes, bracing to be shouted at for getting it
wrong. She started to tremble and waited for the abuse to start, about how useless and worthless
she is, can't do anything right can you Serena, fat, talentless, stuck-up, bitch of a wife....a husbands
words. Not Bernie's.
It didn't come. She flinched as a pair of strong arms wrapped around her and felt the other woman
hesitate slightly before soft lips rained kisses to her temples, eyelids and cheeks.
"Thank you" whispered Bernie, "thank you for keeping me safe."
Serena melted into Bernie's arms and they stood for long minutes just holding each other, healing wounds they couldn't express just with the acceptance and love they received from the other.

Serena fetched Bernie some scissors and placed a cup of coffee by her while she wrapped what she'd bought, before moving away to assemble a cottage pie, Jason's favourite dinner after fish and chips. They worked away in amicable silence. Serena popped the dish in the oven and Bernie finished tidying up as Jason came through the door.
"Auntie Serena, Dr Bernie, I'm home"
"In the kitchen Jason" Serena called to him, smiling as he came through and went straight to her, grasped her arm and nodded.
He eyed Bernie slightly warily.
"Are you okay Dr Bernie?"
"Yes, thank you Jason. Thank you for looking after me in the night."
"You're welcome" he said simply and turned to go.
"Wait, Jason I have a couple of gifts for you" she said and the young man turned back around.
"Thank you. But why?"
Bernie eyed Serena before saying "You've been so amazing this last week Jason. You helped me so many times, I wanted to say thank you.
He nodded. "It's what families do Dr Bernie. They take care of each other."
Bernie and Serena both immediately got choked up at that.
"I'm honoured to be be consider family Jason" Bernie stammered as Serena cried quietly behind him.
Jason nodded again and unwrapped his first present, a t shirt with a slogan on it. "Come to the nerd side. We have Pi" with the mathematical symbol on it.
"I love it Bernie thank you. It's a very funny joke. I will wear it to Alan's tomorrow. I'm spending the weekend with him Auntie Serena" he added and Serena squeezed his shoulder in acceptance.

His other gift was a dense book about string theory. He yelped happily and grasped Bernie's arm.
"How did you know?"
"You might have mentioned it once or twice" she winked and Jason smiled.
"Dinner in half an hour exactly" Serena announced as he gathered his gifts and headed off to the lounge.

"You okay?" They asked each other and grinned before holding hands.
"Family" said Bernie. "I like that."
"Me too. I like you a lot." Serena flirted a little, happy that everything felt so right.
"Kiss me?"
Serena needed no further invitation and leaned across to kiss Bernie, soft, inviting, loving before going to check the cottage pie.

"So Ms Campbell. Tomorrow's Saturday"
"Yes" said Serena, half in the oven, poking the pie to see if was hot.
Bernie smiled and dropped her voice to a lower tone.
"I believe I was asked out on a date by a hot brunette doctor."
Chapter 91 - Doctor, Doctor

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who has defended this story, here and elsewhere. I guess if people think it's dragging they don't have to read it. I know this is fiction but it's also part of me and my heart which is why I want to get it right. Every single comment means something to me. My regular reviewers - thank you. I feel upheld by you all and anyone who has commented even just once or left Kudos, thank you. It's my first ever writing and I have no beta. I know I've made mistakes but I'm doing my best to write this in a real way. It is less frenetic now than during the envelope phase but it was always going to be. I hope that the majority of you reading like where it has gone. I hope you enjoy this chapter and where it will go on to after this. Sian x

Chapter 91

Serena's eyes went wide in mock horror as she teased Bernie a little. "Oh yes, who's that then? Is that payback for my Meryl crush?"

Bernie giggled, a sound Serena decided she would never ever get tired of. "Well it's a rather delectable surgeon if you must know, with rather gorgeous hazel eyes"

"Sounds hot" smirked Serena, enjoying the flirty banter. "Smoking" agreed Bernie and dived across the room, pushing Serena up against the wall and kissing her neck. The brunette moaned and bit her lip, trying to remember to be quiet. "Bernie! Jason..."

"Mmmm" said Bernie, licking a line up to Serena's earlobe, before flicking it with the tip of her tongue. Hearing the moan again she smiled and moved away to let Serena collect herself, as they both heard Jason turn off the television and knowing he would be coming in shortly. Serena pressed a hand to her chest and tried to catch her breath as Bernie flipped her hair and sat back at the table.

Shaking her head, Serena got it together and started to get the pie out of the oven. Jason came in and smiled. "Bernie will you help me set the table please" he said.

Bernie just looked at him. "Is something wrong?"

"No Jason, I've just noticed the last two times you've said my name you haven't called me Dr Bernie, just Bernie. Why?"

Serena looked over, waiting for the answer. She hasn't picked up on the change like the blonde had.

Jason cleared his throats and looked directly at the army medic. "Well, you got me presents and you live here and we eat dinner and we've held each other in our meltdowns and we're family. I did think about Auntie Bernie but decided that might be too much. So I decided to just say Bernie for now." Having finished his answer he turned to get cutlery out but couldn't find any. Serena told him to go fetch the bag out of the car and he went off with the keys, not questioning for once why all the silverware was in his Aunt's car. Serena turned to look at Bernie who has frozen.

"Okay love?"

"Auntie Bernie?"

Serena tried to ignore the prickle of fear that ran over her at the question.
"I think he sees you as family, no I know he does, and he's trying to make sense of where you fit. It's better than Uncle Bernie" she joked and winced at herself at the attempt at humour. "I, I..I need a minute" the blonde choked out and Serena's fear came back in the worst way as she watched her girlfriend practically run from the room and heard the lock on the bathroom adjoining shoved across.

Jason came back in and placed the bag on the floor. Serena retrieved what they needed and then shoved the rest of the bag in the big cupboard with the hoover and the ironing board, out of the way. She passed them to Jason and began to serve the meal as Jason filled water glasses, having established that Serena didn't want wine just now. She brought the plates to the table just as the bathroom door opened and a red-eyed Bernie shuffled out and sat at her place. They started to eat and Jason filled them in on a funny story about a patient and Mr Levy's shirt from his work day. Serena felt like her throats was closed but forced herself to take small mouthfuls when she felt a hand tap her leg. Switching her fork to her other hand, she reached down and held the proffered trauma surgeons hand which was trembling slightly. They kept eating, hand in hand.

Finishing the tasty meal, Jason stacked the dishwasher and Serena wiped the table and Bernie stacked the placemats of cool grey slate in the centre of the table. "Go through Jason, Bernie and I will be in in a few moments" Serena said and they watched him leave the room. Serena turned to Bernie to see the tears welling up again. They say back down and Serena took both of the Major's hands in hers. "Try to tell me Bernie."
Bernie sniffled and cast her eyes down. "It made me miss Cameron and Charlotte" she said and tears fell down her cheeks. Serena leaned over and kissed her clammy forehead. "You and Jason" Bernie continued, "are so accepting, so loving. I've never felt like this, so, well, um, home."
"You are home. You are home here and you are home to me" softly said Serena and watched as the woman she said the words to became visibly emotional once more. "I love you Serena. I love Jason. I just wish..." "You wish your kids were here too." Bernie nodded. "Sorry" "Don't be" said Serena gently. "Of course you miss them. It'll happen. It's already happening with Cameron. Charlotte will come round."
Bernie put her head down on the table and felt the wood against her forehead. "They're welcome here anytime" said Serena which made Bernie sit up again and search Serena's eyes, seeing only truth in them. "Thank you" she said hoarsely, throat thick from crying. "I love you" "Love you too" said Serena. "Come here."
She opened her arms and they exchanged a long hug, tightly held and comforting. "Okay?"
"Okay."
"Come on then. I believe you have a quiz show to beat me at." teased Serena and stood up, offering her hand. Bernie took it and they walked into the lounge where they sat together on the sofa across from Jason. The evening passed in a flurry of geography and literature and a documentary about penguins before Jason wished them goodnight and they all headed up to bed.
Chapter 92.

Serena swam into consciousness and stole a look at her phone. 6am. Bliss, she didn't have to get up quite yet, and there was a warm, faintly snoring army medic to snuggle back into. Bernie was laid on her back but with her face towards the brunette. Her blonde curls were fanned out on the pillow in a golden halo and she'd kicked the covers down to mid thigh. Her pyjama vest had ridden up slightly to expose her toned stomach and Serena sighed with pleasure as she cuddled back into Bernie's side. With her left hand she began to explore the pale skin, the odd freckle here, a thin stretch mark there, the only reminder that the blonde had actually given birth twice. The contrast between softest skin and firmest muscles thrilled the vascular surgeon. She nudged the vest slightly higher and began to trace lazy circles with her finger tips around Bernie's navel. She smiled when an eye cracked open to look at her, closed again and then a smile spread across the face the eye belonged to.

"Morning Ms Campbell"
"Morning Ms Wolfe"
"Enjoying yourself?"
"Mmmm" said Serena wickedly and kissed the corner of Bernie's eyelid.

Bernie's hand went round Serena and delved under her top to run up and down her spine, endlessly fascinated by the length and the moan it elicited. Serena rolled closer and delivered a proper kiss to Bernie's mouth before lying back against her, gathered in her arms.

"Tell me about our date then?" said Bernie, "am I wearing the dress?"
"You are" said Serena smiling broadly and laughing inwardly at her own reaction to the thought of Bernie in the beautiful garment.
"Where are we going?"
"Well" said Serena, thinking on her feet, "there will be food and then the second part combines one of my favourite things with one of yours. I'm not saying any more."
Bernie racked her brain. Shiraz was the obvious choice for Serena but what did she like that could be combined with it? Whisky? Running? DIY? She was stumped.
"Can't I get a little clue?" she wheedled, turning the full cute mode on. "Pleeeeeeaseee?!
Serena laughed. "No! It's a surprise Bernie."
Bernie pretend to huff and closed her eyes but had to laugh when Serena kissed her face and hopped out of bed. "I'm going to make coffee." she announced and slipped out of the room.

Bernie got up and used the bathroom before tugging on a jumper over her pyjamas. She padded softly downstairs and into the kitchen. Serena was sat at the table, with the smell of coffee brewing filling the air. She was sat with her back to the door, studying something on her iPad intently. Bernie tip-toed up behind her and kissed her neck making Serena squeal and leap in the air, clutching her iPad to her chest so that Bernie couldn't see the screen.
"Don't do that!" She hissed at Bernie, not unkindly. "You scared me"
"Clearly" said Bernie, not at all bothered. "What were you looking at?"
Serena flushed a violent shade of red, "n..nothing" she stammered out and then froze as Bernie's face changed.
"You chewed me out for lying yesterday" said the army medic quietly.
Serena looked at her in horror. It was true she had. Bernie was stood before her with her hands on her hips, staring at her through her fringe. There was no anger in her face or in her words, but the quiet disappointment was worse.
"Please don't make me tell you" begged Serena. "I can't"
Bernie nodded thoughtfully. "I thought we could tell each other anything" she mused. She wasn't
tying to pry but Serena had made it so obvious she was hiding something. The brunette looked around wildly but no help was forthcoming. "It's, well, um. Oh God Bernie, please."
"You don't have to tell me" the blonde said almost sub-vocally it was so quiet and she sat at the table, rubbing the back of her neck.
Serena groaned audibly, making Bernie look up. "It's about well, maybe part 3."
Bernie just looked blankly back at her and Serena offered a prayer and a curse simultaneously to the heavens and handed Bernie the iPad. "3323" she offered as the pass code.
Bernie met her eyes, trying to read them but Serena closed them and walked over to the sink, to stare out the window. The blonde looked down at the iPad and tapped the code in.

She looked at the screen and her eyes went wide. She quickly flicked and laid the iPad on the the table. "Serena"
No answer.
"Why are you googling this?"
The brunettes shoulders sagged and without turning round she answered. "I don't know what to do and I don't want to be a disappointment."
"I'm not having that" Bernie said and went over to Serena, wrapping her tight in her arms from behind.
"You could never ever be a disappointment to me Serena Campbell. Not anywhere."
Serena span in her arms and searched Bernie's face who smiled encouragingly. "Whatever you do or don't do will be perfect because it's you and me and that's it. Just our love. And I want to say right now, I have no expectations that after our date that we have to have sex" she said, not quite knowing where the bravery for all these words were coming from. "There is no rush."
"But I want to" whispered Serena, mortified at this conversation having been triggered by her googling of "how to have lesbian sex."
Bernie smiled and kissed her gently. "So do I Serena. But let's not pressure ourselves okay? Let's have this amazing date you've planned for us and then just see. Is that okay?"
Serena nodded in relief and leaned her forehead on Bernies. "Right" said Bernie. "What does a big macho army medic have to do for a bacon sandwich around here?"
Serena giggled, the tension dissolving as she did and spoke up. "If you can find the bread, I'll make you one."
Chapter 93.

The day dragged for them both as prickles of excitement and rushes of adrenaline washed over them. It had all been a bit backwards so far since their first kiss outside theatre. They had had meals and drinks, lots of drinks as friends. Bernie had had dinner at Serena’s with her and Jason and there had been take away as well. But this, an actual proper date, their first. They’d been sharing a bed for a week now, sleeping, kissing, touching, hugging, caressing, but no date. Neither were really sure why they were quite so excited, but it felt like it was cementing them as a real couple. The adrenaline was much more about Serena’s google search results and the potential between them, but also wanting to enjoy each other and time spent away from the ordinary, away from work and home and domestic, just being Bernie and Serena, in love, like any other pair.

Bernie was not good at dating. Lacking in small talk at the best of times and socially really quite awkward, she found it hard to relax. Marcus had been unimaginative in his dating, pizza, cinema, drinks, and then bed. She hadn’t known how to take the initiative to plan dates or be spontaneous. She really wanted to try for Serena but was also glad she wasn’t responsible for their first date, the pressure might have been too much. She had never felt so at ease with anyone as she did with Serena but she still knew that she had to make the effort and do her best to be present and engaging. Even though Serena accepted her as she was, she wanted this date, more than anything, to be a success, for Serena to enjoy it and have the sparkly look in her eyes that came when she was totally and completely happy. Bernie wanted to cause that look over and over again.

Serena was very good at dating. Socially graceful, she enjoyed the planning and execution of dates, which was handy as Edward couldn’t be bothered, unless it involved a quick fuck somewhere in a hotel room with a mistress. Then he could definitely bothered. She wanted to see Bernie in her beautiful dress, in a place where there was no pressure to be anything other than with Serena and to enjoy herself. She’d picked the date carefully, wanting Bernie to enjoy her company but also feel special and spoiled. Serena was a very all-or-nothing personality and for the woman she loved, she would go all out. To be fair, she had, having furiously done some research the other day when the cake had been baking. Made the plans and luxuriated in having a slight secret of how it was going to be so perfect. Worried a little that maybe it was too big for a first date but then what had been conventional so far and Bernie was worth so much more than anything she had ever done before for anyone.

They waved Jason off in his new Pi t-shirt with his backpack full of snacks and pjs and his string theory book. “Poor Alan” murmured Serena in Bernie’s ear. “Hope he likes Physics,” making Bernie giggle and poke the brunette in the ribs. The door closed after he had gone down the path and they exchanged lazy kisses before gravitating back to the sofa. Serena was reading the newspaper and Bernie was fiddling with her phone, trying to pretend she wasn’t really playing Candy Crush, even though they both knew she was addicted, trying to complete a level a day. It helped her to empty her mind of the racing thoughts, having to concentrate. Ella Fitzgerald was singing softly in the background and it was a perfectly lovely day. That they both wanted to be over as quickly as possible.

At half past 12 Bernie made omelettes for them both, and was a suspiciously long time in the kitchen. Serena tried to breathe through it, having returned the sharps to where they were supposed to live from the bag in the cupboard. “Trust” she thought to herself, remaining in the lounge and trying very hard not to pace up and down.

“Serena” called Bernie. “Can you come here a minute?”

She rocketed off the sofa into the kitchen and looked around. The table was set and the omelettes
were under the grill.
“Yes Bernie?” she said, hearing the note of tension in her tone.
“Open a cupboard” the blond replied.
Serena opened the one nearest to her and saw the usual mismatched contents. Nothing looked out of place.
“Look at the back of the door” said Bernie tentatively.
Serena looked, opened a second cupboard, then a third and then flew across the kitchen to kiss Bernie so thoroughly she dropped the spatula she was holding on the floor. On the back of each door was a list of what was in each cupboard and on each shelf.
“I’ve written a master list” said Bernie breathlessly. “It’s here on this cupboard”.
“I bloody love you Berenice Wolfe” said Serena happily. “You’re a marvel.”
Bernie blushed and smiled happily as she picked up the spatula and rinsed it off, flipping omelettes onto plates and placing one in front of Serena. They ate in companionable silence, punctuated by giggles as Serena kept getting up to open cupboard doors and squeaking when she could actually find things. “She’s amazing” thought Serena. “Anyone else would have just re-organised the cupboards but she found a way to work round Jason’s needs.” They rinsed the dishes, stacked the dishwasher and set it to run. They had just sat back down when the doorbell rang. Serena went to answer it. There was an exchange of words and the door shut again.

Serena came back into the lounge in tears. Her arms were full of the most beautiful bouquet of creamy white roses, pale purple freesias and fronds of greenery, emitting a heavenly scent. She placed them on the table and took out the card as Bernie watched, smiling shyly.
“To my darling Serena, on our first date. You have my heart and my love, yesterday, today and forever. Bernie xxx”
“Oh Bernie” Serena said and fell into her arms, kissing every piece of face that she could reach.
“They’re perfect and you’re perfect and I love you so much.”
Bernie hummed happily as she was kissed thoroughly. “You’re welcome. I mean it.”
Serena took the flowers to the kitchen and found a beautiful crystal vase, shimmering with crescents of colour where the light peeped through the facets. She arranged them neatly and carried them back into the lounge, placing them on the coffee table. She sat next to Bernie and they cuddled up together, eventually having a nap. When they woke, it was time to get ready.
Chapter 94 - Bernie

Chapter Notes

A/N - so you noticed the casual CrescentColours cameo in the last chapter! I couldn't resist, it felt like me owning this story.
So the date is almost upon us. I have to be honest, I considered making it angsty. Having a thing happen. But when it has come down to it, I just can't do it. Not to them or my own heart. This date is going to be pure sugary fluff. I reserve the right to ruin future date, but not this one. So if all the fluff is not your thing, see you in a few chapters time xx

Chapter 94.

As Jason had taken all of his stuff with him Bernie was using the shower in the main bathroom. It was a spacious room with a corner bath and a walk in shower. The tiles were tones of grey and the cool whites of the ceramic and stainless steel made it feel like something from an elegant spa. Towels in a range of shades from dove to chalk were in a stack on the side with some warming on the heated towel rail. Serena had lit a candle for her that smelled of white pears and green tea and the fragrance diffused through the space, making Bernie feel calm.

She stood under the waterfall shower head and let the warm water stream over her body. The thrill of getting ready for her date washed over her again and she shook herself as she shampooed her hair, laughing at how she felt like a teenager, at the grand old age of 51, giddy and hormone-filled. She still wasn't sure what Serena had planned, beyond food and that was a great start as far as the army medic was concerned. She ran conditioner through her curls and left it to work as she shaved her legs as carefully as possible, still catching the one place on her knee as always, it just seemed to stick out somehow. It bled a little and washed away in the flow of water. She held the razor in her hand and looked at it, the pull always ever so slightly present, before setting away from her ok the small shelf in the corner, resolute. She soaped her body with a body-wash that she rarely used but like the smell of, a clean, soapy smell, nothing too overpowering. Her nipples hardened slightly as she washed her breasts, her body constantly on edge and seeking the pleasure that Serena had given them so recently and she laughed at herself. She scrubbed her face and rinsed out the conditioner. Letting herself drip dry for a few moments before getting out and rapidly towelling herself off.

She'd already spent longer getting ready than she ever had for a date and she wasn't even half done yet. Blowing out the candle and watching it sputter and then give up she quickly left the bathroom, turning off the light and going to her room - one she had yet to sleep in or spend any real time in but that felt like hers nonetheless.

She sat on the edge of the bed and fiddled absent-mindlessly with the edge of pretty cushion that was at the head of the bed, a pale pink silky cover, with textures of thread and fabrics running over the surface. She regarded the dress that was hanging on the outside of the wardrobe, feeling faintly thankful about not having to agonise over what to wear. The scattering of the crystals twinkled in the light from overhead and the midnight blue gleamed. She had simple nude kitten heel and a matching clutch to go with it, the result of a whole morning shopping some time ago and a fitted velvet jacket that went over the top to keep her warm.
She towelled her hair dry and then sat in front of the dresser helping the curls to form more neatly than normal with her fingers and some mousse. She opted to leave it mostly down but caught one side off her face with an antique silver comb that her grandmother had left to her, in the shape of a dragonfly. Inexpertly she applied some powder to her face with a puff, never seeing the need for foundation. She brushed a pearlescent shadow over her eyelids and lined the outer part of her lower lid with a pale grey pencil. Opening her mouth she mascaraed her eyelashes with two coats of black and applied a clear gloss to her lips, making them look full and luscious and shiny.

She'd selected her nicest suitable underwear, a strapless black bra and matching lacy knickers, as the dress was off the shoulder. She could get away without the bra but it made her feel more secure to wear it. Turning back to the dressing table she spritzed herself with her "going out" perfume, Nina, notes of burnt sugar and exotic flowers filling her senses, she loved how it smelled on her skin and how it lingered.

She sat back on the bed for a few moments, eyeing the dress again and taking some deep breaths. Found herself hoping that Serena would like how she looked and that was new. She didn't really worry about her appearance as long as she was fit and healthy but now finding herself wanting to admired and blushing slightly, bringing a glow to her cheeks under the face powder. The moment had come and she stepped into the dress carefully and drew it up over her hips and adjusted the boning so it sat where it was supposed to. She reached round and awkwardly zipped her self in and smoothed the full skirt so it tumbled to her ankles. She gathered it in her hands and stepped into her shoes, wobbling slightly as she adjusted them. She opened the wardrobe door to review herself in the full length mirror there, tilting her head and critically appraising. "Not too shabby Major" she thought to herself and winked at her own reflection.
She gathered her clutch and her jacket and moved across to the door. Took a couple of deep breaths and stepped out into the hallway.
Chapter 95 - Serena

Chapter 95

Having lit the candle for Bernie and set a stack of towels out for her, Serena kissed the apple of the blonde's cheek and hurried into her own room before she started something she couldn't finish just then. She closed the door and leaned back against, closing her eyes to try and collect herself a little. Her pulse was racing and she wobbled over to the bed and sat for a few moments, grinning to herself at how she felt like a child on Christmas morning, getting the first glimpse of a full stocking at the end of the bed.

She got up and went into the bathroom, set the shower running and lit some candles for her, apricot and honeysuckle scents filling the air as the heat rose from the tiny flickering flames. Looking in the chest underneath the sink she found a scented body wash and popped it into the shower along with a disposable razor that she’d hidden at the bottom a couple of nights after she had cleared the room of sharps for Bernie, making a mental note to return it there after she was finished, sighing a little at the pain she knew was hovering around the army medic but then casting that aside. Tonight was going to be happy, she told herself and the Universe, especially the Universe or it would have to answer to her.

She stripped her clothes off quickly and stepped under the spray, turning the head so it blasted strong jets on to her scalp, feeling like a head massage, before setting it to the rain setting which felt like a summer shower covering her skin. Citrus notes rose from her shampoo as she washed her short hair, recalling the feel of Bernie's fingertips on her head, long fingers running through her locks somehow soothing and passionate wrapped in the same gesture. She rubbed conditioner through her hair and efficiently shaved her legs, no stray nicks for the vascular surgeon. Contemplated shaving...no. She wouldn't, she decided, not needing to try to be something else for her big macho army medic, blushing freely at the thought of Bernie's fingers...there...her mouth. "Pull yourself together Campbell" she said out loud, knowing that this was not going to calm the nerves. She soaped herself with the body wash she had discovered and then rinsed the bubbles from her body and the conditioner from her hair at the same time. A Clinique face cleanser was next, Serena spent money on face care, and then she shut off the water and stepped out into the bathroom, goosebumps arising as the slightly cooler air met her water-heated skin. Wrapped herself in a huge bath sheet and used another towel to remove the excess water from her hair before moving into the bedroom.

She dropped the towel in the laundry basket and picked up the body lotion that matched the wash she’d used in the shower, pumped some into her hands and worked it into her skin, making it soft and supple. Letting it soak in she picked out her underwear and the prickles of anticipation and arousal started again low in her belly. Serena rolled her eyes at herself as she fastened her bra and pulled on the matching knickers, a set that set off her skin tone well. Then the painstaking process of rolling on lace-topped thigh high hold-ups on. She cursed as she put her finger through the second one, but retrieved a spare and rolled it on without any issues.

She sat and applied a light coat of foundation, to even put her complexion, setting it with loose powder from a brush. Her eyes she made sultry and smoky with deep grey eyeshadow and matching pencil, dotting a tiny amount of glitter powder in the corner of her eyes after she’d lined them. Two coats of mascara and her eyes looked huge and inviting.

The dress. Unlike Bernie she'd had several to choose from and had finally settled on the one she drew out of the wardrobe now. A long dress, high collared round her neck but dropping to a deep v
over her cleavage with sleeves that ended between her elbows and her wrists. The bodice was fitted, falling to a sleek fitted skirt with a tantalising split to just above her knee on one side, allowing her to walk. Ostensibly, it was a long black dress, until she moved and then it revealed its magic, shot through with teal and a teal lining to the skirt, it was like the sea in a storm, rolling and slightly wild. She stepped into it and wiggled it on, knowing she would need help to zip the final part. Teal heels and bag, with a black and teal patterned pashmina would finish the dress. She selected a pear-cut diamond drop set in white gold and square diamond earrings to match, carefully pressing a kiss to her pendant from her Father before laying it in her jewellery box for safety. Fastening her necklace and then stepping into her shoes, she regarded herself in the full-length mirror.

She looked good, she knew that, but would Bernie like it? Would she think she overdone? Banishing those thoughts, she spritzed herself with perfume, a Gucci fragrance in pale pink, smelling of Gardenia. She dabbed a little behind her ears too, a trick her mother had always advised when trying to attract boys. She chuckled at that, knowing she was now attracting a girl. Wrapping her pashmina around her arms, she heard Bernie's door open and with a lady look at herself, she opened hers, and stepped out into the hallway.
Chapter 96.

Bernie's mouth fell open and Serena whistled under her breath as they saw each other for the first time in their finery. Neither able to speak they just looked at each other, eyes sweeping over dresses and jewels before locking in on each other's eyes where they got lost for minutes, hunger and heat and desire and love all poured out of them and into each other. The air felt thick and heavy, like trying to breathe in a vacuum. Serena spoke. "Bernie, you look incredible" which caused a heat to rise up the blondes chest and face as she blushed furiously. "I knew that dress would be amazing but it's beyond that seeing it actually on you."

Bernie just continued to blink, robbed of speech by the vision in front of her that was her beautiful woman in the sexiest dress she'd ever seen. Elegant, practically regal, Serena nibbled her lip nervously, waiting for Bernie to speak, anxiety fluttering while she waited. "Fucking hell Serena" Bernie swore eventually. "I can't even speak. You, look, stunning, breathtaking" causing the widest smile the trauma surgeon had ever seen to erupt on the brunettes face.

"Zip me?" Serena said and span round, causing Bernie to almost have a coronary as a hint of bra and creamy back was presented to her. She moved forward and with clumsy fingers took hold of the zip. Serena moaned as she felt warm kisses trailed up her spine as the zip followed to the top. She turned around and gathered Bernie carefully in her arms, not wanting to wrinkle their dresses. Yet. She looked at Bernie's mouth, shiny and full with lipgloss and not having put her own lipstick on yet, pressed a kiss to the corner of the blonde's mouth.

"Beautiful Berenice" she whispered and taking her Major by the hand, they carefully went down the stairs.

Serena busied herself calling a taxi and Bernie just drank the sight of her in. The gleaming brunette locks, freshly washed and shiny like ebony, fluffed out and jaunty at her fringe. Those massive smoky eyes which did funny things to Bernie's insides, the tiny flecks of glitter catching the light. The flashes of teal anytime Serena moved and the tantalising hint of thigh through the slit in her skirt. Bernie's mouth was dry and her palms faintly sweaty. She wiped them surreptitiously on her jacket lining as she pulled it on over her dress, giving her a quirky vintage look. She smiled at Serena who had finished the phone call and was now placing the things she needed in her evening bag, before extracting a tube of lipstick, a pretty coral-red shade and slowly applied it her lips, making them, in Bernie's opinion, even more kissable and she fought the internal battle not to go over there and rip Serena's dress from her body and kiss her senseless. The army medic had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted Serena in that moment and the heat was coming off her in waves.

Serena was reviewing new feelings. She couldn't help but keep gazing at Bernie's chest where the crystals sat like constellations, drawing her eyes there. This fascination with her breasts was a little mind-boggling, having never thought about a woman in a sexual way before. The lines of Bernie's neck, her muscles, the irresistibly kissable lips all shiny and inviting, the comb in her hair, holding the soft curly hair from her face. Serena felt like she was in a gallery somewhere in a private exhibition of a living, breathing masterpiece and she couldn't stop looking, wanting, needing, desiring, loving.

The stepped closer and held both hands in their own, leaning their foreheads together gently, softly gazing into each other's eyes again. Their worlds started and ended right there in that moment and their breathing grew a little ragged as the fought their desire for now, both determined to have this...
date. Bernie could see the nerves still in Serena, mingled with the desire and she cupped the brunettes cheek. "I love you Serena" she whispered, not trusting her voice any louder. Serena visibly relaxed at this, mirrored the hold on her face and whispered back "I love you Bernie" and closed her eyes as they continued to stand, foreheads pressed together.

The sound of the taxi horn broke them apart and they smiled at each other. Serena opened the front door, leaving the hallway light on and Bernie stepped through, followed by Serena who closed it behind them and locked the door, testing the handle automatically. They walked over to the taxi where Serena was ushered into the back by Bernie holding the door open. Settling her in, the blonde went round to the other side and got in. They fastened their seat belts and then took hold of each other's hands.

"Morpeth Street please" Serena said to the taxi driver who nodded and set off, whisking the two surgeons to the first part of their date. A little place of heaven, called "Felicità"
Chapter 97.

The taxi pulled into a tiny side street that Bernie didn't recognise and she looked around curiously as Serena paid the driver. It had a cobbled surface and she mentally prepared herself for walking without falling, unused to even the low heels she was wearing. The street lights were illuminated and the old fashioned shape that reminded Bernie of reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to Cameron and Charlotte when they were small. No one around outside and she realised Serena was waiting for her on the pavement so she hurriedly opened the door and got out of the car, wobbling slightly as she adjusted to being back on her feet. She rounded the car and stood next to Serena on the more even pavement and took hold of the hand the brunette was offering to her, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"I'm nervous" thought Bernie and Serena seemed to hear the thought as she pulled Bernie to her for a gentle hug.
"Come on you. I'm starving" the vascular surgeon said, "so you must be practically faint and wasting away". Serena winked at Bernie at the nerves fell away as the easy banter was present. Still hand in hand they walked a little way down the street before stopping in front of a dark green door with lights shining through the glass and a tiny sign. "Felicità". Happiness. Not the Bernie knew the translation.

Serena opened the door and lead them through a narrow passageway that opened out into a covered, walled courtyard. There was a fountain lit in the centre and bubbling away and white fairy lights strung between silver birch trees around the edges. There were tables underneath them, for summer eating but they were unoccupied tonight. Bernie was wide eyed as Serena lead her under an archway and into a room lined in oak and red silken draped, with gold brocade. An older man in a black shirt and trousers came over and welcomed them in accented English, asking to take Bernie's coat and Serena's wrap. Handing them over Bernie gaped as Serena spoke a stream of rapid Italian at the man who beamed at her and kissed both her cheeks. He looked at Bernie briefly as if he was going to do the same to her but at the last second changed his mind and shook her hand vigorously.
"This way ladies" he announced after presenting them with two thick menus in dark red leather bound books. He lead them into a dining room and Bernie couldn't help but gasp.

It wasn't huge, she counted eight tables, mostly set for two and several were already seated. The floor was dark oak boards and the furniture matched this, solid and yet pretty, ornately carved with flowers and fruit. The walls were hung with more red and gold and the flicker of several hundred candles gave the room a warmth and an inviting feel. A young woman was playing a grand piano softly in one corner. Labels of expensive wine were framed and dotted around, she spotted a 1933 Petrus label she knew had to be very expensive. The real wax dripped here and there, making patterns on ledges and making the place feel loved. Crisp white linen and chairs trimmed in gold made the place feel opulent and Bernie felt like she was in a nobleman's house somewhere like Genoa or Tuscany.

They were lead to a beautiful table with red gerbera in a small case as the centrepiece and they sat sideways to the room, facing each other. Two glasses of wine were placed in front of them immediately, the candle light showing the rich red of the liquid. Bernie reached for Serena's hand and they linked them across the table, the pleasure evident in Serena's face as she saw the wonder in Bernie's.
"Where did you find this place and what did you say to him?" Bernie asked.
"Giovanni and I have a long standing friendship based on our affection for Shiraz" said Serena. "He
is my dealer" and Bernie laughed at the image. "I told him that this was the woman I loved and that he must spoil you" Serena said and blushed as Bernie kissed the back of her hand. "I may also have asked him for this Shiraz."

Bernie laughed again and raised her glass.
"What should we drink to Serena?" she asked.
Serena thought and then she answered.
"Possibilities."

Bernie raised her glass and clinked it gently onto Serena's. She took a small mouthful and was amazed at the smooth, intense flavour of the wine. She was no expert but even she could tell this was no ordinary wine.
"It's from year we were born" said Serena, looking away and feeling faintly embarrassed at being so soppy. "I like to think it was waiting for us to find each other." and tears sprang up in Bernie's eyes, which she blinked away quickly.
"Serena, you're incredible. I don't deserve someone as wonderful as you" said Bernie, "but I'm so thankful I do."

Serena shrugged happily and took a mouthful of her own, enjoying the heat as it slid down. They gazed at each other for a while before Serena picked up her menu and a moment later Bernie followed suit.
"Serena?"
"Yes Bernie?"
"Um. It's all in Italian."
"Shall I translate?"
"Will you, um, just order for us both?" Bernie asked, flushing bright red.

Serena nodded enthusiastically and looked round for a waiter, who appeared at her elbow as if he'd always been there. Another stream of rapidly exchanged Italian followed and the young man bowed and left them. They continued to enjoy the wine and waited for their food to arrive.

"How many languages do you speak?" asked Bernie.
"Well 4, French and Italian I am fluent in and I also have reasonable Spanish and Greek" said Serena modestly. "I love languages. I studied as much as I could alongside my sciences and maths for medicine. What about you?"

Bernie answered "also Spanish and Arabic fluently. Some Pashto and Farsi and a smattering of Armenian. Mostly necessitated by being on tour" she added. "Useful then."

They slipped into a comfortable silence then, Bernie thinking about learning painstakingly as her interpreters laboured with them and Serena, well she was thinking about Bernie in uniform and getting a little warm. She caught the army medic's eye and twinkled a smile to the blonde who raised her hand again to kiss her knuckles. They talked some more, about the hospital and memories and children and then the waiter returned with the first course.
Chapter 98 - Tastes of Heaven

Chapter Notes

Much Italian food research here. Special mention to Angela Hartnett's menu.

Chapter 98

The waiter announced "Sapori del cielo" as he placed several small plates on the table between the two women with a flourish. The crockery was white with a gold stripe running around the perimeter. Each plate held something different and was arranged to look like two mouthfuls of food. When the waiter bowed and left Bernie looked over at Serena who was smiling.

"Tastes of heaven" the brunette announced without Bernie having to ask. "The idea is that two people who love each other feed each other a bite of each plate, they taste and see and feel in heaven.
"Done this before have you?" asked Bernie with no subtle hint of jealousy. Serena took her hand.
"No Bernie. But it's famous."
"How famous?" asked Bernie, all sunshine again now, the green-eyed monster having been banished.
"Two Michelin star famous" said Serena and chuckled at Bernie's eyes widening.
"This must be costing a fortune" said Bernie, blinking and thinking she'd have been happy with a burger and a beer.
"You're more than worth it"

They regarded the plates and Bernie indicated to Serena she should pick first. She leaned across and popped a morsel into Bernie's mouth, who closed her eyes at the amazing taste, and then reciprocated, Serena humming in appreciation both at the food and at being fed by her love, a truly romantic, almost erotic moment.
"And that was?" Bernie said. "Pork?"
"Point to Dr Bernie!" laughed Serena. "Pork shoulder with caper and raisin creme fraiche and hazelnut."
"I'd never think of a combination like that" acknowledged Bernie. "I might not have eaten it if you'd said but it was exquisite."
"Your turn" said Serena.

Bernie regarded the table carefully, trying to see something she might recognise, selected something and then carefully fed Serena, blushing as Serena licked her finger a little, and opening her mouth to receive the identical mouthful.
"Oh wow" moaned Serena. "What number plate?"
Bernie looked at the little flag. "6"

Serena looked at the tasting notes. "Arancini with fig compote, prosciutto and goats cheese" Serena had next pick and they settled into enjoying themselves.
"Roquefort tart with black and white grapes"
"Sea bass and prawn tortellini and fennel purée"

Bernie was eating stuff she had barely heard of but it was a rainbow of delicate tastes and textures and it was all the more enjoyable because Serena was in raptures. She decided to be a little wicked and slipped her shoes off under the table. She popped the next bite into Serena's mouth, a
combination of salami and artichoke and when the other woman closed her lips, ran her foot up the back of Serena's leg, smirking as the others woman's eyes flew open and searched her face. "Bernie" she hissed in mock annoyance and licked her lips, entirely ruining the pretend anger. They continued the journey of food and caresses each other's legs with their feet, holding hands and touching mouths and cheeks. It was like they were devouring each other as they ate.

They jumped a little when the waiter came to clear their plates and refilled their wine, neither of them were drinking fast, not wanting to be too drunk to enjoy this. He returned then with main courses, a pheasant dish with agnolotti for Serena and a tagliatelle of chickens and wild leeks for Bernie covered with shaved truffle. They tasted each other's food off each other's forks during the meal and enjoyed the sharing of the experience. Serena complimented Bernie on her handling of the pasta and Bernie thanked Serena for choosing her food she knew that the blonde would like and not something with snails or octopus or the suchlike which made Serena giggle. "As if I would Berenice" she laughed and Bernie joined in. They looked at each other and the world narrowed to just the two of them, in their own bubble. The love was warm and tangible and they fell harder for each other all over again.

"Dolce signore?" The waiter asked sheepishly, not really wanting to interrupt the lovers, who were obviously absorbed in each other. Serena looked at Bernie who just shrugged. More Italian fell from Serena's lips and the army medic realised that listening to her speak like that was something she really liked and was also making her pretty aroused. The waiter departed again and Bernie took Serena's hand.

"Do you realise how sexy you are when you speak Italian?" Bernie growled and Serena flushed a pretty shade of purple.
"Affecting you a little?"
"You know it" said Bernie seriously and the air was thick and charged. They leaned in for a quick kiss and it was all they both could do to keep from deepening it, vaguely remembering they were in a public place.

The dessert came, divine artworks with chocolate work and sugar shapes, biscuits so fine that they melted, rich creamy flavours, sharp fruitiness and mellow alcohol notes. They tasted each other's and ended up swapping as they confessed preferring the dessert ordered for the other and then thick bitter cups of espresso, that they could almost stand a spoon in appeared. Bernie knew this was the finest meal she'd ever eaten, the food, the setting but mostly because the woman she'd lost her heart to was sat opposite, so clearly relishing every moment of their date so far. She smiled at Serena who was finishing the last of her wine.
"I could stay here all night but I'm guessing we'll be on the move soon?" she asked. Serena nodded and smiled broadly.
"Yes. Guessed where?"
Bernie shook her head and rested her cheek in her palm as she thought again. What could combine two of their favourite things?
"I haven't got a clue Serena" she admitted and the brunette clapped her hands in glee.
"Oh goody. I hoped to keep it a surprise."

Bernie tried to get her credit card out but Serena wasn't having any of it, insisting she had planned the date so she would be paying for the date. Giovanni escorted them back to get their outdoor wear and babbled on in Italian, thrilled that Serena and her lady had had a great night. He turned to Bernie.
"Come any time. I always have room for Serena and her woman."
Bernie beamed and shook his hand, telling him how much they had enjoyed it.

They walked back out past the fountain and Bernie whipped Serena round and in for a kiss, and then several kisses before they went out of the door and into the street. Giovanni had organised a
taxi and Serena went to the drivers side to speak to him before they both got in the back, not wanting Bernie to hear the destination. He drove off as the two woman sat close, hand in hand, for part 2.
Chapter 99 - Nobody Does it Better

Chapter Notes

Lots of you asking, sadly apart from the food, the restaurant is a total figment of my imagination. Maybe I should open one!

Chapter 99.
They pulled into the centre of the city and Serena looked out of the window in anticipation, tremors of excitement running over her. She thought, hoped at least, that Bernie would like this but it was a tiny risk. She knew Bernie would pretend to like it even if she didn’t, but it meant so much to the brunette that they could find things in common. She hated exercise, Bernie was no real cook. She liked Shiraz and Bernie was more a beer or whiskey drinker. They like books and walks and photography and travel and she relaxed a little as ticked those things off in her mind. It was good to like different things but she also wanted to share stuff. Bernie regarded Serena. How perfect was her woman. She was nervous, they both were, about the rest of the date and then getting home and then…She wanted Serena and she could see Serena wanted her right back but the actual act? Would that be too much? She tried to relax and just look at the beautiful face across from her. The taxi driver was talking and Serena was replying but it all sounded underwater to Bernie, she couldn’t think beyond her vascular surgeon.

The taxi driver pulled up outside a large building, tall and imposing. A grand staircase lead up to the door and there were pillars lining the entrance. Other men and women were mingling on the steps in evening wear, jet black tuxedos mingling with jewel-coloured dresses. There were posters on the outside of the building that Bernie couldn’t read. She thought some more as Serena paid the taxi driver and she registered them agreeing for him to pick them up later and he passed a little card to the brunette with the company number on. They got out of the car and Serena came round the car and took Bernie by the hand. They walked slowly up the stairs, making sure not to trip and taking in the grandeur of the building. Serena spoke.

“So. You know what this is right?” and Bernie nodded.
“I love it here. I love hearing this. And they are doing something special tonight, that I thought you’d like. I had the tickets before this was an official “date” as such” Serena said “I was always going to surprise you, but it seemed fitting to make it part of this.”
Bernie looked at her quizzically as she continued.
“The Royal Symphony Orchestra are one of my favourites. I love hearing a full orchestra. I do it as often as I can. That’s my favourite part” she smiled and Bernie smiled back. “Look at what they are doing tonight” and Serena dragged the blonde over to a poster where her mouth fell open.
“I love James Bond!” squeaked the army medic and pulled the brunette to her in a tight hug.
“Yes, they are doing all the numbers you’ll recognise from the box set that you make me sit through” Serena said, blushing with pleasure as she noticed other people looking at them and smiling. “That’s the part that is your favourite thing.”

They walked into the foyer, Bernie was practically skipping with pleasure. The box office was busy selling tickets and they went across to the bar. Serena ordered them Bellini’s this time, the fresh peach juice making them so special. She showed their tickets to an usher who pointed them up a set of stairs and they walked into a box in the circle, set with just two chairs.
“Looks like we have it to ourselves” she winked and Bernie considered this.
“Did you buy the whole box Serena?” she half-whispered and Serena nodded guiltily.
“I didn’t want to share you” she whispered back and they moved in for a deep kiss.
The settled into the chairs and setting aside their drinks they leaned over the rails, watching the orchestra tune up and talk to each other, and the seats in the stalls and opposite in the other side of the circle started to fill up with a hum of excitement as people took their seats. Applause sounded as the conductor walked out onto the stage and bowed, shaking the hand of the first violinist. He settled himself on the platform and the room fell silent in anticipation. Serena took Bernie's hand as they held their breath waiting.

The room filled with low strings as the first chords were played in response to the movement of the baton. The iconic theme tune filled the room and Bernie was beside herself with joy. She had heard orchestras before and military bands were a huge part of her past career but this was something else, music she enjoyed, played in a classical way and it opened a whole new appreciation to her. Flute and oboe took up the main theme as the percussion session made the room vibrate with rhythm. Serena couldn’t believe how wide the smile on her girlfriend’s face was, seeing she was already totally lost in the music and relaxed, it was a good plan after all. More of a Rachmaninov and Mozart girl, but happy to listen to any orchestral works, she sat back to enjoy. The orchestra segued gracefully into a beautiful rendition of Live and Let Die, which made Bernie tremble, she loved this song and the film was her favourite of all the Bond movies. She squeezed Serena’s fingers appreciatively as she tapped her thigh in time with the music, the sweet harmonies giving both women goose bumps. Spellbound they clapped at the end and continued to enjoy the music as over the next hour more were played.

The interval came and Serena fetched them more drinks after a quick trip to the bathroom for them both. Bernie kissed Serena’s temple and her cheek, telling her amazing this was, how perfect Serena is and how much she was absolutely loving this, making Serena’s night. The goose bumps came back as the lights dimmed again and the conductor retook the stage. They started with Diamonds are Forever and moved into an exciting version of Goldfinger, followed by Serena’s favourite, For Your Eyes Only and the two women spent that entire song looking deep into each other’s eyes.

The lights came up and the conductor introduced a young woman to the stage, dressed in a strapless, floor length moss-green gown. She took a graceful bow and stood just off to the side of the conductor who brought the orchestra to life. Both Bernie and Serena found tears in their eye as they listened to her sing Nobody Does it Better, then Skyfall. She and the orchestra were encored back and did a beautiful second version of Diamonds are Forever and then that was that, over.

Their hands were slightly sore from clapping as Bernie placed Serena’s pashima around her and they walked down the stairs, pausing at the bottom for a kiss.
“Thank you Serena” said Bernie. “This has been the most amazing night and the most perfect date I have ever been on in my life” and Serena cupped her cheek, not able to say anything. They spied the taxi driver from earlier waving to them and they got in the car, exchanging some pleasantries with the man and Bernie found herself gushing to him about how wonderful the music had been. And then they were pulling into Serena’s driveway and both women felt the nerves rise. Bernie paid the taxi driver this time and they got out and walked up to the door.
“Going to kiss me and then not call me for a week Major?” Serena joked. “First date and all” and they laughed, breaking the tension. Serena pulled out her keys and they went in, closing the front door and locking the world outside.
Chapter 100 - Forever love

Chapter Notes

M-rated!

Nearly 3 times my normal chapter length, it has taken a while and I hope it's special and I've done them justice.

Be gentle with your feedback on this. It's taken a part of my soul to write it.

The song on the iPod is Endless String by Hilang Child

Enjoy beloved x

Chapter 100

They placed their bags on the side and Bernie took her shoes and jacket straight off, hanging them neatly before turning to look at Serena who was still in her wrap and her heels. Bernie tried to read her face, fear, excitement, desire, love, a hundred emotions flickering through her eyes. Bernie went across to her in her bare feet and held her by the elbows. Serena offered a small nervous smile and Bernie squeezed her arms.

"Serena?"
"Yes Bernie?"
"You know we don't have to do anything right? This has been magical and if you give me a kiss on my cheek and send me to my own room, it wouldn't be any less perfect."
Serena breathed out slowly, considering Bernie's words, and settled into the army medics arms as they encircled her.
"I. Want. You." she said, a slight tremor in her tone. "I'm nervous but not unwilling Bernie. I don't want it to be all awkward and safewordy. Unless we need it" she hurried on, rambling slightly.
Bernie held on tight, trying to impart the love and care she felt and to bite back the urge to take Serena there and then against the front door.
"Bernie?"
"Yes Serena?"
"Take me to bed please."

Bernie slid her hands down to take Serena's and she turned around, leading them up the stairs carefully and into Serena's bedroom, softly closing the door behind her. She took the pashmina from the brunettes shoulders and balanced her as she slipped out of her heels, making the height difference right again. She slipped away and docked her the little iPod on the bedside table, setting it to softly play a song over and over, knowing it would help their nerves if it wasn't totally silent, before coming back to stand in front of Serena again.

Holding hands they stared at each other's eyes and then eyes shifted hungrily to lips and slowly they inched forward before Serena closed the gap and with an intake of breath for them both, they were kissing, deeply, full of pent up need and raw want for each other. When they broke apart Serena pulled the comb from Bernie's hair, placed it on the dresser and returned her hands to play with the blonde hair, scratching at her scalp and make Bernie emit a series of soft, breathy moans. Serena kissed her way down Bernie's jaw to her exposed shoulders and began to kiss the skin over
her collarbones and suck at the junction of her neck. Bernie was running her hands through Serena's hair, and their breathing was ragged.

Bernie broke away and turned her back to Serena. Serena put her hands on Bernie's hips and drew her close, firstly sucking herself earlobe, eliciting a deep moan, kissing the nape of her neck as she undid the zip on the midnight blue dress, licking a pathway down and make Bernie shudder with pleasure. Dropping the dress to the floor she ran her hands round and turned Bernie to face her, running her hand down Bernie's sternum to between her breasts and back up to cup her face as they kissed again.

"Can I unzip you?" Bernie panted and was delighted when Serena turned away so that she could do just that. Carefully she unzipped the dress and helped Serena out of it and then moaned long and deep as she saw the lingerie that Serena was wearing, a matching bra and knickers set the colour of cafe-au-lait with ivory lace trimming it and it made Bernie instantly wet between her legs. Serena's skin lit up as Bernie pushed her gently so her front was flush against the wardrobe door as the trauma surgeon ran her hands over Serena's back, tracing patterns and then coming down to massage her arse cheeks through the spectacular underwear and Serena felt her knees get wobbly.

Bernie pushed herself against Serena so her front was totally in contact with Serena's back and kissed her neck, finding all the sweet spots she'd previously mapped and Serena moaned Bernie's name out loud. The blonde pulled her back against her hips and groaned as Serena ground herself back against her. She reached around Serena and drew her hands up from her sides to hold her breasts in both hands. The brunette stiffened slightly but then melted back into Bernie as the army medic ran her thumbs over Serena’s rapidly hardening nipples, the fabric of her bra creating a heady sensation and the vascular surgeon felt herself get wet with desire and lust.

"I love the way your body responds to my touch" Bernie whispered. "You're so beautiful" Serena blushed and span round to kiss Bernie, opening their mouths, tongues touching, exploring, caressing the roof each other's mouths. Bernie nibbled Serena's lower lip and then soothed it with a swipe of her tongue.

Serena, in a wave of bravery, reached round and unclasped Bernies strapless bra, eyes wide at the sight of her breasts, nipples hardening as Serena stared. She pushed the blondes breasts together and kissed all over the softness at the top, before releasing them and looking Bernie in the eye, took one nipple in her mouth, feeling it strain and peak as she rolled the other between her fingertips. Bernie gasped and writhed at the pleasure coursing through her body as the feeling ran from nipples right down to between her legs. She undid Serena's bra and when Serena let go of her nipple from her mouth pressed their breasts together, both sighing at the sensation of their breasts touching and their nipples rubbing together.

"Come lie down with me" Bernie whispered and started for the bed, pausing as she realised Serena wasn't quite following, gasping for breath. "Serena?"

"Just needed a minute" Serena puffed out and lay awkwardly on the bed, gripping the covers in her fists, feeling a little exposed, just in her knickers before she looked at Bernie and the heat rose again.

"I want this" she told herself. "I want Bernie to make love to me and I want to reciprocate" and those thoughts relaxed her a little. She pulled Bernie close and ran her fingertips round a taut nipple, watching it puff up and harden further. She bent her head and licked all around it before drawing it into her mouth, sucking gently at first and then harder with a hint of teeth.

"Oh God, don't stop" Bernie said, writhing around and moaning again as Serena lavished attention on her other nipple in the same way and then kissed her way up the blondes neck until their mouths met and they were kissing hard and bruising. Bernie rolled herself on top of Serena and they both revelled in all of that body contact. The army medic began to drop little butterfly kisses all over Serena's face and neck and shoulders, whose eyes flew shut and she arched herself into Bernie's body at the sensations, she felt like she was drowning in need and desperate for more.
Bernie whispered to her. "Still okay?" and she nodded, not able to speak, but making eye contact and seeing the fierce desire and liquid love in her girls eyes increased her desperation. "I need to hear you tell me Serena" the trauma surgeon whispered.

"Bernie" Serena wailed, finding her voice. "I need you. I need you to touch me" and Bernie smiled, satisfied. She shimmied down Serena's body and sucked her nipples alternately again, not rushing, making each one stiff and red and wet with her mouth and smiled as Serena's hips went wild at the feelings. She ran her fingers over them, pulling and twisting gently to make them harder than ever before returning to suck them and Serena was babbling under her breath, "Bernie, so good, yes, don't stop, so good."

The blonde kissed down her tummy, making Serena squirm a little with embarrassment which Bernie recognised.

"You're stunning Serena. Don't let the doubts in. I love every inch of you." She proceeded to map the soft belly underneath her with her hands and her tongue and then hooked her fingers into the elastic of Serena's knickers, snapping it against her skin, making the brunette gasp.

"You, you as well?" she asked in a shaky voice and Bernie wasted no time in shoving her own black lacy knickers off and throwing them somewhere behind her. She inched Serena's down her body, kissing a trail down each thigh until she eased them off her ankles. Straddling Serena's knees she made eye contact and brought them to her nose, inhaling Serena's scent.

"Oh fuck" whispered Serena, blushing. "That's so hot."

How could that possibly be so sexy? Serena had no idea but she was more aroused than she had ever been in her life. This was the point of no return and she didn't want to. Didn't want to stop, go back, change anything. She wanted Bernie's touches, there, to touch Bernie and love her, demonstrate the depth of her love and the heat of her desire for the blonde.

Bernie had laughed, a deep rumble at Serena's swearing.

"You smell so good Serena". She settled herself and pressed the lightest of touches to the inside of Serena's knees, asking for access but allowing Serena to open her legs at her own pace. The brunette opened them slowly and Bernie moaned at the first real sight of her, wet and swollen from her touches so far. She kissed the delicate skin of the vascular surgeons inner thighs, and then raked her nails over the same skin, feeling Serena tremble.

"Can I?" she asked, needing that explicit consent and Serena's yes was quiet but enthused, she wanted this so much, despite the nerves.

Bernie couldn't quite believe what she was about to do. That she could touch this amazing, beautiful woman who'd captivated her from their first meeting in the car park, that she was going to make love to her. Serena, so trusting, so beautiful and all she could do was just stare at her, laid open for Bernie's touches and she was more determined about making Serena feel good than she had been about anything in her life.

She settled between Serena's legs and looked up to make eye contact. She blew gently on the swollen labia and heard Serena's breath catch. She reached to link Serena's hand in her left one, needing to just impart closeness for a moment.

"I love you so much" Bernie said and felt emotional tears prickle at the back of her throat. Serena reacted and dragged Bernie up her body for a kiss, making the army medic moan as she felt wet heat contact her thighs and she kissed long and deep before shimmying back down and just cupped Serena in her hand, feeling heat and soft hair and then running a finger through Serena's folds to her clit, making small circles round and round. Serena spread her legs even wider, thoughts of anything but more of that pleasure vanishing from her mind as Bernie's continued to lightly move round her clit, no real pressure. Then she rubbed, two fingertips over the hardening mass and Serena made a sound that surprised them both, not quite a moan, a shout or a gasp but something incredible in between and Bernie felt another release of fluid between her own legs.
"Still okay?" she panted and Serena moaned her yes.
"Please Bernie, please!"
"Tell me what you want Serena."
"I, I, you, I need,"
Bernie waited, amused at the lack of coherence, all while rubbing at her woman, making the wall of pleasure bigger. She ran her finger down to her opening and Serena moaned so loud.
"Oh God, yes, inside me, please!"
Bernie smiled, having guessed what Serena wanted, but decided to indulge herself and have a little taste first.

Serena looked up as she felt Bernie's curly hair closer on her thighs and her eyes went wide as Bernie licked all the way up from her opening to her clit and then took it in her mouth and sucked gently but rhythmically. Serena's brain shorted out as at the same time, gently, Bernie put two fingers inside her and stretched them slightly, the tiny burn feeling so good along with what Bernie's incredible mouth was doing and the waves of pleasure washed over her.

Bernie couldn't believe how responsive Serena was being as she started to move her fingers in and out, rearing up from the bed, eyes wild as begged the army medic to keep going, to not stop, right there. Bernie had no intention of stopping and ran her tongue around Serena's clit again before sucking once more.

They both realised Serena was close and she reached for Bernie's hand once more, and they rested their linked fingers against Serena's hip, giving her comfort as the sensations were nothing she'd ever felt before. Bernie moved her finger in once more and then curled them up and Serena came, hard, calling Bernie's name which made Bernie feel so special and loved. Serena was beyond thought or speech, the breath pulled from her body as she had the orgasm of her life, never had it felt so strong, moving over her body in wave after wave as Bernie slowed but kept touching, letting it ebb and flow until Serena found her knees clamping either side of Bernie.

"Come here" she panted, totally out of breath and Bernie moved up the bed and pulled a flushed and sweat-covered Serena to her and held her, stroking her back and her face, telling her how fantastic she was, how beautiful, how Bernie loved making her come, watching her come, how good she felt and Serena couldn't stop the tears.

Bernie kissed them from her face, recognising they were a response to the overwhelming feelings and she kissed Serena who pulled away in wonder, touching her mouth and then going red as she realised she was tasting herself and Bernie giggled, not able to help herself and licked her lips.

Serena hissed and pushed Bernie on her back, rolling on top of her and pressing her weight down, and Bernie's eyes flashed with desire as Serena gathered herself.
"That was amazing. I love you" and she kissed Bernie, thoroughly exploring her mouth with her own tongue until they were gasping for breath.
"I've never come like that. Not ever. Now I want you to come too" she said simply and then the nerves kicked back in. Bernie felt it and kissed her cheeks.
"Whatever you do, will be perfect, because it's you and from love. Don't be scared Serena."

The brunette sat up straddling Bernie and looked down at the naked blonde beneath her, nipples stiff and straining. Serena took both between her fingers and rolled them, feeling Bernie's hips lift underneath her and she twisted them slightly, make a stream of words erupt from the trauma surgeon, how good it was and just more. Serena smirked and bent to take a hard nipple between her teeth using her tongue between them, keeping her eyes on Bernie's face who was writhing underneath her. She switched back and forth between them, in raptures at the pleasure she was giving her girl and watching her come undone and Serena knew that she would want to do this over and over again.
Bernie's eyes flew open as Serena trailed kisses down her chest and over her stomach, hands caressing muscles and ribs and just glorious skin.
"Serena, God" Bernie exclaimed as the brunette stroked the soft, downy hair between in her legs, and shivered as Serena sat back between her legs. Bernie opened them, faintly embarrassed by her wanton lust and need.
"Unchartered territory here Major" Serena quipped, to try and get a handle of her nerves and then she had her finger tips there, feeling soft wet heat.
"Doing great, don't stop, please Serena" pleased Bernie, desperate for release after Serena's orgasm earlier and her touches now.
Serena moved fingers up and ran them either side of Bernie's clit, drawing a long breathy moan and a "Fuck yes" from the recipient of the touches, making her smile with pleasure. She was doing okay. She gave herself a little reassurance as she felt around Bernie's clit, finding a super-sensitive spot and concentrating her touches there, rubbing gently making a fresh flow of wetness stream out of Bernie and then she had to taste it, lowering herself and mimicking what Bernie had done.
Bernie had had her eyes shut and not expected to feel Serena's mouth on her and she shrieked Serena's name as she felt her tongue lap at her wetness and circle her entrance before going back to her clit, licking wide strokes. "Yes, yes, yes" Bernie uttered over and over. The only thought in Serena's mind was now feeling inside Bernie. She brought her fingertip to her entrance and stilled, waiting for Bernie to open her eyes and when she did, silently asking the question.
"Yes, inside me Serena, yes" and tentatively Serena pushed two fingers in and moaned at the soft wet heat surrounding her fingers. She used her other hand to rub Bernie's clit as she thrust in and out, adding a third finger when she heard "more" come from the incredible woman below her. Then Bernie was swearing and she felt her fingers squeezed as Bernie came with a cry that sounded like Serena's name and she was amazed again at this new sensation. She continued gentle and then felt Bernie tug on her shoulders and she moved up again to lie in Bernie's arms as she came down from the peak Serena had driven her to.
"How have you never done that before" Bernie gasped as Serena pulled the covers over them both, feeling slightly shivery from exertion and sweat-cooled skin and just from the emotion of it all.
"Ah Google" Serena smiled and Bernie laughed richly and kissed her.
"Was it okay?" Serena asked softly, hiding her face in Bernie's neck.
"Was it okay? Bloody hell woman, it was and you are fantastic" Bernie said seriously. "You nearly killed me!"
Serena chuckled.
"Are you okay?" Bernie asked tentatively and Serena looked up at her.
"Oh yes. I'm very okay. Why haven't we done that before?" Serena smiled.
"Cos I'm an idiot" puffed Bernie. "But we will be doing it again right?"
"Oh gosh yes" said Serena, "but I need a sleep first."
They kissed and lay in each other's arms, not needing any more words but not able to sleep just yet, consumed with the feelings and the thoughts about what they had done. Then Serena turned over and pulled Bernie with her to spoon her back and the brunette fell asleep. Bernie lay her cheek on Serena's back, matched her breathing and fell into her own contented slumber.
Chapter 101 - From there and back again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 101.

They slept a few hours and woke, hungry for each other again whilst the moon was still ruling the sky. All around the city slept but two hearts and two bodies came together in a rhythm as old as the world itself, touches of heat and fire, liquid silk and velvet kisses. An urgency and a need to drive the other to the highest of heights and the deepest of depths, oceans of pleasure in lives that had been bereft of passion and love and adoration for sand timer turn and turn. Voices soaring like swifts on the air, tumbling, turning. Fingers mapping lines and creases and folds and marks, committing to memory the pleasure points and pulses. Sinking back down into sleep, wrapped so completely in another naked body, joined at heart, mind, flesh and soul.

The sun banished the moon for another night and Bernie woke like clockwork, her cheek pressed into an expanse of creamy skin as she lay behind Serena. She sighed contentedly and wriggled a little, getting comfy again, and sharing heat under the covers against the chilly morning air. She dropped little kisses to Serena's shoulders, finer than spider silk and revelled in the closeness and the love that she'd shown and been offered. She wrapped her arms more closely around Serena who murmured wordlessly and shifted back so her whole back was pressed again Bernie, who started whispering words of love into her ears. Serena smiled and stretched into the embrace, enjoying the nakedness with shame, still half asleep but skin already humming with love and care.

"Morning Major" she croaked, throat dry and slightly hoarse from certain loud exclamations through the night, keeping her eyes closed. "Morning you" Bernie husked back and leaned up on one elbow to kiss Serena's cheek. Serena smiled and opened her eyes, immediately bursting out in laughter. "What?" said Bernie grumpily. "Am I not allowed to kiss my girlfriend good morning?"

Serena continued to laugh as she turned over. "Look behind me" she laughed, tears forming in her eyes. Bernie looked and flushed a deep shade of red. Hanging from the lamp on the bedside table were her knickers from the night before, when she'd thrown them behind her, desperate for Serena. "Oh God" she muttered as Serena continued to laugh and she turned away. Serena pounced on her, "Come on now, none of that. It's funny. You can throw your pants anywhere you like if it means you do that thing."

"What thing?" said Bernie, stills little shame-faced and not looking at Serena. "That thing with your tongue" said Serena, scarcely able to believe she was talking dirty to Bernie after a night of mind-blowing sex. Bernie growled and turned over, pulling Serena to lie on top of her. "Bernie!" Serena squealed in surprise.

Bernie was done talking and captured Serena in a kiss and in time, did exactly what Serena was talking about.

Later they lay together, kissing lazily, touches languid and loving, not meant to arouse, both spent from giving and receiving. Bernie was cradling Serena's head before they decided to get up and shower and eat. They washed separately, knowing time in the shower together was something to enjoy later, dressed and headed downstairs. As it was now nearly lunchtime Serena made toasted sandwiches and they sat at the kitchen table, sharing the Sunday papers, in a perfect scene of domesticity. Serena wiped the table as Bernie stacked the dishwasher and they looked at each
"What would you like to do today?" Serena asked Bernie who shrugged. "I don't know and I don't really mind, as long as I can stay close to you" she said, wincing slightly at how needy that sounded. "Stop overthinking Berenice. I want to be close to you too. It's okay that you want that."

Bernie nodded and stared at her feet. How did Serena do that? Read her mind and her thoughts so completely.

Serena thought for a few moments. "I could do with doing some laundry but that's all house wise."

Bernie nodded and thought a little more. "Maybe a walk, or if you don't want to, a run for me?" she asked.

Serena thought. "You run. I'll do laundry and start work on the roast."

Bernie's eyes lit up, "a run and a roast!" she said happily and Serena couldn't do anything but kiss her. "Let me do the laundry?"

Serena agreed. "Clean sheets for us, Jason's does his own. My laundry hamper is in my room plus your stuff okay?"

They set about their tasks. Bernie changed into a set of running clothes, which meant Serena had to have a cheeky feel of her arse, all pert and emphasised by the compression leggings before Bernie pushed her away laughing. Washing going and vegetables being prepped, Bernie kissed Serena and set off on her run, iPod blaring out "I walked out my house tonight, just to feel the quiet..." and she sang along in her head, and realised she was happy and she squeaked a little as she thought of Serena. Just a week ago she'd thought it was all lost, the kiss on theatre floor the end before the beginning and now she was living with...oh.

She stopped dead in her tracks as the world crashed in and she sat on a bench in the park, sweating. They had to go back to work tomorrow. Would Serena still want her at home? When had she started calling it home? The panic started to rise. "I can't go back to my flat" she thought, "I won't survive it." But what if she couldn't be at Serena's anymore? What if Serena decided it was all too much, working together, living together, being together? What if everything fell apart?

She started to hyperventilate, "what if, what if, what if" running through her mind and the only coherent thought she could form, despite the what ifs was to get back to Serena and she set off at a frenzied pace. She got back to the house and kicked off her trainers. She'd crashed through the door and flew into the kitchen and barrelled straight into Serena's arms, sobbing. "Please Serena, please don't."

Chapter End Notes

Song is Already Gone by Wild Rivers.

Return to angst!! About time after all the fluff....
Chapter 102 - Tears

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 102

"Darling? Don't what? Please don't cry?" Serena was baffled. She'd been happily chopping onions to make stuffing, singing to herself and thinking about how Bernie's ribcage felt under her splayed fingers when the object of her affections had rocketed into her arms and was sobbing, big, loud, noisy sobs, fearful sobs. She'd never heard Bernie cry like this, with absolutely no care for who might see or hear. She was clinging so hard to Serena that the brunette could feel small bruises already starting to form and she gathered Bernie up and slid them down the cupboard to the floor. Bernie clambered into Serena's lap like a small child and Serena held her hot head in her hands, close to her chest and rocked her, whispering how she was safe, that Serena had got her, it was okay, nothing was going to hurt her. And Bernie cried. And cried and cried.

Where was this fear, this terror of rejection and abandonment coming from? It was pouring out of her in waves, the antithesis of the big macho army medic she purported to be. She tried to push it away, knowing she was scaring Serena but it just wouldn't go. She clutched Serena's shirt in her her fists and burrowed into her like a little rabbit seeking warmth and protection. No words would come, she was crying too hard. She could hear the comforting words Serena was offering her and they helped but they also made the fear bigger. Bernie didn't know how to trust, how to rely on anyone. People always let her down in the end. She guarded her heart fiercely. Until Serena, who'd seen the cracks not as defects but as ways to let the light in. She'd given parts of heart away and yet become whole, the pain of the pieces coming apart again, just the thought of it, was too great to bear.

Serena had no clue what was going on but she reasoned that Bernie seemed okay physically if a little clammy and there was no immediate threat whilst she was sat on the brunettes lap being held. So she decided not to try to do anything other than offer the comfort and love that Bernie seemed to be seeking. She felt her own tears start but let them drip unheeded, she was always a crier when someone else was upset. She'd learned to keep that more or less under control through medicine and having to be stoic and calm for the patients but if Serena loved you and she might just love Bernie harder than she's ever loved, then she will cry along with you, even if she doesn't know why.

The desperate choking sobs started to lessen in favour of broken hiccups and sharp intakes of breath. Bernie laid her hot cheek against the cool skin under Serena's chin and closed her eyes, still holding tightly to her shirt, as if she was afraid Serena might apparate in a cloud of white smoke away from her. She felt Serena stroke her hair, smooth the curls behind her ears and drop kisses to the top of her head. A second wave of tears welled up and she sobbed again, feeling the vascular surgeons arms tighten around her once more.

Serena continued to hold Bernie as she nuzzled in and felt the crescendo of her crying rose again. She felt calm. They'd professed their love for each other in words, in actions and in things yet unsaid and undone. What could come against that, she reasoned, the self-talk giving her confidence. A skill she'd learned as part of her therapy in the States, ignore the negative thought, turn it into a neutral one and then a positive if possible. She found herself thinking back to the vicars speech at her wedding. She hasn't wanted to get married in church but her mum and Edward's had insisted.
“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Serena remembered rolling her eyes at that even on the day. Edward had never moved her like that, she hadn't loved him like it either, but in the last months with Bernie and especially the last week with her, she felt like those words actually meant something. Her love for Bernie and Bernie's right back looked like all those things. Love never ends, she thought, and hoped, believed that this time that was true.

Bernie managed to her her crying back under control and was now listening to Serena's heartbeat, slow and steady and hypnotic in its relaxation effect. She rubbed her eyes with her hands and pushed away from Serena, just looking into light brown eyes, filled with love and concern. Serena didn't say anything but they got up off the floor and the brunette lead the blonde to the little bathroom and helped her wash her face and hands and patted them dry. Poured glasses of water and they went to the lounge to sit.

Serena just waited. And Bernie opened her mouth and started to speak.

Chapter End Notes

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a is the text
"I can't do this..."

Serena gaped at the words that left Bernie's mouth and her eyes filled with immediate tears, that spilled over her lower lashes and down her porcelain cheeks. She couldn't believe that now, after the perfect night they'd spent together, Bernie was going to run again. She got off the sofa hurriedly and went over to the window, staring out at the driveway, in the spot where a week ago, she had waited for Bernie to come so she could convince her to stay and she'd failed. She cried quietly, the occasional muffled sob breaking out.

She felt a pair of arms go round her waist and she struggled against them briefly but they just held her tighter and she burst out into noisy, full-body sobbing.

"Wh-why?" she managed to get out.

Bernie was kicking herself.

"I, didn't mean, oh um..."

Breathe, she told herself.

"I can't do this by myself Serena. I'm so scared."

Serena span round in Bernie's arms, looking at the army medic who was peeking through her fringe. The brunettes hand tucked the loose curls behind the ear of the other woman who's own eyes were full and shining unshed tears.

"I can't go back to my flat Serena. I'm too scared."

Serena tried to make sense of it. "Why would you need to?"

Bernie gulped and squeezed Serena tightly to her.

"We're going back to work tomorrow. I don't want it to be too much, working with me, being with me, living...". she trailed off, not able to finish.

Serena fought a wave of anger as she realised Bernie had not meant that she couldn't do their relationship, reminding herself that the trauma surgeon was not always able to do the right words first time even though she'd scared Serena immensely. She rested her forehead on the army medics own and waited for the dark brown eyes to come up and meet hers.

"Why do you assume I don't know what I can handle?" she asked, wincing slightly as heard her tone as more clipped than she had aimed for.

Bernie tried to move away but Serena wouldn't let her, keeping her close. She took a deep breath.

"A week ago we hadn't even kissed. Now I'm, well, living here, in your bed."

"I don't get it" said Serena bluntly. "You said you can't go back to your flat and you are implying you can't be here even though that's not true, so what now?"
Bernie's eyes gave up the tears and they slipped down her face and dropped onto their arms as they held hands between them.

"I don't want to fuck this up Serena. You're too important to me for that."

"You're doing a pretty good job of that anyway" whispered Serena, not meaning to hurt, "don't shut me out Bernie."

They stood holding hands and looking at each other before Serena lead them back to the sofa and they sat, angled to face each other.

Bernie has another go.

"I'm scared that when we go back to our real lives that you won't want this" she said softly, not looking at Serena. "This last week has been everything from heartbreaking to perfection and we haven't had work in that equation. I want to spend every minute with you but I'm worried that going from never having kissed to living together in a week is too much."

"For who?" Serena countered, "okay, yes the jungle drums will beat at work but so what? They'll move on eventually, they always do. We can talk to Hanssen and to HR, do it properly as technically I'm your boss" she said, winking for effect. "I don't want you to go Bernie. If you want to sleep in your room here some nights, rather than in mine, that's fine. But don't go when it's not something either of us wants, because somehow you've convinced yourself it's the right thing."

Bernie searched Serena's soft brown eyes, looking to make sure it was the truth. Serena let her and then opened her arms and Bernie all but fell into them, both women crying some more as Bernie rested on Serena, letting the anxiety ebb away. The brunette ran her fingers through the blonde hair, lightly massaging Bernie's scalp, feeling her relax against her.

"Where did this come from darling?" she asked carefully

Bernie sat up and pulled her iPod out of her pocket.

"I was running and singing this song and the words hit me and I remembered about going back to work and and and"

"Play it for me?"

Bernie flicked it on.

I walked out my house tonight just to hear the quiet,

Listen to the dark before I lie

Looking to the city lights burning from afar

Glowing at the bottom of the sky

I think nothing beautiful comes without a fight

Of course, there's no exception in us

I've come to love revolving doors and things
that tend to shine
but you never really cared for that much
Ohhhh Ain't it just a shame, ending 'bout the
same way that we started out
Oh, Comin' back around with just more jewelry,
I'm afraid that we've departed now
You won't stop me, trains are moving too fast
What's this railcard to some bits of broken
glass?
I had a box of pictures that I hid in tall grass
You won't find me 'cus I'm already gone.
Well I used to have love,
but I was stubborn and drunk
So I squandered it
I got rid of your taste
with some things in a place
Because I wanted it
Ohhhh Ain't it just a shame, ending 'bout the
same way that we started out
Oh, Comin' back around with just more jewelry,
I'm afraid that we've departed now
I walked out my house tonight just to hear the
quiet,
Listen to the dark before I lie"
"That's a really sad song Bernie love." Serena said in a watery voice.
"I got all these pictures in my head of how I'd screw up and you'd end it and...
She couldn't carry on, the tears were falling too fast and Serena snuggled her into herself, kissing the top of her head.
"We talk Bernie. We always talk okay? Don't put thoughts in my head or words in my mouth in your mind. Ask me. We can always work it through. I know neither of us is used to this in a
relationship but we can work on it together."

Bernie nodded fervently, not capable of forming words and leaned up for a tentative kiss, met softly by Serena's lips on hers. Then she was crying again and laid her head back on Serena's chest to listen to her heartbeat.

Serena pushed her up after a while.

"Come with me" she said and led them both over to the piano. They sat together on the stool and Serena opened the lid, smoothing her fingers over the keys.

"Let me give you a different song"

The vascular surgeon rummaged in a box of music before pulling a paper out and setting on the inbuilt stand. She kissed Bernie's cheek and then placed her fingers in position, playing the opening chords with confidence as she owned her mouth to sing, her rich voice filling the air.

"It's a little bit funny
This feeling inside
I'm not one of those who can
Easily hide
I don't have much money
But boy if I did
I'd buy a big house where
We both could live.
So excuse me forgetting
But these things I do
See I've forgotten if
They're green or they're blue
Anyway the thing is, What I really mean,
Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen
And you can tell everybody
This is your song
It maybe quite simple but
Now that it's done
I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind
That I put down in words
How wonderful life is Now you're in the world
If I was a sculptor
But then again no
Or a girl who makes potions in
A traveling show
I know it's not much but
It's the best I can do.
My gift is my song and
This one's for you.
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
And you can tell everybody
This is your song
It may be quite simple but
Now that it's done
I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind
That I put down in words
How wonderful life is
Now you're in the world."

She finished and looked over at Bernie who was staring at her mesmerised.

"That's how I feel Bernie. My life, all parts of my life, work and home and heart are better, are wonderful with you in it."

Bernie couldn't speak, almost couldn't believe what she had just heard, that Serena, the most perfect woman she had ever known, felt like this about her, was too big to take in.

"I love you" she said and then pulled the brunette to her, kissing her fiercely.

"I love you" panted Serena when the kiss broke. "We can do this darling."

Bernie nodded and rested her head on Serena's shoulder, letting her mind empty as Serena sang the song again, at Bernie's request.

Chapter End Notes

Song 1 - Already Gone - Wild Rivers
Song 2 - Your Song - The Ellie Goulding version
Chapter 104 - Dissociate and Repatriate

Chapter 104

Jason arrived home and launched into a blow-by-blow account of his weekend with Alan. The two women listened and Serena asked the odd question, Bernie though, was decidedly distracted. "Antsy" thought Serena as she tried to keep her attention on Jason. The blonde had started to pace up and down the length of the lounge, making Jason stop and look at her.

"Bernie are you alright?"

Bernie didn't even hear him, her thoughts were loud and fast and jumbled. She'd calmed down while sitting with Serena at the piano but now the anxiety was back with a vengeance.

"Bernie?"

"It's okay Jason, Bernie's anxious about going back to work tomorrow"

Still she couldn't hear them, trapped in solitude of her mind's making. Drifting between continent and spaces, times and divides, devolved from the present, trapped between the past and the future. Dissociated from the love she was wrapped in, Bernie continued to pace up and down, perfect synchronisation with the military drum beating in her head, snatches of prayers, the last post, machine gun fire and mortar rounds. Smells of animals, unwashed bodies, mess tents and family dinners. Children crying, pleading in a dozen languages, eyes, everywhere eyes searching, begging, denying, mocking. Flinching at touches on her skin, the impact of bullet, the fierce heat and the miserable cold.

Serena watched this play with no set, scenery or script playing out on Bernie's face and in Bernie's actions. She sent Jason to the kitchen, asking him to set the table. She slipped into the hall and retrieved her handbag. Digging through receipts and lipsticks until she found a small bottle of her everyday perfume. She stood near Bernie and waited for to pass by, misting some of the scent in the air.

It worked. Bernie stopped pacing and looked around, bewildered.

"Serena?"

Serena went over and gently wrapped her arms around Bernie, who stiffened and then relaxed.

"You were somewhere else in your head" explained Serena.

"Sorry" said Bernie automatically and tried to pull out of the arms encasing her.

"No, it's fine. Come on. Jason's in the kitchen and the bird is cooked."

They went into the kitchen and Jason eyed Bernie with a level of suspicion.

"You didn't listen."

"Sorry Jason"

"You know, we will all be at work together tomorrow. I'll come and see you on my break."

Bernie smiled shyly at him.

"I'd really like that Jason. Thank you."

She sat at the table, not trusting her legs to hold her up and watched Jason and Serena deal with the food.

"Did you do the lists on the doors Bernie?"

She bit her lip. "Yes Jason, I'm not very good at molecular mass so I thought it would make me more efficient."

Serena shot her a grateful smile for making the lists about herself and not her.

"That makes sense. I'll keep them updated" said the young man, passing her a dish of roast potatoes.

The food, as usual, was excellent and Bernie found herself with an appetite after all. Succulent
roast chicken, stuffing, parsnips, potatoes, cabbage, peas and carrots. She filled her plate and smothered it in rich, meaty gravy. Waited for the others to start and then tucked in, complimenting Serena on the cooking, who blushed and licked her lips, making Bernie all hot and bothered as she suddenly had a flash to them being in bed naked, and pushed it back out. She looked back at the brunette who had one eyebrow raised, letting Bernie know that she knew exactly what the blonde had been thinking about and then it was Bernie's turn to blush.

They ate, Jason doing most of the talking and then Bernie and Jason did the dishes, Jason stacking the dishwasher and Bernie scrubbing the pans and the roasting dish. They settled at the table once more and Jason enjoyed beating the two women at scrabble, his best word "hexane" earning him approval from Bernie, especially as he positioned the x on a triple letter space. He packed the board away and went to watch a film in the lounge, as the two women headed upstairs after Serena checked the doors were locked and had a quick whispered conference with Jason whilst Bernie fidgeted in the hallway.

She hesitated at the top of the stairs, before Serena wrapped her in another hug.
"Come sit with me" she said to the blonde who nodded and followed her into Serena's room. They sat on the bed and Serena leaned over and kissed Bernie's mouth gently.
"I have something for you." she said and Bernie got tense as she was made to close her eyes and hold her hands out.
She felt something cold placed into her hands and she opened her eyes and looked down.
"It's, its"
"It's a key to the front door Bernie" Serena butted in. "Jason and I want you to have it. A key to your home."
Bernie just stared at it laid in her palm, unblinking.
Serena started to worry a little.
"It's just, well, we want you to be able to come and go as you please."
"Thank you" said Bernie hoarsely and felt a kiss pressed to her cheek.
"Is it okay?" asked Serena. "I'm not trying to force you to decide, just giving you the freedom to treat this as your home, if you want it....eeek"
She squealed as Bernie captured her lips in a bruising kiss, emotions pouring out of her.
"It's EVERYTHING Serena." Bernie croaked, "everything."

They kissed some more and Serena undid the buttons on Bernie's shirt and then pulled it off, kissing across her collarbones as the blonde threw her head back and moaned.
"Ssshhh" said Serena, "moan quietly Major!"

Bernie opened her eyes, dark with desire and nodded, pulling Serena close and taking off her top and bra in almost one motion, making Serena flush and press into the army medic, all skin on skin. They got a little tangled in the straps of Bernie's bra and quickly got rid off their other clothes, climbing into bed. They lay flush against each other, stroking and kissing, licking and nibbling, and then froze as they heard Jason's footsteps come up the stairs and go into the bathroom. They laughed silently as they waited for him to go to his room and for the tinny sound of his television to go on.
"Where was I?" murmured Bernie. "Oh yes" and she pulled Serena to her and the two women felt wet heat meet and they rose and fell until they moaned into each other's mouths, and lay back, sweaty and sated.

"God that was fantastic" said Serena.
Bernie smiled and nodded and reached for her phone, setting her alarm and the nerves kicked back in, Serena could feel her practically vibrating with fear and took her in her arms.
"Close your eyes and just feel me. In less than 24 hours we will be right back here together"
Bernie shut her eyes and tried to relax as they lay there, eventually falling asleep as Serena
hummed a tune, she had sung, just a few hours previously to her big macho army medic. The brunette watched as Bernie's sleep deepened, kissed her cheek gently and shut her eyes, falling asleep to the sound of soft snores.
Chapter 105.

It was not an undisturbed night of sleep for either woman. Serena woke with a start as Bernie leapt from the bed and hit the floor in one movement, "no, no, no" coming out of her mouth as she cowered from unseen but very real terrors in the army medics past. She'd half expected this with the anxiety levels Bernie had been showing and snapped on the light, blinding herself for a moment before she could round the bed and sit next to the traumatised women, speaking low words of comfort and safety into her ear, trying to counteract the images and sounds of violence that were rampaging through the dreams of her girl. When she'd come round, panting and flushed Serena had helped her up and rubbed the knots in her back, slipping a t shirt over her head and one on her own body and then lay them both down, pulling Bernie into her arms to go back to sleep.

It had taken them both a while and then Serena woke, predictably needing to use the bathroom. She was mindful of the last time and gently shook Bernie awake, the army medic snapping to attention, half asleep still and scrabbling for a gun that wasn't there.

"Sshhh Bernie. It's okay. I have to pee, but I didn't want to leave you in the bed like last time." The blonde rubbed at her eyes as the room swam into focus and she shuffled across to sit on the edge of the bed. Serena took that as an okay and as quickly as possible used the toilet, washed her hands and went back to the bed. As she got back in Bernie came to her and turned her over so she was the little spoon in the trauma surgeons arms. Bernie sleepily kissed the warm neck in front of her and they both went back to sleep.

Bernie's alarm triggered a fraction of a second before Serena's and both shot awake at the unfamiliar sounds of each other's chosen wakening. Serena grinned at Bernie before realising the trauma surgeon was trembling.

"Come here"

Bernie shuffled over sheepishly and let Serena put her hands on her face.

"It is going to be okay Bernie."

The blonde nodded and took a deep breath, not trusting herself to speak. Serena kissed her forehead and then sent her into the shower whilst she laid out clothes for herself and checked Jason was up, needlessly because his routine was cemented, but she liked to do nonetheless.

A soaking wet Bernie wrapped in a towel came out and nipped passed her to her own room, still to be slept in, to get dressed as Serena scrubbed herself quickly in the shower, and emerged clean and feeling refreshed. She dressed, choosing her usual black trousers and vest and her burnt orange blouse. Small amount of make-up, jewellery and she was off to the kitchen, colliding with Bernie at the top who was in skinny jeans and a dark green shirt, hair damp and tousled, probably not having seen a brush. Serena squeezed her elbow and they joined Jason in the kitchen who'd made a stack of toast. Coffee was swiftly consumed and coats and shoes and bags.

Bernie stood for a moment, attaching her new key to her key bunch, missing Serena surreptitiously wiping a tear away at watching her and then they were outside and Bernie proudly locked the door and tested the handle, making Serena sniffle again with joy. She and Jason went over to her car and Jason climbed in the back. Serena got in the drivers seat and then huffed, getting back out again as she realised Bernie was hovering but not getting in.

She stood with her hands on her hips, head tilted, looking at the infuriatingly adorable woman in front of her.

"Come on then" she said gently.

"Should, should..."

Serena tapped her foot with slight impatience.
"Should I take my own car? Stop the jungle drums and all that?"
Serena had had enough.
"Berenice bloody Wolfe, will you just get in the damn car."
Serena stalked back over crossly and sat in the seat as a chagrined army medic slipped into the passenger seat.
"Sorry Jason" Serena mumbled, pulled Bernie to her and kissed her.
"I don't care about anyone in the hospital except the two people in this car. Alright?"
Bernie nodded and kissed back.

Jason grinned as he watched the two women kiss and then separate. Catching his aunts eye in the rear view mirror she winked at him and he smiled back, happy that they were all okay.
"Auntie Serena?"
"Yes Jason?"
"You need to start the car or we'll be late."
Serena laughed and put her seatbelt on, checking the other two had as well and started the engine. The drive was short and she turned up the radio at Jason's request when The Sound of Silence was played, all 3 of them singing along and Serena slipping effortlessly into the harmony, giving Bernie goosebumps as her voice wrapped around the army medic like molten chocolate.

They pulled into the car park and Jason started to get out. Serena unclipped her belt and watched Bernie frozen. "Mars bar" her little voice whispered as Jason said his goodbyes and went on his own way. Serena took her hand.
"We've got this Bernie. We're going to get out of this car, you're going to hold my hand and we are going to go through the door, up in the lift and to our office. That's all you've got to manage okay?"
Bernie nodded and took some deep breaths as Serena got out of the car and came round to her side. She got out slowly and grabbed Serena's hand and they walked into the hospital through the automatic door, into the lift and up to AAU.
Chapter 106 - The long mile

Chapter Notes

Meh sorry. This is basically filler.
Not happy with this. Blame the pneumonia that's taken residence. Bear with me.

Chapter 106.

Bernie hesitated at the entrance. Still gripping Serena's hand like a vice she felt herself get sweaty with nerves. What was wrong with her? She gave herself a scolding. She had worked here for more than a year now, several months on AAU and yet it was like a first day, where she didn't know anyone and she wasn't wearing any pants. It was unusual for two consultants to have the same week off and part of what was worrying the army medic was that she didn't know what anyone had been told. She pulled at Serena's arm.

"What did you tell them?"

Serena looked at her. "That you weren't well and needed me to help out." she said. "I was more open with Hanssen though Bernie."

The blonde nodded and they let go of each other to alcohol-gel their hands, the coolness on her flushed skin grounding Bernie and making her feel slightly more normal.

"Game face" she murmured, The Beatles playing in her head.

"Come on then little blackbird" whispered Serena, seemingly reading Bernie's mind again.

They walked through the doors to a busy but controlled scene, patients and monitors, doctors and nurses.

They walked over to the nurses station where Morven was sat, the young woman looked up and smiled warmly before realising it was the two consultants and running round to wrap her arms around Serena, who'd become something of a surrogate Mum to her. She squeezed Bernie's arm as well, welcoming them warmly. Raf waved from across the ward and after Serena told the junior doctor that they would do rounds in half an hour, they headed into their office and Serena shut the door behind them.

"Well done darling" she said to the blonde who looked pale but determined as they sat opposite each other and poked the power buttons on their PCs. Serena surveyed her desk, tidy and ordered and giggled as she looked at Bernie doing a quick clean up job of various coffee cups and post it notes, and what might have been a sandwich a week ago.

"I'd forgotten this."

"What?" said Bernie trying to remember her password.

"That you are essentially a slob" chuckled Serena.

"Oy" protested Bernie, "I've been my best tidy self at home.." she bit off the end having referred to it as home again.

Serena smiled warmly. "I appreciate it. Oh Goody. I've got a meeting request from Hanssen for 9:30 and then another at 11?"

"10:15" said Bernie wincing and clicking to accept reluctantly.

"It'll be okay Bernie" said Serena softly.

Bernie got up abruptly and started to pace. "You don't know that Serena. What if he says we can't work together anymore? What if one of us has to change wards? What if he closes the Trauma Unit?"
"Woah" said Serena getting up. "Breathe with me."
They stood and Serena brought Bernie's hand to her chest so she could feel her breathing pattern like before. The army medic struggled against but eventually it settled.
"Don't be hasty okay? Let's hear what he has to say and we will figure it out. He's not unreasonable. It's not like I'm a consultant and you're an F1. We're equals and I'm sure he'll want to check in with us both after the week off."
"What if he thinks I can't cope, with my, my..."
"Your PTSD?"
Bernie nodded and started to wring her hands.
"He will be supportive. I promise. He's one of the good guys."
Bernie searched Serena's face and then sat suddenly on one of the visitors chairs.
"Don't let me fall apart here" she whispered, not to Serena but to whoever might be listening somewhere watching over them.
Serena knelt in front of her, resting her elbows on Bernie's knees.
"Remember what I said a week ago. You're the most fantastic, fearless doctor in the entire hospital."
Bernie smiled and gave Serena a quick kiss.
Serena smiled back and cupped her face. "Seems we've come full circle" and gave her another quick kiss before heaving herself up and back to her desk.
"I'm going to get in my scrubs."
"Ok love" Serena said. "Rounds in 10."
Bernie nodded and slipped out of the room.

Serena exhaled in a rush. That hasn't been too awful. A thought crossed her mind and she guiltily sloped over to Bernie's desk. She opened the draw and had a quick look and then a rummage, removing two wrapped scalpel blades from the depths with a sigh and depositing them in the sharps bin just outside the door. She'd have to confess that later but for now, it was something. She walked over to the desk and laid her hand on Morven's shoulder.
"Oh Ms Campbell, I've missed you" the young woman said. "How is Ms Wolfe?"
"On the mend Morven. Hello Raf" she said as the Scotsman came over. "Thank you both for holding the fort."
"It's fine Serena" he said gently. "It's not been too insane and you've heard Fletch is awake and on the mend?"
"Yes" enthused Serena, "I'm going to pop up to see him later."

Bernie came over then in her dark blue trauma unit scrubs and her hair pulled back off her face, looking calmer and more focussed, her hospital uniform helping her recognise her identity here, a strong, capable, intelligent surgeon.
"Hello troops" she quipped.
"Hi Ms Wolfe" they said in unison as Serena rubbed the back of her neck and looked away, the sight of the scrubs doing delicious things to her insides.
"Rounds?"
They walked round the ward, Raf leading and Morven making notes as they were brought up to speed on each case currently occupying space. The two consultants offered insights and suggestions and gently questioned the younger doctors to encourage their diagnostic skills. They finished and the doors opened with a new patient being wheeled in.
"I'll take it" said Bernie, "off you go to see our illustrious leader."
"Ma'am yes ma'am" said Serena and squeezed Bernie's hand, noted by both Raf and Morven with hastily hidden smiles and off they went to their respective tasks in hand.
Chapter 107 - Serena

Chapter Notes

And here we are at 100k words!
Hope you're still enjoying it x

Chapter 107

Serena knocked on the light oak door of the office of the CEO. A brief flurry of nerves came and went again, she knew Hanssen would be fair and he had only ever been supportive of her and Jason.
"Come" came the austere voice and she opened the door and went in. The tall, dark-haired man rose politely as she entered and she offered him a shy smile.
"Ah Ms Campbell. Do sit down."
"Thank you Henrik." she said, dropping into the chair opposite him and across the desk.

Hanssen regarded the woman in front of him without speaking. He could see the worry she was trying to hide, the slightly darker circles under her eyes and she seemed to have lost a little weight.

Serena stared at him, unsure of what to say.
"She, we, I, well"
"Go on"
"We are in a relationship now Henrik. And she's living with Jason and I." She exhaled noisily,
relieved at having said it out loud. Hanssen nodded as if he knew that as well, did she have no secrets from this man?
"Is that wise?"
Again no judgement was coming from him and she found she actually was glad to explore this with someone not invested in it.
"Honestly? Wise no. Impossible yes. But, I love her."
The tears came then and she found herself on the receiving end of a crisp white handkerchief with which she dabbed at her eyes.
"You'll need to see HR. Just to be on the right side of the rules."
She nodded, "I had planned to go there after seeing you."
"Very good." The CEO sat back in his chair and regarded her.
"Will this change things?" she asked tentatively.
"I'll need to speak with Ms Wolfe first Ms Campbell but you're coming back at 11 so we can discuss that then. What I will say is, please remember not to neglect yourself. Loving someone is never easy and you've now got two quite fragile people in your heart. You don't always have to be the strong one."

She had to get up then and she moved to the window, wrapping her arms around herself. He came to stand beside her as they looked down to the peace garden outside.
"Thank you Henrik" she stuttered and he nodded.
"You know Ms Campbell, I think you'll be just fine."
She blinked back the tears once more and gently touched his elbow.
"Thank you."
"I came across Mr Haynes this morning wheeling a man to Darwin. He seemed to think I was blocking his path and informed me that my route to my office was inefficient."
Serena groaned. "Sorry about that. I should never have encouraged him to read that book about efficiency studies."
"On the contrary, I think he had an excellent point. Imagine if we all saved 2.3 seconds of every journey."
His face and tone gave nothing away but Serena knew he was trying to reduce the tension. She squeezed his arm once more.
"I'll be back at 11"
"Yes, do be prompt."
He sat back down and got back to his paperwork as she left the office where she spied Bernie hurrying down towards her. They clasped hands briefly.
"Okay?" The blonde murmured and Serena smiled.
"Okay. You?"
"Yes. Left Raf and Morven with the patient. Fell off a ladder and is probably going to need ortho but I'm worried about internal bleeding so they'll be organising some imaging and bloods. Can you check in on them when you do back down?"
"Of course." said Serena and looked around, seeing no one she kissed the army medics cheek who blushed.
"Don't work about Hanssen. It'll be fine:"
"Promise?"
"Promise."

They kissed, a gentle, chaste kiss of lips and Bernie then continued to the office the brunette had just left and Serena poked the button for the lift and headed for the 3rd floor.
Chapter 108 - Bernie

Bernie came to a stop just outside the office door. She bit her lower lip as she tried to set her face to calm and reassuring. She trusted Serena’s judgment of Hanssen and how he might respond but she didn't really know the man, and wanted to impress him as a doctor, not knowing that she already had of course. The tall Swede was the epitome of grace under pressure, a characteristic the blonde admired and recognised from her army days. She ran her hand through her fringe, where had that Bernie gone? She thought about the last week of continually falling apart on Serena, the months of hiding her self harm and her descent into the depths of her repressed trauma. Was the old Bernie still in there anywhere or was this the new normal?

She squared her shoulders as she would if she was going to face her commanding officer in the regiment and tapped smartly on the door. On being summoned in she walked in step time automatically to the front of the desk and just barely stopped herself saluting. She saw the tiniest raise of an eyebrow on the man facing her as if she had done it anyway and given her formal report of name, rank and serial number.

"Ms Wolfe, do sit down"

She sat in the same seat that Serena had occupied earlier, also noting the neatness of the mans desk and office and mentally made a note to try harder in their office. Well if it still was their office after this.

"Thank you for coming to see me Ms Wolfe. Forgive the directness, how is your mental health?"

She recoiled slightly in her chair.

"Um, well."

"You've probably heard the rumours about me Ms Wolfe. A cold fish, brusque, unfeeling. Not without merit. But what I will say is I am responsible for your welfare and would like you to feel you can be honest with me."

Bernie had no response to this. She knew Serena trusted this man, though she was not sure exactly what he'd done to earn it, but it must be big as Serena loved easily but trusted few.

"Ms Wolfe, I want to reassure you if I may. Your job is safe. For as long as you want to be at Holby. I need to ensure you are able to perform your role to the best of your ability and may enforce some leave if necessary but that is all."

"Did, Did Serena tell you?"

"I'm asking you to tell me Berenice." Hanssen said softly, knowing the use of her first name would disarm her a little.

She looked him in eye and saw, just as Serena had, no judgement, only questions.

"It's been very hard Mr Hanssen since Fletch was stabbed. And before. But it's triggered in me some feelings that I need to deal with. I'm seeing a therapist on Wednesday for the first time. I'm, now, in a relationship with Serena, Ms Campbell, and I am living with her and her nephew."

She paused. "I am though, capable and wanting to be at work. It gives me purpose" she said simply and the CEO nodded.

"I expected you to say that. I am pleased that you are taking positive action."

They sat in a companionable silence for a while as Bernie adjusted to what she'd shared with a man she barely knew. She plucked a pencil from his pen holder and began twirling it in her fingers. Hanssen remained silent, recognising that the woman in front of him was working up to day something.
"What happens now?"
Hanssen leaned back in his chair.
"You'll need to see HR, just a formality, to confirm what I believe Ms Campbell is telling them right about now after she comes to meet with us both in a few moments."

Bernie got up and started to pace, out of nervous tension. After a few moments of watching her, the tall man, got up and stood by the window and she gravitated over there, unconsciously echoing the earlier position of her girlfriend and the CEO.
"Ms Wolfe, if you would permit me an observation?"
"Of course Mr Hanssen."
"You are not under orders here. It's not like the army. We share each other's burdens. You do not always have to be in control, or certain of the future. You have a good team around you in many ways, and I want you to hear it from me, that what happened to Nurse Fletcher was in no way your fault. It was a series of unpredictable events. Let it go."
Bernie froze and stared at him. He nodded gently and moved away letting her have space to process.
"You really don't blame me?"
"No Ms Wolfe, no one does, except you."

She couldn't stop the tears then and was handed a crisp white handkerchief.
"Thank you, Mr Hanssen" she said after a while, "it appears I needed to hear that."
"Indeed" said the Swede.
She mopped at her eyes while the CEO shuffled some papers and signed some documents, giving her chance to pull herself back into shape. She felt exhausted but like a part of the weight she'd carried for a week was lifted.

Hanssen finished what he was doing and looked at his watch, a slim leather strap with a white face and copper coloured workings.
"I believe Ms Campbell should be about to return."
As if on cue, a light knock sounded and Serena entered the room for the second time that morning.
Chapter 109.

Serena, in the meantime, had been up to the HR department on the 3rd floor, reluctantly but she understood why it was necessary. She been forced to wait on a hard white plastic chair, feeling faintly like she was waiting for the headmaster at school, when she'd been cheeky to her teacher aged 8.

To her relief she didn't see any of the other staff she was close to and a woman she'd seen on a couple of occasions before came across to her.

"Ms Campbell, I'm Laura Masters one of the Human Resources reps for staff. Would you like to come through?"

Serena rose and followed the woman through to a generic NHS office space, industrial grey and institutional blue but with little touches to make it seem a more personable space, a sofa and some wingback chairs, a low table sporting the obligatory box of tissues and the same vague art on the walls.

She took a seat on the couch and Laura settled to the right of her on a chair, neutral expression and clipboard at the ready. Serena regarded her. She was dressed neatly in a knee length black skirt and a slightly fussy shirt with a floral patten.

"How can I help you today Ms Campbell?" Laura asked.

"I need to register a personal relationship with another staff member." Serena said, feeling a little silly.

"Okay, can I ask who it is?"

Serena cleared her throat. "Ms Wolfe."

Laura nodded seemingly already knowing that. "Okay, we will need to do a few things."

"Firstly, Mr Hanssen will need to be informed."

"He already knows" said Serena. "I've just finished telling him and Bernie, Ms Wolfe, is in with him now."

She was passed a form to fill in, asking for names and dates and positions held within the work place. She uncapped a blue biro and filled it in swiftly, passing it back after signing it.

The HR rep smiled and thanked Serena.

"I'll just need to do a quick run down, this is unusual because you're co-leads is that correct?"

Serena nodded.

"Normally it's a superior and a junior and Mr Hanssen would simply move one of them. You're slightly senior to Ms Wolfe. Do you know if he's planning that here?"

The brunettes heart sank.

"I don't know yet" she admitted softly.

"Okay, well for the moment, let's assume not."

Serena prayed in her heart that that would be the case.

Laura continued. "You can't take Ms Wolfe's performance review meetings or sit on any panel involving her conduct. If complaints are made about her to you by staff or patients you must immediately refer them to Mr Hanssen or to this department in his absence. Any disagreement between you on workplace matters will be mediated by him or another senior staff member at his discretion."

None of this was a surprise so far so all well and good. Serena was fairly sure that even before this she wouldn't have been doing Bernie's review and the rest was just common sense and good practice.
Laura continued again. "Any impropriety on hospital grounds may be grounds for a disciplinary, the consequences of which could be suspension, transfer, loss of seniority and ultimately dismissal."

Serena rolled her eyes, she practically gave this speech on AAU every time a new crop of fresh-faced sex-mad F1s joined the ward, though it went something like "no shagging in any cupboard I might have to walk into." and she smiled in spite of herself.

"As the senior colleague Ms Campbell you remain ultimately responsible for the conduct of you both."

Again no shock.
"You are both union members, you are entitled to seek their advice if you feel that is warranted at any time."

She sat back and watched Laura complete a simple tick box to state she'd covered all the necessary areas and asked Serena to sign that one also. The young woman gathered the documents and clipped them together neatly and then looked at Serena.

"If you need anything Ms Campbell, at any point, that's what we are here for. Advice, a sounding board, anything."

Serena smiled, tight-lipped but genuine.

"Thank you. This situation is still very new so I'd appreciate your discretion."

Laura looked at her calmly.
"My job makes it professionally inappropriate for me to share anything you tell me apart from what I am required to. Being a person of integrity means I wouldn't anyway."

Serena relaxed a little and Laura tapped her pen against the files, knowing what she was about to say would probably kill the lightness that had just come into the room.

"If Mr Hanssen changes anything we made need to meet again" said Laura quietly, seeing that this something the AAU doctor was scared of. "Try not to worry."

Serena got up at this, needing to cry but also needing to go to Bernie and to her 11 o'clock meeting with the boss.

"Thank you Laura" she said and held out her hand. The two women shook hands and then Serena slipped out of the office and then the department.

She found an gel station and rubbed her hands clean before heading back down to the first floor to Hanssens office. She took a moment to collect herself and the tapped lightly on the door, before opening it and strolling though the door.
Chapter 110

All either of them wanted to do was take the other in their arms and just hold them close, kiss it better, make the tension and the worry dissipate. But here, in this austere, functional office, with their boss standing politely on the other side of the gigantic desk they just offered half smiles as Serena entered the office. Both Hanssen and Bernie had stood and the brunette looked fondly at the army medic, always so chivalrous. She examined Bernie's face, a little tear stained she noted unhappily and the usual tension in the muscles around her eyes was definitively present but there was also a softness that she hadn't expected, a relief perhaps. Serena wondered what Hanssen had said to her. He was a kind man despite the aloof persona he cultivated and she trusted him deeply.

Bernie looked at Serena and fear stabbed low in her gut as she regarded her. Evidence of dried tears were present in a slight salt track down one cheek and she seemed to be holding herself rigid, as if she thought if she relaxed she'd come apart. What had Hanssen said to her and what had happened in HR? Had someone made her feel scared or worried, had they teased nastily as it was a relationship with another woman, when Serena's previous relationships had clearly been with a man. Bernie's thoughts started to race and she automatically started a search with her eyes for something, anything, until she clamped down on those thoughts. Not here. Not in his office. She didn't need to freak him out more than normal. There would be time. She thought about her desk and knew she had what she needed.

"Ms Campbell, welcome back" the CEO said. "Do sit down again."
Serena dropped into the chair next to Bernie's, sighing a little at the proximity of her, knowing that she was close meant Serena's nerves fall away a little. They could face this together.

"Ms Campbell, Ms Wolfe, I should like to start with my assurances that I and this hospital are in gratitude of your hard work and services on AAU. You have been outstanding co-leads."
Both women sat up a little. Past tense didn't sound good, thought Serena and Bernie, well Bernie expected the worst so was unsurprised by the initial tone.
"I don't see any reason for that to need to change. I'm sure HR has given you the talk Ms Campbell and you'll be given it to Ms Wolfe, discretion is the best part of valour and all that."
Serena nodded as Bernie's mouth fell open in surprise. She'd expected to be shipped back to Keller at the very least.
Hanssen continued, "I am glad that you Ms Wolfe are seeking additional support and the hospital will be covering the associated costs. Ms Campbell, if you should find yourself needed to attend then you have my permission to rota the team accordingly. My door is always open to either of you, together or separately as you require."

He sat back and surveyed the two women in front of him. Both of them had got tears in their eyes as they looked back at him. He opened a drawer and drew out two fresh handkerchiefs, passing them one each. Serena giggled a little at that. "I knew you had a stock of these Henrik" she said and the man nodded sagely.
Bernie couldn't process. Hanssen was allowing them to stay together and the hospital would pay for her therapy? She spoke. "Mr Hanssen, I can't let you pay for my therapy as much as I appreciate the offer."

Hanssen rolled his eyes and Serena tutted audibly. "It is not an offer Ms Wolfe" he said. "I am obliged to take care of your emotional well being and this is how I intend to do so."
"It's okay Bernie" said Serena softly. "Let him in."
Bernie started to tremble a little and she swallowed and sat on her hands. "Thank you" she said hoarsely. "I, I don't know what to say, but thank you."
"Thank you from me as well Henrik" said Serena, seeing Bernie overwhelmed. "You've once again been most kind to me."
"Think nothing of it." said Hanssen.
They sat together in silence, both Bernie and Serena dabbing at their eyes and looking at their unlikely friend.
"Well I think that covers everything I needed" he said gently and both woman got up, expressing their thanks and leaving the office, shutting the door behind them.

Bernie leaned up against the opposite wall, feeling her legs want to turn to jelly. Serena came over and stood next to her, stroking her arm and whispering encouragement to her.
"You did so well my darling" she intoned in the army medics ear.
"I didn't expect that" Bernie said.
"He's one of the good ones" Serena replied, "okay, so you need to pop to HR and have the no sex in cupboards conversation."
Bernie's eyes flew up to Serena's twinkly smile.
"Oh God no" groaned Bernie. "I've heard your F1 speech, I know the drill."
"Sorry" said Serena, "not allowed to be me that gives you The Talk. I might be a corrupting influence"
Bernie laughed at her flirtatious woman. "Ms Campbell you're incorrigible."
"S'why you love me" the brunette sassed and kissed her Major quickly while the corridor was empty. "Off you go. Ask for Laura."

The squeezed hands and headed their separate ways, Bernie jogged up the stairs to HR and Serena waited for the lift to take her back to AAU. "Half the day done already" she thought as she poked the button and stepped in as it arrived. Allowed herself a deep breath when the lift doors closed and she thought about the morning had gone. She hasn't expected Hanssen to separate them but there had still been the possibility he might. She was relieved that they could continue their work together as they were at their best as a team. She exit the lift and pushed through the doors onto the ward, to be met with utter chaos.
"Serena, over here!"
Raf called her over to where he was taking a blood gas from a patient's artery. Alarms were shrieking on multiple patients and staff nurses were scurrying between patients and doctors, trying to assist. Across the aisle Morven was applying compressions to another patient who was in cardiac arrest.
"Both went south at the same time" panted Raf. "I'm fine, help Morven."
She looked around at a third bed where two nurses were cleaning a young woman's wounds and the fourth bed had an elderly woman shouting her head off for someone named Alistair while an F1 tried to keep her in the bed.

"Dr Digby, what have we got?"
"Richard Carlisle, 43, in an RTA at 10:57am today, fractured left tib and fib, crush injuries to the chest and pelvis. GCS 15 on scene, assessed in the ED and transferred here. GCS dropped to 7 on arrival on AAU. No immediate output. Given 5 of adrenaline, compressions at 8 minutes with bagging. Airway is clear."
"Well done, keep going with compressions and I'll hook him up to a 12-lead."

Serena worked quickly to attach the man to a heart monitor after pulling on a pair of surgical gloves. The little sticky pads applied in specific places and then leads clipped on.
"Okay hold compressions"
Morven stopped and she viewed the monitor, the trace perform complex patterns.
"Okay he's in V-Fib. Paddles at 300."
Serena lay the pads on the mans chest, and Morven passed her the paddles.
"Air away, clear, shocking"
The mans chest leapt violently and sank back down.
"No change. Air away. Clear. Shocking."
His chest leapt again with the electricity trying to calm his heart rhythm.
They looked at the monitor and Serena head Raf call for a chest tray in the background.
"Yes, rhythm, no he's back in V-Fib. Charge to 360"
Serena looked at Morven, who tapped the commands into the unit.
"Air away, clear, shocking"
The mans whole torso came off the bed and resettled and a steady beep rose from the monitor.
"And we have sinus. Good. I want an FBC, U and Es, Cardiac Enzymes and a trauma panel. Someone page Dr Valentine please. Continuous obs."

Serena pulled off the gloves and chucked them on the floor, pulling a fresh pair out and hurrying over to Raf, who had his patient draped and was making an incision on the right hand side of his chest.
"Tension pneumothorax" he said and then went back to concentrating. "Damn"
"Easy Raf" said Serena calmly but firmly, "visualise the space, thread the tube in gently"
"I need suction" said Raf and a nurse applied the device, clearly the entry he had made a little.
"You've got this" confided Serena.
Raf exhaled and frowned as a few moments passed.
"It's there."
"Well done. Well done. Tie it in and hook him up and then let's get some films."

She ungloved again and went back over to Morven who was talking to Oliver Valentine.
"Ms Campbell" said the cardio-thoracic doctor. "It looks like an anterior wall MI."
Serena nodded, having expected that. "He needs a CT and and MRI on those crush injuries."
Oliver agreed. "Then he needs to go to Darwin."
Morven was scribbling furiously in the chart as two porters arrived. Serena signed quickly and directed the young doctor to go with the patient to the scans.

She went back to Raf, who was reviewing the portable x ray films. "Drains in a good place."
She nodded and patted his shoulder.
"Let's see if we can send him to Keller."
Raf went off to clean up after giving some instructions to the nurse with him. Serena checked on the other beds in the bay and agreed to the treatment courses suggested to her by the other doctors and nurses around her.
She went over to the nurses station just as Bernie slipped through the double doors.
"What did I miss?" asked the blonde surgeon and Serena smiled.
"Oh just Morven and Raf being their usual brilliant selves. Quiet really."
Bernie raised her eyebrow at Serena who laughed. "How was HR?"

They walked over to their office and sat at their desks.
"Laura was, nice? It was a little weird though. She kept asking me if I was okay"
"Well she's meant to check on you love."
"I wanted to tell her she'd be more than okay if she'd had Serena Campbell's tongue..."
"YES, thank you Berenice!" shot out Serena flushing.
"What?" asked Bernie in mock innocence.
"Behave yourself. This is our place of work."
"Mmmm yes, forgot, no shagging in cupboards"
They looked at each other and laughed.
"I like giving that speech much more than getting it" groaned Serena, rubbing her neck.
Bernie got up and stood beside her.
"Coffee?"
"Oh yes please."
Bernie smiled and dropped a quick kiss to the top of Serena's head.
"Technically not a cupboard" she whispered and skipped out of the way of Serena trying to slap her.
"Go get caffeine you" said the brunette, laughing.
Bernie rummaged in her bag for her purse and left the office.
Serena sat back and exhaled loudly. It had been an intense day so far. She looked over at Bernie's now unoccupied desk and a tear came unbidden to her eye as she thought about how wonderful it was to have her there and to be able to banter like always, in spite of what they had experiences in this last week and how it so easily could have been a permanent empty space.
She shook the thoughts away, restarted her PC and focussed on the screen, waiting for Bernie to come back.
Chapter 112 - Coffee stop

Chapter 112.

In the queue at Pulses Bernie was biting her lip, looking like she was considering her coffee choice, not that was even a decision as far as she was concerned, nor Serena, hot, strong with a side of pastry goodness if you please. No, she was thinking about her morning, that so far had involved very little actual medicine, sending for a set of bloods on a chap with a mysterious skin infection hardly even qualified. She'd missed the manic part whilst she was in HR with Laura, that had been fairly excruciating, she'd almost rather a root canal. Almost. Oh the woman had been kind and matter of fact, she just didn't like the slightly sordid undertone, that she was bedding the woman who was her boss, even though neither of them saw their working relationship as anything other than equal, in name, Serena was it.

She'd been on the other end of an imbalanced relationship with Alex, she rolled her eyes, hardly a relationship when conversation is limited to "hurry up", "shhh" and "oh god yes there." Bernie had been the one in charge and she could never shake that fear, a different fear to Marcus finding out, though that was present too. Her life was her command and part of her knew it wasn't worth it, the sex was good, really good and she felt like she'd come home in a way, but the threat of court martial, losing her commission, maybe even discharge, a dishonourable one, was a heavy cross to bear and then the IED and repatriation and losing her place in the army anyway turned it into just another affair, that she couldn't end but then it came anyway and it was a relief.

There just weren't any of those feelings about being with Serena, they fit, it was fate. The thought of someone, anyone, seeing and judging that, denoting it as a boss-worker fling, that hurt, Bernie realised. Laura hadn't judged, neither had Hanssen, but more with the HR rep, she'd felt like she was being asked to define them as something they just weren't. She'd wanted to rip the silly forms up, declare her undying love and esteem for Serena that couldn't be relegated to check boxes on a stupid form. Oh she understood why, but it didn't mean she had to like it and she would definitely sulk about it.

She was passed coffee and cake without saying a word, their order so constant, so predictable, the whole transaction complete in smiles and silence as she passed over the money. Paper bags and styrofoam cups, the contents saying so much more about them than a tick next to The Talk on a bureaucratic piece of paper. She jogged back up the stairs, careful not to spill and backed through the double doors on to the ward. All quiet on the western front so far as she surveyed the landscape as a seasoned pro, grateful to slip on the office to the appreciative sigh from Serena who eagerly stretched her hands out for sustenance, her lips for kisses and her soul for the taking.

"What about The Talk" laughed Bernie kissing her woman swiftly and thoroughly.

"Not technically a cupboard" Serena threw back to Bernie, capturing her for one more kiss before delving into the bag.

"Mmmmm thank you."

"For kisses or cake?"

"Both" said Serena in a shower of crumbs and icing sugar.

A knock at the door and Jason arrived with his sandwiches.

"Auntie Serena, Bernie, I came to see you as it's my break."

The two women welcomed him and he sat on the plastic visitor chair and dug into his food as the doctors sipped their coffee and ate their snacks. Jason kept them laughing with tales from his life as a porter including one man who'd confused them both so much that they'd gone full circle and started back where they were without ever getting where they were going. Luckily Ms Offanga had
spotted it and sent them round for lap 2 and Serena made a mental note to send her a thank you. Everyone was so supportive of her nephew, he was a thoroughly likeable young man but they all went out of their way to support him and by proxy, her. Serena was well loved at Holby, even if she didn't always know it. He finished off his food and bid them goodbye until home time, gleefully reminding them that tonight was Toad in the Hole. Serena cast her eyes to the heavens as she remembered not getting the sausages out of the freezer but it seemed Jason had anticipated that and done it for her so crisis averted.

They started their afternoon, Bernie went off to supervise Raf in theatre on a trauma case that arrived from ED, Serena did afternoon rounds, solved a stock crisis and did a little teaching about wound care with the F1s on a man with gangrene in his leg. Nothing too awful and they passed again in the office where Serena was working on the new budget for AAU and Bernie was writing up her charts for the day, before going to a consult in the ED. Clocking off time arrived and they did the handover to the evening shift together with Raf and Morven and walked with Jason to the car, heading home, first day back complete.
Chapter 113 - Confession

Chapter 113
“I really hate making toad in the hole Bernie.”

Bernie looked over from where she was peeling carrots, to where Serena was browning sausages on the stove, the Kitchenaid humming a low note in the background as the batter came together to be poured over the meat. She felt like there might be a subtext to what Serena had just said and gauged what to say.

“Do you?” she offered noncommittally and felt immediately exasperated with herself for not delving deeper and going with her gut. Serena’s body language was clearly indicating that this was not about the food and yet she wasn’t sure what to ask. She resolved to try again.

“What about it do you hate? That is a very strong word.” Better, Bernie, better, she thought to herself. Open questions are good. Serena latched onto the opportunity immediately.

“It isn’t ever perfect. It is both too crispy and dry or too soggy. It is against everything I am about. I can’t ever meet the expectation that comes with it.”

Bernie put down the peeler and wiped her hands on her jeans. She moved over to stand behind Serena and put her hands on the other woman’s hips gently, not wanting to startle her. She rested her cheek on her back and felt the warmth coming through her shirt.

“What’s wrong” she half whispered. “Tell me.”

Serena felt tears start and blinked them away unseen.

“Today was okay wasn’t it?”

Bernie registered the change in topic and pondered it in her mind.

“It had its moments but we got through it together. Though if we have HR issues you are going to have to deal with them because I am never going up there again” she joked, trying to lighten the tension.

“I did something.”

Bernie forced herself to stay close as a hundred possibilities ran through her mind. She took a deep breath and waited for Serena to continue.

“Please don’t be mad.” The tears were making Serena’s voice thick and Bernie stepped back a little and sat on the bench at the kitchen table to allow her a moment, in which she flipped the sausages into a baking tray and poured the batter over them, before sliding it into the oven.

“Serena.”

The brunette looked over at her and then came to sit by her side. Bernie took her hand and held it in her lap.

“There isn’t anything you can say or do that would make me mad forever” and looked through her fringe as Serena simply shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It must matter or we wouldn’t be talking about it darling.”

Serena’s eyes flew up at the term of endearment and Bernie blushed. She wasn’t so good at the whole romance thing but she was trying so hard to make Serena feel loved.

“I went in your desk drawer.”

“Okay” said Bernie, puzzled, why on earth would that be a big deal. “I went in your handbag for a tissue” so it is okay right?”

“Oh of course, I don’t mind that” Serena said, knowing she wasn’t making sense and living in the dissonance of wanting to confess and wanting the ignorance of bliss.
“So why would I?” Bernie asked, genuinely not understanding.
“I didn’t take a tissue.”
“What did you take?” asked Bernie gently, racking her brain.
“Some scalpel blades” said Serena and covered her face with her hands.
Bernie looked at her, processing what she had said. Her face tinged pink with faint embarrassment and her head shouted nonsense about betrayal and then conversely about love.
“What did you do with them?” she asked, not at all sure why she needed to know.
“I put them in the sharps bin outside. Bernie, I promise, it was with the best of intentions, you asked me not to let you fall apart at work” and Bernie though about how she had whispered that to the universe that morning and not actually Serena and her heart filled with love for the woman next to her who was trying so very hard to protect her from herself.

“I’m sorry” whispered Bernie and she hung her head, trying to take her hand back but Serena wouldn’t let her. “I’m sorry I make you worry about my self-harm.”
“Oh Bernie” began Serena. “I love you, and anything I can do to help keep you safe, whatever it is, I will always do, but then I was worried you wouldn’t trust me when you knew I had rummaged. I don’t want you to feel like I invade your privacy.”
“You don’t” answered Bernie. “I appreciate you keeping me safe and I am glad you told me and didn’t keep it to yourself. Honestly, I did think about it a little, especially when we first got there, but you were wonderful, the safe word helps so much.”
Serena sniffled, close to letting the fat tears fall at the forgiveness and understanding she was getting, instead of the sulks and the tantrums that Edward would have given her.

“Bernie I love you.”
“I love you too. Come here.”

The blonde opened her arms and Serena shifted onto her lap and felt strong muscles ripple as she was encircled with love. She lay her head on the shoulder of the trauma surgeon who felt the moisture as tears tricked down her neck under her shirt collar.
“It’s okay. Thank you for keeping me safe and for always wanting to.”
Serena couldn’t speak, didn’t want to, only wanting to stay close, joined together in body, heart, mind and soul, the only place where she felt whole. She felt lips pressed to her forehead in a delicate kiss and she sighed a little as the tension started to release.

“Serena?”
“Yes Bernie?”
“Do you think I have expectations of you?”
Serena thought for a moment.

“I worry that I won’t be enough, that I’ll get it wrong, that you’ll run, even when my intentions are good” she admitted, more tears coming and silent soaking into the cloth against her face.
“I can see why you would, I am very good at running, I have told you that. But I am trying, I will always try, for you, to stay, to talk and to ask you to run with me. You said you would and I believe you. I don’t have any other expectations than you holding on with me. I am like toad in the hole, I’ll never be perfect, but I like it dry and crispy and soggy and anywhere in between. You might not always get it right, and I definitely won’t, but it is always okay.”
She stopped after what was a fairly long speech for her and held her breath. Serena was properly crying then, with relief and love and emotions she couldn’t even name.

“Thank you” she stammered out and Bernie gave her a little squeeze to tell her it was all okay.
They sat together for a while, just enjoying the feel of being close and warm and loved until Jason shuffled through to check on dinner progress and they got up and finished the food, then sat to eat together in their little family, safe and secure and relieved in honesty.
They all went to sit in the lounge and Bernie and Jason played several rounds of speed chess while Serena sat and watched whilst she browsed the internet on her iPad, a little clothes shopping, a look on Amazon and eBay before delving into her book, a biography of Queen Victoria. She was stretched out on the sofa as Bernie and Jason faced each other either side of the coffee table, sat on big floor pillows she had bought when Elinor was small and kept recovering to match the room. She glanced fondly at her two favourite people as they rapidly moved pieces and punched the timer to trigger the other person to move. Concentration was filling the air along with satisfied sighs from Jason and alarmed gasps from Bernie as he beat her for the third game in the a row before she gave up and hauled herself off the floor, back protesting as she worked out the kinks from having been curled up in an awkward position. Her short rose up and Serena stared unabashedly at the expanse of flat stomach that was suddenly on view, abs bulging slightly as Bernie arched her back carefully with her hand on her hips.

Bernie finished stretching and packed away the chess board as Jason fiddled with the TV, setting them up for a film, Serena had asked for something fun so he chose The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, which Bernie hadn't seen. The blonde move over to the sofa and slipped under Serena so their brunette was cradled with her head on the stomach she'd just been admiring. Wickedly she drew circles on the little sliver of skin showing until Bernie started to squirm and the brunette thought she'd better behave as Jason was casting looks that meant be quiet at them.

They were quickly absorbed in the film, all fierce colour and riotous comedy. They laughed and Bernie's belly vibrated as she found the young hotel owner funny and then Serena cried a little at the sad parts, making a wet patch on the army medics shirt, causing Bernie to run her hands gently through Serena's hair, scratching at her scalp and tousling the short dark hair into peaks and static. Feeling tied, the vascular surgeon snuggled in and began gently exploiting her position by rubbing at any exposed skin she could now find, making Bernie sigh happily. They were in a perfect bubble when Serena shot upright violently and to the other end of the sofa, away from Bernie, flushed and with wild eyes. The trauma surgeon opened her mouth to speak when Serena shook her head wildly and pressed her finger to her lips, indicating she should stay silent.

They sat stiffly, neither now professing the movie and jumping every time Jason laughed out loud, half-heartedly joining in so he wouldn't realise anything was wrong. Both women's minds were working overtime and the tension in the room was palpable, Bernie was twisting a butting round on her short and Serena was drumming her fingers on the soft arm of the sofa in a complex pattern involving different combinations of her fingers, both willing the film to end and Jason to go to bed. No eye contact was happening, Serena stared resolutely but unseeing at the screen and Bernie was staring at Serena and then alternately at her own hands, desperately trying to work out what was wrong. She thought her head might explode, she could hear her own pulse in her ears. Serena had a dry mouth and her palms were wet with anxiety, something that almost never happened to the normally unflappable medic.

Finally the film finished and Jason got up. He eyed them sitting separately instead of tangled round each other as they had the last few days but didn't say anything other than to wish them goodnight, and head upstairs. Both women unbeknownst to the other counted his steps on the stairs and inhaled at the sound of his door closing and the tinny sound of television immediately leaking out.
Bernie spoke quickly, "Serena, what?"
Serena silenced her with a look that was both fire and ice in the same eye contact.
Her voice came out thick, emotional and faintly accusatory.
"You've shaved your legs."
Bernie was thrown utterly by this and nodded her head, she had.
"Yes, this morning."
Serena's voice was pure pain and poison, and it made Bernie's blood run chill.
"You've shaved your legs. You've got a blade."
"Oh."
"What do you mean, "oh"?!!" Serena spat at her. "You've got a blade, here in this house, after everything we are trying to do to keep you safe. How could you?"
Bernie started to scratch at the back of her her hand as she looked at the beautiful and angry woman opposite her.
"I didn't think Serena, it wasn't intentional."
Serena laughed and goosebumps rose on Bernie's skin at the sound, hollow and dry and devoid of any warmth.
"You didn't think. You didn't think??! Well that's just great Bernie. I worry myself sick over having disposed of blades at work and you've got one here all along. Stupid Serena gets it wrong again."
Bernie blanched. "No, no Serena, I'm sorry, I wasn't, I didn't."
"Right" said Serena and they lapsed into silence.

"I'll get it for you" offered Bernie and Serena snorted. "Bit late for that Major."
"What do you want me to do?" asked Bernie plaintively.
"I don't know" said Serena, all of a sudden so very weary and drained from having to deal with all this. "going to bed." She got up, gave Bernie a last, sad look and went off up the stairs, leaving a shocked and frightened Bernie all alone on the sofa.
Chapter 115 - Serena

Chapter Notes

Sorry that you all had a meltdown over the angst of 114 - I never promised it would be all fluff! I promise I will never leave them broken forever - good enough? Trust meeeeee xx

Chapter 115.

Serena closed the bedroom door and sat on the edge of the bed, the soft white duvet billowing up either side of her as the mattress dipped with her weight. She buried her face in her hands and groaned to herself, the anger making way for shock and hurt and disappointment in herself for what she had just done. Supporting Bernie wasn't really a hardship was it? It was more the reality of how hard it was to keep her safe, keep her from hurting herself. So many dangers and temptations and ones that Bernie herself didn't seem to recognise. She thought back to the night where she had emptied the kitchen into the boot of her car, that was unsustainable. The blades in her desk at work, Bernie had been hiding this a long time, years and she had never had to deal with self harm so close up. At work she empathised and then handed them off to the nearest psych consult. Bodies are so much easier to fix than minds. She hasn't hated her psych rotation but she'd known all along that it wasn't a field she wanted to work in, so she put in her hours, dutifully wrote essays about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Person Centred approaches versus Freudian and Jungian Psychoanalysis, learned about the side effects of atypical antipsychotics and got out into the far safer territory of arterial grafts and liver disorders.

Her thoughts meandered to one young man she'd encountered there, Julian. Abused and rejected by his parents and now with a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, she had sat through week after week of seeing his wounds and the peddling of a different drug to try and calm the disquiet in his mind. Hearing him describe the compulsion to hurt himself in the face of emotions he couldn't regulate and the things he tried in order to stave it off, the ice and the perfume ideas had been straight from working with him. The 2am pages to ED when he'd needed stitches, the 48 hour sections that were never enough to uproot the demons of his past, a cycle condemned to repeat over and over, year on year, until he never returned.

She turned her mind back to Bernie, precious, beautiful, troubled Bernie, and how the angst of this evening hadn't been because of the blonde but her own reaction, her fear. Seeing Bernie cut her stomach last week had been one of the singularly most terrifying moments of Serena's life, the thought of losing Bernie to her own hand, that one day she might go too far had caused Serena significant anguish and she'd buried it. She thought back to another patient, Eliza, and her mum Kathy, and how Kathy had ended up in therapy herself, simply to help her cope with the troubles that caring for someone with mental health issues had cost her. Briefly, she considered that that may be something she may consider, both Bernie and Jason were now in or about to start after all, perhaps a safe space to talk might help.

She'd just left her. She inhaled sharply. Why had she done that? Anything that was likely to top Bernie into hurting herself or running was rejection from Serena. She ran her hands through her hair. Was she punishing Bernie? Why? So many questions began to pour into her mind and she winced at the images that came with them. She felt vaguely nauseous and took some deep breaths.
After all she'd tried to do, to help and keep her safe, she'd lost it over a non event, Bernie shaving her legs, not even a wound. "Stupid, stupid" she muttered out loud to herself.

What to do? Go down to Bernie, was she even still there? Serena's heart leapt in her mouth at that and then she calmed, she hadn't heard the front door open so Bernie must still be in the house she reasoned. Would Bernie want to see her after what she had just done? What if that was it and she ended it? Serena's heart began to beat faster and tears started in the back of her throat. She had never loved anyone as quickly or as fiercely as she loved this woman and it was like walking a constant tightrope between one crisis and the next. She was tired, drained, but so what? Wouldn't Bernie be there, do whatever she needed if the positions were reversed? She thought to how Bernie had held her in the kitchen, reassured her after the revelation and Edward and the photos and Serena felt a wave of shame come over her and she whispered her sorry out to the silence of the room.

She froze as she heard the softest footsteps on the stairs, that could only be the woman she loved, the creak of the one floorboard at the top that had never been aligned right. She held her breath and waited and her heart broke a little as she heard the footsteps shuffle away and a door open and close. Bernie has gone into her own room. The tears slipped freely down her face and she did nothing to wipe them away. She flipped onto her stomach and buried her face into the pillow on what she'd come to think of as Bernie's side, breathing in her scent and crying harder now. She'd got it wrong and now she didn't know how to fix it. She wanted so much to go along the landing to her and gather her in her arms, tell her over and over she was sorry but she didn't know how to take the first step. Would she even be wanted?
Chapter 116 - Bernie

Chapter Notes

Lots of anger towards Serena still. I'm sorry. But I'm also of because not everyone reacts well when they're frightened. It's real.

Chapter 116

Bewildered and broken-hearted, Bernie watched Serena leave the room, stifling a sob as she hears slow and weary footsteps trudge up the stairs and the opening and shutting of a door, she presumes Serena's bedroom. She sat down on the sofa and curls over onto her side, but it didn't help the pain in her chest so she hunched over onto her knees, in an almost forward roll, with her hands over her head as she tucked it into her knees. A low keening moan escaped her as the avalanche of pain descended. Serena had walked away. Walked away and left, with hate in her eyes and venom in her mouth. Hadn't let Bernie explain or fetch her stupid bastard pink razor that she had shaved her legs with, wanting nothing more than them to be silky smooth when they were entangled with Serena's in bed. Thoughts of using it to hurt herself hadn't even entered her head in the shower. It wasn't her blade of choice anyway. The scalpel blades at the hospital, she'd wanted them when there's arrived at the hospital that morning, but precious, wonderful, supportive Serena had talked her down after she used the safe word, and then later had disposed of her stash in her desk.

"Mars bar" she whispered out, rocking back and forth. "Mars bar."
The urge was back now, loud and consuming, make this pain go, bleed it out, the pain trapped on the inside, so much less when it was made to be on the outside. Still she stayed rooted to the sofa, knowing, that getting up would be the final nail in the coffin of keeping herself intact. "Cut, bleed," played over and over in her head and she continued to breathe through the pain, the mental pain so excruciating, the loss so great that she couldn't think or reason, self-preservation the only thing holding her there. Her heart was sweaty and her skin all flushed, overheating as she was crammed into the fabric of the sofa, making indentations on her skin, as if she'd been asleep in one position for too long.

How could she fix this, explain, make it right? What could she possibly say to Serena that didn't sound hollow, empty promises, more lies. The tears came then, racked her lithe frame with silent, gut-wrenching sobs as she pictured over and over the hurt on the face that she held most dear, the look that screamed of a betrayal. She'd seen that look from Serena only once before, when she'd heard about Bernie's affair with Alex, the classification of her her friend into the "lying cheating" category. Not even after Cameron's accident had she looked at the blonde like that. That Bernie has put that look on her face for a second time was the greatest grief, a death of part of her own heart and soul. She was so bound to Serena, soul-tied and the fraying of the cord and the dying of the light between them was too hard, too impossible to survive. She would need a plan. A good one, but not tonight. Tomorrow maybe.

She sat up suddenly and swiped at her face, tears absorbed by the soft flannel of her green checked shirt. Pushed her hands through her hair and tied it up with with elastic she'd been wearing around her right wrist all day. She started to pace, back and forth along the lounge, cursing softly when she hit her shin on the edge of the coffee table on one of her passes by the corner. She should leave, she knew that she had outstayed her welcome but she just couldn't do it. She passed through to the
kitchen and poured some water with shaking hands, held the cool glass to her red cheeks and tried to think.


She rubbed at her eyes, heavy and sore from tears and moved to the back door, checking it was locked and bolted. Flipping light switches she worked her way through to the hall and performed the same checks on the front door. Debates hard with herself, picked up her car keys from the little shelf in the hall where she had laid them and then put them back. Sleep first. Tomorrow. Softly she padded up the stairs, could see the strip of light under Serena's door and she stepped on the creaking floorboard by accident and froze. She couldn't go in there but so wanted to take the brunette in her arms, kiss her apologies into her skin, hold her while they slept but all that was gone now.

She slipped into her own room, the first and last time she would sleep in it and closed the door. She flicked the bedside lamp on and the soft greys and pinks came to life in the gentle light. She undressed and found a shirt to sleep in, pulled it over her head. She sat on the bed and scooted to sit with her back against the headboard, tears falling down her cheeks again. She picked up her phone and sent a quick text, flicked off the lamp and sat still in the shadows, watching the moonlight through the open curtains, the stars blinking off metal and damp skin. Lay back slightly and waited for sleep to take her under.
Chapter 117 - No man's land

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentines!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 117.
Serena pulled herself up from the pillow and changed her clothes slowly. She sat on the edge of her best and listened for Bernie, she could hear her shuffling around. She rubbed her cheek on her top and felt the sting of tears. She shivered in the cool air and hugged her knees to her chest, tired and appalled with herself for what she had done. Fear continued to run through her, how could she possibly keep Bernie safe from herself? She had had a glimpse on the sofa of the dangers that everyday life brought, at work surrounded by possibilities as well, too many threats, dangers, and conflicts. She shuddered as she saw again in her mind Bernie drawing the kitchen knife across her stomach, the memory of the motion, the blood and the sounds, the intake of breath, the clatter of the knife in the sink. That was her fault as well, she reasoned and the tears fell unchecked, soaking into the cloth covering her arms. “I’m the biggest cause of Bernie’s pain” she thought and stifled a sob, not wanting to draw attention from either of the other people in the house. Then her thoughts cleared and she sat up with a start. What if? Was she? Had she?

Without a second though Serena got up and walked quickly to the door, opening it and walking through. She cursed as she stepped on the creaking floorboard. No light was coming from under Bernie’s door and she hesitated, but pressed on, tapped lightly on the door and waited. She heard movement and feet hit the floor, coming nearer and she held her breath as the door cracked open. A tear stained face with heavy, dull eyes looked back at her and the tears started again.

“I’m so sorry” she whispered and Bernie’s face crumpled as she pulled Serena through the door and shut it behind them. They stood in the low light of the moon coming through the window where the curtains were still open and grasped each other’s arms. Bernie moved them over to the bed and they sat side by side as Serena struggled to get control enough to speak any more.

“Bernie, I am so, so sorry. I got scared”

Bernie nodded her head and dropped her eyes to her lap.

“You have nothing to be sorry for” wept Serena. “It’s me, I saw the possibilities, the opportunities to hurt yourself and I freaked. If I can’t keep you safe then I’m useless, but then it was me this time and last time that made you hurt yourself. You have haven’t you? Are you okay? Can I see the cuts?”

“Serena” murmured Bernie, still not making eye contact, “I didn’t, and I haven’t”

Serena cupped Bernie’s face with her hands, bringing her chin up slowly to look in her eyes.

“I am so very proud of you” she said. Bernie looked into soft, admiring hazel eyes and lost it, flinging herself at Serena who caught her and wrapped her in the fiercest hug she could muster. They both sobbed with abandon, not caring at the mess, the noise, just the sheer relief that washed over them. They held on so tight and let the tears come, both needing the release of the tension they had been holding.

Serena pushed Bernie back slightly as they swiped at their faces. The blonde took a deep breath before speaking, “I am sorry I made you so frightened Serena. You keep me so safe, look at this morning at the hospital, and taking the blades from my desk. That is two times you kept me safe.
And I used the safe word tonight.”
“What do you mean” asked the brunette, puzzled.
“I said it to myself, in the lounge and in the kitchen and the hallway. I nearly did, but I didn’t and I stayed, I didn’t run” she said proudly. “That was you, you have given me that.”
Serena stared at the amazing woman in front of her and took her hand, bringing it to her lips and kissing it. “I don’t deserve you” she said and turned her face away.
“What?” said Bernie, slightly louder than she had intended. “It’s me that doesn’t deserve you. I’ve tried to run so hard from this, from you, from myself. You can’t take on responsibility for keeping me safe, no one can. You help me so much. Tonight, was well, um, difficult. But we, I, need to get better at talking to you.”
“I overreacted” cut in Serena. “In my foolish head I thought I could remove every temptation, but it made me realise I can’t and when I get scared, it comes out as anger. I should have stayed calm and had this conversation then. I could have saved us all this.”
“I was going to go tomorrow” confessed Bernie, wincing at the sharp intake of breath from the vascular surgeon. “I thought we might be done but I couldn’t go without saying goodbye to you, or to Jason” and started to tremble as Serena started to cry again.

“Are we done?” whispered Serena, dejected and scared.
“I don’t want to be” whispered back Bernie who squeaked as Serena pushed into her.
“Please don’t go Bernie, please don’t leave me” she sobbed. “I know I did the wrong thing; that I said awful things, left you alone, that I am horrible but I love you so much, so, so much” and she buried her face in Bernie’s neck. The blonde immediately put her arms round her love and held her close, whispering soft words of love over her.
“I won’t go Serena, I won’t” she promised and felt Serena sob again into her. “It’s okay. We’re okay”
“Are we?” whimpered the brunette. “Do you mean it?”
“Course I do” said the blonde. “We’ve just learned a few more things about each other, but we are okay.”
“Can we get in bed? I’m cold” said Serena, “oh, only if you want to share, I can go back...”
“Ssshh” soothed Bernie. “Of course I do.”

She flipped on the lamp by her bed and turned round to face Serena, her mouth falling open.
“You’re, you’re wearing”
“Your scrub top?” said Serena, “yes. I needed you close even though I was scared and lonely and horrid, I wanted you close and this is the only thing I had”
“You really do love me don’t you” she said with wide eyes.
“Bernie, I love you with all my heart, even if I wasn’t very good at showing it today.”
“Come here” said Bernie and lay back in the bed, opening her arms. Serena moved over and eased herself down to entwine with the army medic. “I love you Serena Campbell.”
Serena sniffled at little and pulled herself deeper into the comforting embrace and warmth of her girl.
“It’s really okay?”
“It really is. Promise.”
Serena flicked off the light and they lay cheek to cheek on the soft pillow.
“I’m scared to go to sleep” admitted Serena.
“Why?”
“I can’t say” she tearfully replied.
“You’re scared I won’t be here when you wake up aren’t you” stated Bernie, guessing totally accurately and soothed again as Serena cried. “I promise I will be.”
Serena nodded through her tears and brought her lips tentatively to Bernie’s for a soft kiss, which the trauma medic smiled into. “See, a kiss to seal the deal.” She smoothed the lines on the brunette’s forehead and kissed the corner of her eyes. “Love you. Try to sleep for me.” Serena
closed her eyes and sighed, opening them again and then closed them again as Bernie hummed gently. She felt her hands grasping tightly and then loosen as she started to tumble into sleep, exhausted from the emotions. Bernie watched her, kept stroking her face gently and then shut her own eyes to fall asleep herself.

Chapter End Notes

You knew I'd fix. Keep the faith.
Chapter 118

Bernie woke whilst the dawn hadn’t fully broken, slightly overheated and sweaty from where Serena was wound round her, even in sleep too scared to let her go. Her legs were pinned by the brunette’s own and an arms was curved round her as Serena was pressed into her side. The vascular surgeon was mumbling in her sleep, but Bernie couldn’t tell if it was a good dream or a nightmare. Gently she lifted her free arm and caressed sleepy, pale cheeks lightly with her fingertips, exploring, memorising every detail of the face opposite her. She closed her eyes and sighed, smiling ruefully at the events of the last few hours. She hadn’t imagined that they would ever sleep in this room together, knowing how Serena loved her tranquil green paradise of a room, where they had embraced and slept and made love together. She opened her eyes again and saw Serena looking back at her, a slight air of worry evident even in the murky half-light of the early morning. The brunette tried to pull away but Bernie wouldn’t let her, and started dropping kisses to the top of her head as she tuckered Serena back into her.

“Don’t go” she whispered lovingly, “I like having you there.”

Serena smiled and snuggled back in, relief starting to feel real but she couldn’t banish the worry.

“I’m sorry Bernie” she started and was startled when a fingertip came to her lips to silence her.

“Don’t Serena. It really is fine, we’re fine. Let’s not go back round it okay?”

Serena nodded, but she was unconvinced. The fear that she had driven Bernie too far away was too great, even laying all tangled up in the covers. She closed her eyes and tried to silence the thoughts in her mind when Bernie sat up very slightly on one elbow and tugged her so that she was lying half on the army medic.

“Bernie?”

“Just want you very close” the trauma surgeon said and settled them back down.

They lay contentedly against each other, dozing a little as the sky began to warm with the first tendrils of morning. Serena jumped a little after a short sleep and Bernie hushed her as she lay her head back on Bernie’s shoulder. Then Bernie had an itch she couldn’t reach on her thigh and wigged them both around, finally getting the rich giggle she loved to come out of the vascular surgeon. Serena shifted slightly and they joined hands, laying side by side.

“I’ve never slept in here” Serena said quietly. “It’s not bad.”

“I love it,” said Bernie softly, “but mostly because you’re here” and smiled at the blush that rose on Serena’s cheeks. “Now you match the décor” she laughed, earning her a swat on the belly from Serena in jest.

They lay just enjoying each other being close, holding hands and watching each other, they’d always been able to communicate by looking at each other, but in the last week it had gone to another level. It felt like it was deeper, past everything, deep into the soul of the one they loved. It had never felt like this for either of them. Bernie’s phone buzzed as her alarm went off and Serena groaned.

“It can’t possibly be time yet” she said and Bernie laughed and stretched her back out carefully, making Serena bite her lip appreciatively at the toned and lithe figure next to her.
“Come on Ms Campbell, shower. I’ll make coffee.” Bernie bounced out of bed, marvelling at feeling so much happier than when she had gone to bed.

“Kiss?” asked Serena with a wobbly voice and Bernie span back towards her. “Come here” she said and Serena got up and went over to her, to be wrapped securely in strong arms.

“Please will you believe me when I say it is okay?” asked Bernie, peeking through her fringe. “You’re not still angry with me are you?” she asked, suddenly wondering if that was the problem. “No!” said Serena, feeling the prickle of tears again. “I’m worried, you might hate me after all for being such a bitch last night when you really think about it” and she looked down towards her feet.

“Let it go Serena. I’m not angry. I’m not going, we’re going to get ready, go to work, come home and then I’m going to cook dinner. Or maybe buy it. If Jason agrees” and Serena let out a breath she hadn’t realised she had been holding.

“Yes please” she said simply and leaned up for her kiss. Bernie met her lips and they shared a soft sweet kiss that tried to be more before Bernie pulled away.

“We have to get ready, come on.”
Serena huffed a little before pecking Bernie again and heading to the ensuite in her own room. She stepped into the bathroom and took off the scrub top, running her fingers lovingly over the stitching on the breast. She set the shower to warm and cleaned her teeth, wincing a little at the puffy eyes reflected back at her in the mirror. She scrubbed at her scalp in the water and soaped her body, loving the scents of her products and feeling more alive. She wrapped in a big towel and went back out into the bedroom, just as Bernie came through the door with a mug of coffee for her. Bernie’s eyes widened as they would always do at the site of Serena nearly naked and she drew close and sucked some water from her shoulder.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish Major” warned Serena, only half joking as her pulse rate shot up.

“Rain check?” asked Bernie in total seriousness and Serena smiled. “Absolutely” she said and took the mug of coffee. She sniffed it and moaned appreciatively, knowing the effect that would have on the blonde. It worked as Bernie rubbed at the back of her neck, kissed the brunette’s cheek and went into the bathroom.

Serena sat on the edge of the bed and sipped the scalding liquid, never minding that it was so hot. She set it down and towelled herself off before putting on underwear and a camisole. She went back to her coffee and then selected a pair of black trousers and a stripy blouse, before spritzing herself with perfume and doing some light make up. She went back to her coffee and finished it off before picking up her phone from where it was on her bedside table where she had put it to charge the night before. She checked her messages just as Bernie came out of the ensuite and back into the bedroom.
Chapter 119 - Message delivered

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, been a bit blocked, the muse ran away.

Chapter 119.

Serena looked up suddenly at Bernie who was wrapped in a towel and about to make a dash back to her room. A strangled noise escaped the brunette which gave Bernie pause, she turned to see tears coursing down Serena's cheeks, streaks of jet black mascara and soft brown kohl pencil leaving stripes on her skin. Bernie took two steps toward the vascular surgeon who's chest was heaving as she cried her heart out.
"Serena, what on Earth?" said Bernie in a panic, "what's happened?"

Serena's knees gave and she sank to the floor beside her bed, turning slightly and pressing her face into the white covers hanging over the side, mindless of the make-up transferring to the pristine duvet. She sobbed and sobbed. Bernie came and squat down on her heels by her, reaching out a tentative hand to rest on her thigh, tracing soft circles she wasn't even sure that Serena could feel. She wanted to gather the sobbing woman in her arms but something told her to hold back and just stay close and reassuring.

"It's okay" she murmured sotto voce, over and over. It seemed to make Serena cry all the harder at first and the pricklest of fear washed over Bernie in a wave and then she pushed them away. "Could this be my fault? What did I do?" she asked herself, racked her brain but just came up blank, having to wait for Serena to calm enough to speak.

"Bernie" Serena sobbed, "Bernie"
"I'm here love, I'm right here." replied the blonde and sat down cross-legged on the carpet, thigh pressed against Serena's.

Serena turned to face her, eyes wide and pupils dilated and she bent forward at the waist, covered her eyes with her hands and laid her face in Bernie's lap, crying hard all over again. Bernie ran her hands through the slightly sweaty brunette hair and rubbed her fingertips on Serena's scalp, trying to transmit feelings of love and calm and safety with her touch. She leaned forwards and dropped soft kisses on the shiny brown locks, feeling Serena trembling and gasping as the crying slowed and she started to come back to herself. Bernie pulled her up gently and tucked the broken-down woman under her chin. Serena grasped at the towel with both hands as she cuddled right into Bernie as if afraid. Then it suddenly dawned on the army medic.

"Serena?"
"Y.y.yes?"
"Did you just read the text I sent last night?"

Serena nodded and began to sob all over again. Bernie rest her back against the bed and held the poor woman close, letting this fresh wave of tears pour down her front and be absorbed by the towel she was wearing.

The text had been simple.
"I can't go to bed without telling you I love you. I will go in the morning after I say goodbye to you both. I'm sorry I screwed up again.
I love you. Sleep well. B x"
"Serena, sweetheart. I sent that before we talked, before we slept and the woke together. I'm not going."
She winces as she feels the big gasps of air as Serena shakes violently in her arms. "Damn it Wolfe" she thinks to herself.
"Don't, don't go" croaks Serena desperately, the only words she can force out.
"Darling look at me" Bernie says and lifts Serena's chin to meet her gaze. Flashing and fearful hazel eyes meet hers.
"We are going to do exactly what I said. Go to work, come home, dinner and then if you let me, I'm going to spend the evening holding you close."
A massive rush of breath left Serena and she went limp in Bernie's arms, so much that Bernie worried for a second that she might have fainted.
"Sor- sorry" stammered Serena and she tried to pull away but Bernie wouldn't let her, the blonde kissed each cheek and her forehead, both with their eyes open.
"Nothing to be sorry for Serena" said Bernie calmly, "but I do need to get off this floor."

Serena pulled herself up and then held out a hand to Bernie who carefully rose, flinching slightly at a sharp tug of pain that then dissipated.
"Right Ms Campbell. You need a face wash at a minimum. You go do that, even have another shower if you want one and I'll get dressed and attempt to meet Mr Haynes' exacting breakfast standards" smiled Bernie and winked at Serena who offered a wobbly smile in return and linked their hands.
"I love you Serena"
"Love you" the brunette replied, a fresh round of tears threatening.
"No more tears" whispered the blonde seeing her eyes go shiny. "Go on" and she propelled Serena into the ensuite before disappearing to her own room to dress.

Serena decided to just wash her face and she scrubbed at her skin, the salt of tears mixing with her soap and she let them fall, knowing she couldn't stop them. She pat her face dry and sat on the closed toilet seat to collect herself. The last 12 hours had been so very hard and she'd caused all of it. A rush of shame stabbed at her and she took some deep breaths as the adrenaline rose. The thought of Bernie leaving was too much pain to bear, even the threat of it caused white hot terror to settle in the centre of her chest. She was a little frightened at how hard and how fast she had fallen for the army medic, but she knew, so very much, that this was what she wanted, who she wanted, so why did it feel so much like a rollercoaster she wanted to get off? She smiled to herself at a memory of being dragged on some monstrosity at Alton Towers with a teenage Elinor and her friend. She'd screamed herself hoarse and come straight off to vomit. Fear, she rationalised to herself. That's what she wanted to go. Nothing else. She went back and reapplied the make-up that she'd cried off and headed downstairs.

Bernie and Jason were sat at the kitchen table, heads bent over bowls of porridge, in companionable silence. Jason wished her good morning and she ruffled his hair lightly. Bernie passed her a bowl of her own but her stomach was still in knots so she gave up after a few spoonfuls, much to the concern of the trauma surgeon who wrapped her in a quick hug as Jason was putting his shoes on. Leaving the bowls to soak in the sink the three of them headed out, got in Serena's car and went to work.
Chapter 120 - Working world

Chapter Summary

WWBWB is 120 chapters and 3 months old!!
:D

The drive to work was mostly silent as both women were lost in their thoughts and Jason was plugged into his phone, muttering softly under his breath as if he was picking up on the sudden tension that had sprung up. Serena crunched the gears pulling away from a traffic light which made them both wince at the sudden grinding of metal on metal. Bernie smiled softly at a pair of little girls walking hand in hand down the street in their matching red coat and little by little they made their way to the hospital and pulled into the parking space Serena favoured. Jason leapt out, calling his goodbyes and they watched him shuffle off to the Porter’s lodge. They continued to sit and Serena felt a chilly hand slip down her arm to entangle their fingers together and give a brief squeeze.

“Oh Serena, what can I do?” asked Bernie, helplessly. This was hard, she thought, and had a brief and uncomfortable insight into what Serena was experiencing in her mind as she realised the damage her constant need to run was doing to the poor woman.

“I don’t know” admitted Serena and sniffled a little.

“Let’s go get a coffee and I’ll buy you a pastry as well. Two if you want them” said Bernie.

“Cupboard love” smiled Serena and Bernie beamed at her.

“Can I hug you?” asked the blonde carefully and when Serena nodded she wrapped her in an awkward embrace over the gearstick and handbrake which the vascular surgeon leant into. She dropped a soft kiss to Serena’s cheek and they parted and got out of the car. Serena locked the door and went round to Bernie’s side who offered her arm congenially.

“Allow me to escort the most beautiful woman inside” she said and Serena chuckled, the sound warming Bernie’s heart.

They entered the building and headed straight to Pulses where Lucy the barista waved at them and immediately started preparing their usual order. The two woman stood together, as close as they could, drawing strength in the closeness. Bernie extracted her wallet and paid and, after a few words with the young woman serving them, they headed to the lift. The ride up was quiet as people shuffled in and out and they exit and headed towards AAU. Just before Serena could open the double doors she found herself spun round and a pair of soft lips pressed to hers.

“Love you Ms Campbell” murmured Bernie casting furtive looks around.

Serena smiled and after her own quick check of the corridor kissed Bernie back. “Love you Ms Wolfe”

They walked into their ward and waved at Raf and Morven, already there and headed into their office. Bernie looked glumly at the pile of paperwork already on her desk and Serena sat serenely at hers, devoid of files and folders. Their eyes met and Bernie did her best to look hopeful and cute.

“No way Major.”

Bernie huffed and sat down to the sounds of Serena giggling as two folder immediately crashed to the floor.
Raf knocked and came in smiling.
“Morning ladies. Rounds in 30 minutes”
“Must just get changed then” quipped Bernie and took the opportunity to run to get into her scrubs.
“Pass me those files Raf” said Serena sighing.
Raf grinned as he passed them to the doctor in front of him. “She’s got your number Serena”
“Hasn’t she just” sniffed Serena in jest.
“I’m happy for you both” he said. “Fletch was asking if you would pop and see him today” and Serena smiled.
“I will” she agreed, “I’ll go up after rounds if the red phone cooperates”.

Raf nodded and left and Serena delved into the files, sorting through what she could do and what really had to be Bernie. By the time the trauma surgeon returned there was a much smaller pile on her desk than that of the brunette and she blew a kiss to her co-lead and partner.
They went and did rounds, listening and teaching again, offering advice and gentle correction, tag-teaming off each other. Bernie said she would supervise Morven doing a tricky central line and Serena headed up to the High Dependency Ward to see Fletch.

He looked pale and drawn but offered a sunny smile to his boss and friend. “Serena.”
“Hello Fletch. How are you doing?” she asked.
Fletch gave her the edited highlights of his current medical status and they agreed that he was making solid progress. They chatted about Raf and the kids before he stopped and looked at her.
“How are you and Bernie?” he asked gently and Serena blushed.
“We, are, well, actually, I don’t know how to describe it, I haven’t exactly said it a lot. We’re together” she settled on and Fletch beamed from ear to ear. “Tell me” he said and Serena did, about kissing on the floor after his surgery and how Bernie had sort of moved in and he patted her hand.
“You’re brilliant for each other. Will you ask her to come and see me when she can so I can reassure her about what happened to me?” he asked.
Serena teared up, “you’re happy to do that?” she asked and when Fletch nodded she smiled in relief. “Thank you, I think it will really help her to hear it from you.”
“I’m not kissing her though” he joked and made Serena laugh, “have you seen her girlfriend? Feisty brunette who’d have my guts for garters” and winked. Serena stood and ruffled his hair gently.
“Hurry and get better, we all miss you.” she said.
“Thanks Serena, for everything” and they smiled again and Serena left to go back downstairs.

Bernie was in the trauma centre dealing with the aftermath of a knife fight, smiled at Serena and shook her head at the question of whether the brunette was needed so Serena went back to their office and cracked into the paperwork. Bernie blew in and dropped a file, waved and ran straight back out to another bay where Morven and Raf were busy with another patient. When she came back in for the second time it was lunchtime and they ate sandwiches that Serena had fetched for them and exchanged some small talk. After they ate Bernie reluctantly dug into her now smaller pile of paperwork and Serena went to theatre with Raf to deal with a sudden aortic aneurysm emergency.

The end of their shift came and Serena wasn’t back. Jason came into the office and installed himself on a visitor chair, watching Pointless on his iPlayer app on his phone, headphones in. Serena finally came in, freshly cleaned and changed back and they walked out together.
“Fish and chips Jason?” asked Bernie gently and the young mad just nodded. “Drop me at the shop and I’ll get them and then walk home, shall we have something else later?” and Serena nodded tiredly. Bernie clambered out and waved as Serena and Jason drove off, a few roads later pulling into their driveway and going into the house.
“Auntie Serena?”

“Yes Jason?”

“Are you alright?”

Serena looked at the young man in front of her who was examining her face earnestly. She smiled gently at him and nodded.

“I am. Why do you ask?” she quizzed him.

“I heard you crying this morning. I wanted to come in to you but then I heard Bernie’s voice and thought maybe you wouldn’t want me to” he said straightforwardly.

Serena grasped his arm gently. “I got a bit worried about some things but Bernie and I talked about it. I’m sorry I worried you and it would have been okay to knock and ask if you were unsure.”

Jason thought for a few moments. “Are you finding it hard with Bernie being here all of a sudden?” he asked and Serena nodded again.

“Not in the way you might think” she said softly. “It is more that I am worried she is going to leave us and how much that would hurt me. And you” she added as an afterthought.

“That seems logical” said Jason “After all she has tried to do that a few times, but she seems happier.”

Serena considered this. “I think she is too, but when we disagree or say something, she feels she has to run and I get scared that she will run.”

“You’ve just got to get used to each other” he said gravely. “Remember when you and I first got to know each other, we both made mistakes Auntie Serena”

Serena looked at him and grasped his arm again. “We found a way to make it work didn’t we?” and Jason agreed instantly. He stroked his face in thought. “So make a plan Auntie Serena”

“What do you mean Jason?” she asked, not quite comprehending.

“Make a plan that if you feel like she might run or if she feels she needs to, what you’ll do instead.”

Serena smiled at him. “I like that idea” she said and Jason grinned at her, pleased with the validation. “Can I hug you?”

Jason agreed and they had a slightly stiff but nonetheless warm hug just as Bernie arrived through the front door in a gust of cold air, vinegar and disinfecting soap. The blonde smiled at the cosy scene and shrugged out of her shoes, passing over the food to Jason who accepted it eagerly and went to the kitchen to plate it up.

“Alright?” she whispered at Serena, who nodded and opened her arms. Bernie moved across to her and they wrapped around each other in a close hug that felt like love and care and acceptance and home. Jason reappeared and they shuffled out of the way as he took up residence in the sitting room with his food and the familiar noise of the TV starting up. The two women stayed, content in each other’s arms and then Serena initiated a tentative kiss, which Bernie enthusiastically returned.
They broke apart grinning and went into the kitchen where Serena poured them both a glass of wine. They sat together on the long bench and the brunette leaned against the blonde and closed her eyes.

“Jason said we should make a plan about what to do when you think you should run and when I get scared you will” she blurted out, reddening instantly. She felt Bernie place her glass down and then the blonde’s arms went round her and kiss was pressed to her temple.

“Sounds good to me. What should we do?” Bernie answered.

They sat in silence for a while, thinking.

“We already have a safe word, maybe we need another especially about this?” Serena offered, swivelling round so she could see Bernie, who had her head on one side thinking.

“Okay, what word?” said Bernie, in agreement that it was a sensible suggestion.

“What about Jet plane?” said Serena, giggling in spite of the seriousness of the conversation.

“Okaaay” said Bernie, and Serena, hearing the question in the army medic’s voice began to sing, “Leaving, on a jet plane, don’t know when I’ll be back again!” and she and Bernie started to laugh, but all of a sudden the brunettes laughs turned into heaving sobs and she was gathered close to the other woman who crooned in her ear soft words of love”

“Sorry” she sniffled and Bernie tightened her hold.

“Don’t be, it’s okay. It’s been a long and tiring day. Jet plane is good.” She said and the vascular surgeon relaxed in her arms.

“Let’s decide on some food” said Bernie “and then we can get comfy and cuddle.”

Serena delved into the drawer under the microwave and drew out some menus. They decided on Thai food and Bernie phoned the order in and then hand-in-hand they headed upstairs and Bernie closed the door behind them. She ran her fingertips from Serena’s shoulders to take her hands and pulled her in for a kiss that deepened straightaway and she felt the brunette’s hands go into her hair and scratch at her scalp. She moaned a little and then pulled away.

“All in good time” she whispered, making Serena smile. She gently helped Serena undress and passed her some clean pyjamas, then rapidly shucked her own clothes and put her own PJs on, raising her eyebrow as the brunette watched unashamedly at the brief display of her body. They sat on the bed and Bernie pulled Serena close, to hold.

“I meant what I said. I just want to love you tonight, keep you close, to show you what you mean to me” and Serena snuggled in closer to the warmth oozing from both the trauma surgeon’s words and her body as they were close. Bernie stroked her hair and her arms and dropped little kisses now and then and the vascular surgeon felt herself getting a little sleepy as the doorbell rang. They headed downstairs and Bernie paid for the food, before they plated it in the kitchen and joined Jason who smiled at them.

“Auntie Serena?”

“Yes Jason?”

“What would you like to watch?”
Serena looked at him fondly. “Jason, that is so lovely of you to ask, can we watch a film, if you are sure?”

Jason nodded “it is fine, I want to make you happy.”

Serena choked up a little. “You always make me happy Jason” she managed.

Jason smiled. “Pride and Prejudice then?” he said and Serena laughed and nodded.

He set it up and they settled in, Bernie and Serena eating their food and feeding each other bites as Jason fiddled with his iPad, only pretending to watch before giving in and wishing the two women goodnight, offering Serena a hug which she gratefully accepted. Bernie took the plates to the kitchen and the two women cuddled close under the blue blanket from the sofa to watch the rest of the film.
Chapter 122 - Love me lots

Chapter 122

Pressed against each other they watched and laughed and cried at the antics of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy and as usual Serena had a few tears that soaked into Bernie's shirt as she lay between her legs snuggled in. She felt Bernie's arms tighten round her and soft kisses dropped into her hair. As the end credits rolled the brunette leaned out for the remote and flicked the television off, and cuddled closer to Bernie who hummed in contentment and began to run her fingers though the short brown locks, scratching at her scalp which made Serena purr in contentment and stretch her toes out when they curled in bliss. She felt Bernie smile and leaned up to catch her eyes. The army medic looked deep back into the light brown eyes and felt herself getting lost in their soulful depths. They shuffled and their mouths met in a gentle kiss that rapidly got heated and Serena moaned into it as she ran her fingers up and down Bernie's torso, making her quiver. The blonde ran her tongue lightly along the vascular surgeons lower lip, asking silent permission which was instantly granted and then Bernie's tongue was stroking the roof of her mouth and entangling with her own. A series of deep moans started deep within Serena's chest and Bernie started kissing along her jaw and smoothing her fingers across heavenly collarbones under Serena soft pyjama top.

Bernie jumped a little as Serena sat up to straddle her legs, the brunette threading her fingers through the curly locks and pulling Bernie impossibly close, their bodies melded and their kisses fierce and heated. They broke apart, panting and offered smiles at each other. Question asked and answered solely by eye contact and Serena climbed carefully off Bernie and they headed out of the door. Quick checks of locks by the ever-security conscious blonde and they were headed upstairs, fingers laced together and with a delicious air of anticipation between them.

Closing the door behind them, Serena pounced and kissed Bernie from earlobe to earlobe, suckling gently and scraping it between her teeth. Bernie felt her knees wobble at the sensations and Serena chuckled deeply against her as she pushed her back towards the bed. Making Bernie sit, she pulled the army medic's pyjama top off and inhaled at the sight of her. A faint pink tinge appeared on the blondes cheeks which were immediately kissed by Serena. "Beautiful Bernie" she whispered reverently and the pink cheeks turned into full on red at the sentiment the trauma surgeon could see in her woman. She ran her fingertips down her swan-like throat down creamy skin to perfect breasts, wickedly pinching the rapidly hardening nipples, making Bernie full on growl. The sound made Serena visibly shiver with lust and she felt herself gush between her legs. She pushed Bernie further back so she could lie above her on her elbows and took a nipple in her mouth, loving the whimpers and moans and the "don't stop" that hit her ears. She switched her attention to the other nipple while she rolled the one she'd made wet between her fingers. Bernie tried to sit and take control but Serena pushed her back down and held her hands above her head.

"Keep them there" she whispered and Bernie nodded, more turned on than she'd ever been in her life. The blonde gripped the headboard tightly and watched as Serena pulled her pyjama bottoms off and threw them before sliding her fingers through velvet soft wet heat, pushing inside in one smooth motion and licking her clit, making Bernie screech and arch off the bed. Serena pushed the blondes hips back into the bed and continued to move in and out and lick round and round. The heat coiled low in Bernie's stomach as she felt her orgasm rushing up when Serena crooked her fingers and she came hard, calling Serena's name and hoping somewhere in the back of her mind that Jason had headphones on. She tried to pull away but Serena kept going gently but surely and a second wave came over her and she sat up as she came again, clamping her legs around Serena's head and fingers as she was so sensitive now. Serena grinned and pushed back and crawled up Bernie's body, lying on top of her panting girlfriend who wasn't able to string a sentence together.
She laid her head between shiny breasts and listened to the thrum of her heartbeat and smiled as Bernie spoke.
"God Serena, what was that? I've never, I'm, I can't even"
Serena smiled, "never?" she asked with a slight smugness.
"Never" said Bernie. "Come here."

Serve found her face covered in dizzying kisses and Bernie rolled her earlobe between her fingers as she kissed, making Serena breathless with need. Bernie flipped them and removed Serena's top all in the same motion and then their breasts were pressed together and Serena was moaning at the sensation of their nipples rubbing before Bernie licked her way down to suckle them alternately, nipping gently with her teeth and Serena was begging, begging her for more. Bernie sat back and pushed Serena's legs apart, not all that gently and the brunette felt herself get even wetter at the dominance in the gesture. She raised her hips to help Bernie remove her bottoms and then the blonde was just starring between Serena's legs. The hunger in the army medics gaze made Serena moan and she felt her core clench in anticipation, which in turn made Bernie shiver. "Mine" whispered Bernie and Serena flushed as more fluid came out of her. Bernie nestled between her knees and swept the liquid up to her clit, pinching it between two fingers. Serena inhaled sharply and felt the world spin as Bernie rubbed fast circles over her.
"I need you inside" she heard herself say and closed her eyes in slight shame.
"Look at me" Bernie urged and as she opened her eyes the blonde pushed two fingers inside. "BERNIE" she shouted as the woman began moving in and out, rubbing with her other hand. Serena tensed every muscle, lost in the pleasure she'd never felt before and she came, sobbing out Bernie's name again, and Bernie covered her clit gently and sucked and a second orgasm came for her as well and she burst into tears, overcome with how good it had felt.

She felt Bernie slip out of her and come to lay beside her. Serena clutched at her and they lay skin to skin as Serena came down, Bernie wiping the tears gently, kissing her face and her neck. "I've never either Bernie" she struggled out and Bernie gave a self-satisfied smile. "Good" she said and they lay entangled, stroking skin and exchanging lazy kisses. Bernie wrapped herself all of a sudden around a surprised Serena and buried her face into her neck. She murmured and Serena strained to hear.
"It's okay, I know you are." Serena said. "It wouldn't be normal if you weren't worried about it darling. But we'll go together and I will be waiting for you the whole time."
Bernie nodded and Serena felt a wet drip on her skin. She pulled the duvet over them both and caressed Bernie's hair and skin until she fell asleep. Serena lay there with her thoughts for a while until she too succumbed to her dreams.
Chapter 123 - Anticipation

Chapter Notes

Sorry it has been so long. I've struggled with some negative feedback and a depressive episode, but here is the next chapter. I hope you are all well, I've missed you xx

Chapter 123
They woke in the same moment in the morning while the air was still heavy with dark and sleep, the first notes of birdsong not yet audible in the still inky sky. Bernie wrapped herself round Serena who could feel the blonde trembling and she began to stroke her hair, making soothing noises and softly whispering words of love and comfort in her ear.

“Sweetheart, it’s not different to telling me really”
“It is” pouted Bernie, glistening tears threatening to fall, “I love you and you love me, this is telling a stranger about my private stuff.”
“I know” said Serena softly, “but it was hard for you to tell me too at first, but now look, we can talk and share and you feel better I think?”
Bernie nodded. “I know you’re right Serena, but it’s so hard to say the words.”
Serena stroked Bernie’s arm and dropped kisses to her upturned cheeks.
“Of course it is. But it’s got to be better than it all churning you up inside. And Philip sounded good on the website, that he had experience of treating people in the military”
“What if it is all men Serena?” said Bernie in a rush, “what if he hasn’t heard about, well, what happened to me?”
The brunette thought for a few moments. “If you and he are not a good fit we will ask him to recommend someone he thinks might be better”
“I’m honestly not trying to get out of it Serena” said Bernie seriously, “I am just”
“Scared” finished Serena. “Of course you are. But I will go with you and wait and then I will bring you home and we can cuddle and I’ll make you anything you want for dinner.”
“Lasagne?” asked Bernie hopefully and Serena laughed and nodded.

Bernie cuddled into the vascular surgeon and lay her blonde head between Serena’s breasts, listening to her heartbeat and feeling the soft skin of their arms touching.

“I love you so much” she said hurriedly, feeling faintly embarrassed and the need to say it but relaxed when she felt soft lips on her forehead.
“Love you too my darling” offered Serena gently and they lay in the silence until the alarm went off, and they heard Jason’s offer an echoing call down the landing.

They shuffled out of bed and Bernie went for the first shower as Serena headed to the kitchen to make coffee and porridge for Jason, who gave her a five minute lecture about Jurassic fossils that she could honestly not repeat a word of, having been thinking about Bernie and her therapy the whole time. She went back upstairs and handed the other woman a mug of steaming caffeine and got in the shower while Bernie dressed herself, the usual uniform of skinny jeans and a black shirt, tousled blonde curls tumbling round her face. She sat and waited for Serena who bustled out and got herself dressed and sat to apply make-up and dry her hair. Bernie giggled at the amount of stuff she used earning herself the evil eye from Serena who waved a mascara wand at her threateningly. They headed downstairs where Bernie greeted Jason and they headed out to the car, with whispered promises of a Pulses breakfast. Jason treated Bernie to the same talk about fossils and
Serena had to bite her lip from laughing as she understood no more of it the second time around. Jason was waved off to his day and reminded that he was going to be brought home by Raf later as Serena and Bernie were not going to be there. He smiled and wished them a good day.

They got out of the car and Bernie immediately wanted to hold Serena’s hand, who had no objection. They headed straight to Pulses for their order, and then up to the ward office. It promised to be a busy day with several overnight admissions to the ward. Bernie was changed quickly into scrubs and called straight into theatre while Serena did rounds and gave Morven some attention as she seemed a bit down. An invite for lunch on Sunday cheered the young woman up and the brunette went back to her office satisfied that all was as well as it could be and tackled her inbox which was groaning with unanswered missives. She was engrossed in the filing cabinet and didn’t hear a certain army medic creep in and jumped when two arms snaked round her waist and drew her backwards.

“Ms Wolfe!” she screeched and spun around to see a sheepish but smiling Bernie looking back at her.

“Hi” whispered Bernie and sneaked a quick kiss as Serena hugged her gently. They sat back down and smiled at each other as they worked on their computers, when both were called to separate cases, Serena down on the ED and Bernie in the trauma unit. They agreed to meet back at the office as they moved off to their tasks. Neither case was particularly difficult but they were lengthy, then it was time. Serena put her coat on and Bernie came back in re-dressed in her jeans and shirt, pale and wide-eyed. The brunette wrapped her in a long hug and they walked slowly to the car. Serena offered to drive and Bernie agreed, trembling a little as she tried to calm down.

It was a short drive to the counselling practice and they were ten minutes early. They sat together in the car and Serena held Bernie’s slightly sweaty hand in hers as they waited. She squeezed gently as the minutes ticked past and the time drew closer. Serena unbuckled both of their seat belts and got out of the car, closing the door and walking round to Bernie’s side. She opened the door and Bernie reluctantly got out and grasped for Serena who closed the passenger door and locked the car. They turned and walked into the building together, and into the counselling practice to Bernie’s appointment.
Chapter 124 - Taking a step

Chapter Notes

It is back! Tentative step back into this, Holby broke my heart with what they did to Serena that I have found it almost impossible to continue, but here it is. I am not sure how much more there will be or when the next chapter will be but enjoy this.

Bernie felt the colour drain away from her face as she looked around. The waiting room was painted the same cool shade of light blue as the relative’s room on Keller she noted. There will several big plants and a faint smell of vanilla and spice on the air.

“Hello, I’m Claire” came across from a woman who got up from out behind a desk to one side of the room. “Are you Bernie?”

Bernie nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She could feel her skin getting clammy and hot as the panic started to rise. She automatically began to look for something to relieve her distress and settled for starting to scratch her neck awkwardly. Serena came up behind Bernie and introduced herself, shaking Claire’s hand, but Bernie couldn’t hear the words above the rushing of blood in her ears. She felt herself being guided to a chair and she bent forward slightly over her knees, trying to restore sound and stave off the faint that was threatening. Serena rubbed slow circles on Bernie’s back, which helped to ground her. Slowly she sat back up.

Claire was crouched in front of her in a partial squat, dressed casually in a pair of black trousers and a loose top with a pale lilac pattern twisting over the white fabric. She had her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and she held out a bottle of water to Bernie who accepted it gratefully.

“Don’t worry Bernie” Claire said, “We know you’re scared, but this will become a safe place. Philip will be out shortly, why don’t you take some time to fill in this client record sheet?”

Bernie reached out and took the clipboard and the biro that was offered to her. She and Serena settled back into the chairs and the brunette clasped the blonde’s thigh gently. Bernie leaned into her and started to fill in the basic information, the simple task helping the adrenaline surge come down from maximum. Serena watched patiently and continue to just sit with Bernie. She could feel the tension in the hard muscle of Bernie’s quad and massaged it unconsciously. Bernie shifted and put the clipboard on the chair next to them and leaned weakly into Serena’s shoulder, seeking comfort from the solidness of her, which Serena was more than happy to give.

“Okay?” Serena murmured and Bernie nodded, before a sharp intake of breath as a door opened and a woman came out. She nodded at the two women sat together, gathered a file from Claire and then went back behind the door, clicking it shut. It came back to life immediately, as did, Bernie, when a man in a navy and white striped polo shirt came out and smiled kindly.

“I’m Philip” he said, “which is Bernie?”

Bernie raised her hand, feeling a little foolish as both women stood.

“This is Serena” she half-whispered, words feeling dry and chunky in her throat.

Philip shook Serena’s hand, making no expectation that Bernie would touch him and explained that Serena could wait. Bernie felt a tug at her elbow and then the two women made eye contact, having a silent conversation that said Serena would wait.
“Bernie, would you like to come this way?” Phillip asked, holding the door open. Bernie shuffled forwards on jelly legs taking tiny steps, breathing hard. Phillip allowed her to pass through and then shut the door gently behind them. They walked down a corridor, painted white into a small room with a slope on one side of the ceiling.

“Please have a seat” Philip said. Bernie looked and noted 3 leather armchairs and a desk and chair in the corner. “Where?” she asked. “Wherever you’ll be most comfortable” Philip replied, waiting by the door.

Bernie looked and noted the chair that had its back to the wall so she could see everything and tentatively walked towards it. There was a low wooden coffee table next to it with a box of tissues, a pen and some paper. She sat and adjusted the cushions. “Where would you like me to sit?” Philip asked and Bernie looked, indicating the chair that wouldn’t put him between her and the door. The sandy-haired man eased himself into the chair and sat back. He pushed his glasses up his nose and they looked at each other. Philip started to talk softly, telling Bernie about the setup of sessions, confidentiality and seeing if they were a fit. She half listened, trying to take it in but also concentrating on remaining in the room and not just running.

“Bernie?” Philip asked gently and she winced, realising she’d not heard the question. She shrugged her shoulders, feeling like a petulant teenager. “I realise it is so difficult to be here Bernie” Philip said. “Why don’t you try to tell me why you’re here?” Bernie though, the silence seeming to stretch out between them and the thoughts racing to fill the gaps. Philip waited, patiently, noting body language and gestures, unconscious movements that all helped him build a picture of the woman in front of him, clenching and unclenching her jaw. Eventually she looked up and shook her head slightly. “Don’t worry. Let me tell you about why I’m here” Philip said and saw Bernie visibly relax as the pressure was removed.

“I’ve been a therapist for 20 years” he started, “I’ve never served in the military, but my brothers both did and I became somewhere they could send their friends when they returned from a tour of duty. Eventually the army and air force both started paying for my services for their people in order to try to help them. I also do a lot of work with veterans who struggle to cope with civilian life. However, I also support non-military people for a whole variety of things.”

He paused and watched Bernie who for the first time was listening intently. Their eyes meet and Bernie felt hers fill with tears before she blinked them away furiously. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out to her total frustration. Philip reminded her to breathe and take her time and eventually a small but distinct voice said “I need help”.

Philip leaned forward and made eye contact again. “Bernie, I’ll work with you through this if you want me to, it will take time, it will take work for you to trust me and open up, I can see that, but I will sit with you and I can hear whatever you want or need to say.” Bernie sighed gently and plucked at the cushion she was holding on her lap. She in a quiet and halting voice said “I had some hard experiences in the army and they’ve left me with some effects”

“Would you like to tell me about them?” he asked and Bernie nodded, before choking out a sob. “Good” he said. “We can set up a time that works, each week and we can slowly start to think about it together. I won’t rush you.” Bernie offered him a slight smile. “Can we be done for today?” she asked and Philip nodded. They walked back out to the front where Serena rose from her seat warily and Claire and Philip exchanged glances. Claire wrote an appointment time for Bernie on a little card which Serena pocketed and saying their goodbyes the two medics left the office.
Chapter Notes

Here is the next bit in honour of Catherine saying Serena is going to be back in February!
Thanks for all the kind words, love you lot so much xx

Serena hurried after Bernie and watched as the blonde army medic struggled with her emotions as she walked away from the office. Suddenly Bernie stopped and crouched in a squat, fingertips brushing the pavement. Her back heaved as she tried desperately to drag in air to her panic-stricken lungs. Serena bent over and rubbed soothing circles on her back before stumbling as Bernie stood upright and unexpectedly launched herself into Serena’s arms.

“Breath Bernie” Serena intoned into the shell of her as she encircled her close, “You’re okay”.
“Ser, en, a” Bernie panted out in shaky gasps, “help!”
“Count with me as you breathe in, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Good, now out, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11”

They repeated that several times and Serena felt Bernie relax. She stood back slightly and looked at the flushed face in from of her. She pressed a kiss to Bernie’s forehead and took her hand. They walked slowly to the car and got in. Serena half turned in her seat and looked at Bernie who looked like she was braced for impact in a disaster movie, hands clasped to knees and bent forward, huddled around herself in self-protection.

“It was okay” Bernie whispered after a while, “sorry, I just got overwhelmed”

Serena smiled fondly and ran her hand affectionately through unruly curly hair. “You have nothing to be sorry for Bernie. Do you know how proud I am of you?”
Bernie shrugged and hunkered further down in her seat.
“Look at me?” asked Serena softly and watched the visible effort that it took Bernie to make eye contact. “See”
Bernie nodded and her eyes filled up at the look of love and admiration she received from the brunette. Serena raised her hand slowly and cupped Bernie’s cheek, feeling the other woman lean into the contact she smiled again. “Let’s go home”

Bernie nodded and Serena started the car. As she put the car in gear and started to move a hand crept onto her thigh and gripped gently, anchoring the army medic to her rock. Serena flipped the indicator and turned towards home.
The drive seemed to go quickly and they pulled up on the driveway. The car was turned off and seatbelts unclipped. Bernie squeezed Serena’s thigh before letting go and they climbed out of the car. Unlocking the front door they went in and closed the door behind them, both letting out a big sigh at being shut away from the world.

Bernie eyed Serena and asked softly, “will you sit with me?” Serena agreed happily and they went into the lounge. Serena sat on one end of the sofa and opened her arms to Bernie who all but fell into them, burying her face into Serena’s soft shirt. Soon Serena felt a wet warmth on her stomach as Bernie released the tears she had been holding. The vascular surgeon crooned words of love and nonsense over the shaking army medic, waiting for her to relax again.
“’I like him” Bernie mumbled, “but I’m so scared of doing this”
“But you are doing it Bernie and that is amazing” said Serena
They lay cuddled up until Bernie sat up a little, seeking a kiss that Serena happily returned. “I need to pee” said pushed up.
“Um” said Serena, biting her lip.
“What?” Bernie asked in trepidation.
“Is this, well, a Mars Bar kind of moment” she asked nervously.
Bernie smiled, “no, I won’t, I promise”

Serna smiled broadly and nodded, standing. As Bernie headed to the bathroom she herself went to the kitchen and looked at the master list of where everything was in the cupboards and extracted the necessary ingredients and equipment for the lasagne she had promised earlier. She got out a chopping board and started to cut onions and mushrooms when the toilet flushed and she heard the tap run. She moved over to the hob and started to fry the onions gently, before adding the mushrooms. Bernie came out of the bathroom and moved behind Serena, threading her arms round the brunette’s waist and pressing a kiss to the base of her neck. “Mmm” said Serena and felt Bernie smile as she dropped another kiss on the same spot. Serena finished assembling the lasagne and popped it into the oven. She scored over to the sofa and they snuggled back in the same positions as before, just listening to each other breathe.

They were drowsily cuddling when they heard the front door go and Jason yell “BYE” to Raf who had dropped him off. They exchanged hellos and went back to the kitchen where Jason laid the table and Bernie dealt with drinks while Serena portioned out the lasagne. Jason kept them entertained over dinner by telling them about his day. He asked to watch a quiz show and Serena told him that she and Bernie were going to go to their room. He nodded and wished them both good night. Bernie stacked the dishwasher and Serena wiped the countertops. Glass of water in each hand she motioned for the blonde to follow as they went upstairs.
“Bath?” asked Serena and Bernie agreed happily.

Serena ran it and they both got in, Serena leaning back into Bernie who had asked to be the big spoon. The warm scented water was soothing and comfortable and they relaxed, Serena humming softly. They washed each other’s hair and bodies, gently and lovingly caressing skin, trading kisses and enjoying the intimacy of the proximity. They dried themselves off and ran the hair dryer in turn. They got dressed and into bed and met in the middle. Long, slow, soft kisses and caresses turned into Serena laid with her head on Bernie’s chest, swirling her fingertips over taught abdominal muscles.
“Bernie?” asked Serena, making her jump a little.
“Yes Serena?” she replied.
“I’m really worried about something.”
Chapter 126 - Anxiety

Bernie froze and Serena widened the circles she was smoothing on the skin of the frightened woman laid half beneath her. The heart under her ear hammered and a prickle of sweat began to appear.

“What is it?!?” stammered out Bernie, tensing her muscles and moving directly in fight/flight.
“Ssssh” said Serena, gently, “I didn’t mean to scare you”
“Just tell me okay”, barked out Bernie, bathed in fear.
Serena pushed herself up onto her elbow and ran her fingertips down the blondes soft cheek.
“I’m worried that work and therapy and me and all this is too much for you right now”, she admitted. “I don’t want to make things worse for you.”

As soon as the words had left her mouth, Serena regretted them. She watched them worm their way into Bernie’s soul and start to rip at the edges of fragile contentment, leaving insecurity and fear in their wake. Bernie sat up suddenly and swung her legs over the side of bed so her back was to the brunette. Serena watched in horror as her lovers shoulders heaved with silent sobs. She knelt up hastily and wrapped her arms around the crying medic, pressing her front to Bernie’s back as if trying to fuse them together.

“Bernie, whatever you just heard, listen. That wasn’t a breaking up speech.”

Bernie whirled round and examined Serena’s face, searching for the truth. Kind, soft eyes met hers and the trauma surgeon let the tears flow. She covered her face with her hands and curled over, face down in the brunette’s lap. Long, strong fingers carded through the golden curls and scratched at her scalp. Bernie gave into all she’d been feeling and sobbed brokenly. Serena just let them come, not feeling the need to try to stop Bernie, knowing the healing value of the release the sobbing was providing. They sat like that for some time before Bernie pushed herself up to sitting and mopped her face with a handful of tissues from the box on the table beside the bed. She started to speak but was cut off by Serena,
“Don’t you dare say sorry Bernie! That was my fault. I was clumsy. What I was trying to say was, maybe you need a longer break from work or shorter hours so you can do your therapy and get used to us. It’s a lot of pressure and I’m worried that the hospital environment might be triggering for you while you work on stuff.”

Serena nibbled at her lip nervously, watching the fear turn to relief on Bernie’s face. She opened her arms and Bernie fell into them. She eased them both back against the pillows and dropped gentle kisses onto every bit of skin she could reach. Bernie clung fiercely at first but breathed out slowly and relaxed her grip. She turned her face towards Serena who kissed her lips so gently it was like the passing of a fairy wing over her mouth. Hoarsely she spoke,
“Sorry Serena. I know this insecurity is really unattractive.” She felt Serena smile as was drawn back into a close hug.

“That was my fault,” said Serena wryly. “And why wouldn’t you be insecure?”
“You’ve given me no reason to be” said Bernie and sat back a little as Serena laughed bitterly.
“Oh but I have my darling,” she said sadly. “I’ve doubted and been insecure too. We’re learning to trust each other on a whole new level and so why wouldn’t there be doubt? We can operate with each other without words, being intimate and loving each other takes more.”

Bernie nodded and leaned in for a kiss which lasted a minute and left both women slightly breathless. They leaned their foreheads against each other as if they could communicate telepathically.

Bernie sat back and cocked her head to one side in thought. Serena said nothing, allowing the army medic to process and then find her words.

“I don’t want to stop working Serena. It gives me purpose even when it’s hard.”

Serena nodded gently. “Okay,” she said, “but can we keep talking about it as we go along?”

Bernie nodded herself. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Serena. “Shall we get up?”

Bernie smiled, “We probably should”.

The two women moved together in a long embrace before getting out of bed. Serena wrapped herself in her robe and told Bernie to get in the shower while she went to make coffee. Bernie agreed and headed into the bathroom as Serena went downstairs. She flicked the kettle and sat at the table. Putting her head in her hands she berated herself for her earlier carelessness with words.

“Got to be more thoughtful about when I speak damnit!”. She felt a wave of sadness come over her as she remembered the sight of Bernie sobbing and then a rush of love. She laughed at herself a little, but grew serious again as she allowed herself to feel the depth of her love for the women upstairs. She made herself a vow, there and then, to do better, be better and try harder to take care of Bernie.

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