A Question of Professional Ethics

by MissBJinx

Summary

Slightly-AU. Serena Campbell is a private detective initially hired by Marcus Dunn to investigate his suspicions surrounding his wife's potentially adulterous behaviour. A consummate professional, how will Serena cope when she eventually begins to fall for the charms of Berenice Wolfe herself? As they grow closer, will Bernie ever find out the truth behind Serena's actions?

Notes

This AU is partially inspired by Chandler & Co., a BBC detective series from the early nineties which Catherine Russell had a starring role in. I posted the idea for this fic on my Tumblr and thought I would have a go at writing it! I'm hoping to write several chapters and would love to know what you think, so feel free to leave me a comment or message!
Target Acquired

Click

Raising her faithful camera to her eye once again, Serena Campbell’s frown creased slightly in concentration as she carefully focused the lens, a trained index finger hovering over the trigger with the stealth of a lioness waiting to pounce upon her prey. Whilst many private detectives favoured the discrete use of a mobile phone camera, Serena still preferred the control offered by a more traditional choice of photographic equipment. Besides, she was well camouflaged within the colourful metallic sea of cars which cluttered the tarmac of Holby City’s overcrowded hospital carpark.

Click-click

“Come on, come on… turn around…” she tutted impatiently, her sight never leaving the back of the tall woman’s blonde hair as she waited for her opportunity. As if she had been overheard, the willowy figure shifted her weight uncomfortably from one leg to another, long fingers scrabbling a crumpled cigarette packet from within the depths of a pale duster coat. The target twirled the solitary occupant of the packet in an elegant dance of flirtation around her long fingers, nearly succumbing to the lure of her eagerly waiting lighter before returning the cigarette to its familiar home; accompanied by a rueful purse of her lips. A familiar, lonely ritual which Serena had observed countless times in the past week.

Click

‘She’s stressed,’ Serena thought to herself as the woman in question plunged her hand angrily into her pocket, snatching at her phone and letting out a hiss of frustration as the gadget took on the nature of a bar of soap; slipping tauntingly out of grasping fingers and tumbling onto the unforgiving paving with an expensive clatter. Apparently unaware of her watching audience, a sharp kick of frustration was administered to an unfortunate nearby bench.

‘But what this time?’

“Hold it…” Serena murmured, taking advantage of the change of position.

Click-click-click-click

A rapid volley of shots captured the woman’s face, contorted slightly in pain. She was hopping uncomfortably, cursing– whilst inaudible at distance, it would not have required a trained lip-reader to approximate a guess at the words hissing from between her clenched teeth– presumably at her stubbed toe. Running a vexed hand through her unruly lightened hair–which was fast escaping from a loose ponytail–dark, watchful eyes swept the surrounding landscape.

‘Searching, for something… or someone.’ Serena thought to herself, lowering her camera as the object of her surveillance appeared to decide that enough had been enough (both in terms of her patience and potential for possible public humiliation courtesy of inanimate objects) and strode back inside as authoritatively as she could manage whilst limping.

“Just what exactly are you up to… Ms. Wolfe?” she sighed contemplatively, taking a welcome draught of coffee, letting the bitter infusion dance across her tongue as her analytical mind processed the available evidence before her. Her tired body relished the welcome arrival of caffeine.
Her musing was interrupted by the harsh rattle of her phone vibrating against the cheap interior plastics of the hire-car.

“Hello?” inquisitive low alto tones answered the incoming call. “Ah, Mr Dunn…..”

Several weeks ago:

Marcus Dunn shifted nervously as he retraced the same path around the wooden floorboard of 114 Pinehurst Lane; the creaking planks and nervous footfall of his brogues falling into an uneasy duet within the silence of the empty house. Pausing to sweep an imaginary speck of dust from the silver photo frame, his children’s faces beamed back; a picture of innocence, blissfully unaware of the dark clouds of suspicion that were beginning to gather within the Dunn residence.

Why on earth had he agreed to meet at the bloody house?

The sound of a car pulling up on the road set his pulse racing once more. Positioning himself on the arm of the brown leather sofa which set within the corner of the wide bay window, partially shielded by the heavy cream curtains, he tried to catch a glimpse of his mysterious visitor.

The driver of a green Saab convertible unfolded herself gracefully from the car: her bobbed brunette hair ruffling gently in the uncharacteristically chilly spring breeze, pulling her fitted dark coat slightly closer to her as she strode confidently towards the awaiting dark blue door; heeled leather boots rapping smartly upon the pavement. Dark, inquisitive eyes swept carefully across the outer façade of the house and met with his; a slender, raised eyebrow questioning his poor choice of vantage point with a faintly incredulous manner that seemed to say: ‘Hiding in the curtains… Really? That’s subtle…’

Although he was expecting it, the harsh buzz of the doorbell still managed to make Marcus flinch, a jarring noise which cut cleanly through the uneasy silence.

“Serena Campbell?” he questioned, opening the door slightly.

“Correct,” the brunette nodded once in the affirmative, shivering slightly in the chill as she met his tentative gaze. Marcus continued to stare helplessly, suddenly unsure about his chosen path of action.

“I believe that it’s on hinges for a reason…” she gesticulated briskly towards the half-open door, “Or shall we conduct our business on the doorstep?”

“Come in…” Marcus mumbled, pride slightly dented at the abrupt manner of his visitor. A skilled surgeon, he was used to running an operating theatre at St. James’s where everyone responded to the snap of his impatient fingers.

“Thank you, Mr Dunn…” Serena Campbell swept past with a faint waft of an expensive perfume and, if Marcus was not mistaken, a fleeting attempt at an eye-roll.

Brief pleasantries exchanged, he led her through to the living room and seated himself awkwardly upon the sofa, eyes wandering nervously around the room in the pursuit of imaged sources of noise.

“So…” he smiled self-consciously, fingers drumming worriedly upon the leather.
“So?” His feeble attempt at an introduction was countered by another raised eyebrow.

“Your website... it, I mean– you are, discreet?” An embarrassed flush darted across his cheeks as he stumbled.

“Yes, Mr Dunn...” Serena adopted a slightly softer tone of voice as she surveyed her potential client, “I am a private detective, specialising in investigating extra-marital affairs. Discreet is my middle name.” She cleared her throat, tilting her head slightly as her direct gaze met with Marcus’s. “And, that is after all why you chose to make contact with me...”

Marcus nodded glumly, his insides twisting fiercely as his darkest fears were finally spoken aloud and given credence. “Bernie...” he tailed off and looked down at his lap. “Major Berenice Griselda Wolfe, to give her her full title, my wife... I–, I believe she may be having an affair...”

“What first made you suspect her?” A carefully chosen stock question came from his right as the detective began to make a series of neat notes in a burgundy notebook.

“She recently returned from service in Afghanistan... she was in the Royal Army Medical Corps., at least until she was blown up by an IED... horrific injuries.” He paused to collect himself. “I persuaded her to turn down a ten-year commission to spend more time with her family... to return to England, settle in Holby, take up a position at the hospital. She seemed happy at first, to see more of Cam and Charlotte...” he gestured at the silver-framed photograph that sat upon the mantelpiece.

Serena looked up to see broadly smiling, slender blonde-haired woman, clad in a relaxed jumper and jeans ensemble posed on an autumnal day out with a friendly arm slung over two children who appeared to be in their late teens. A seemingly perfect example of a family unit.

“But as soon as she came home... she was different. Distracted... distant. It usually took her a little while to adjust when she came home from a tour, but this was different... she was always texting when I walked into a room, and she’d hide her phone away so fast... I saw the name ‘Alex’ flash up on the screen once before she could snatch it away...”

He paused, gesturing anxiously with his hands. “I can’t say for certain, but for my sake... for my children’s sake... I have to know, one way or another...”

Serena looked up from her note-taking and briefly outlined the shape that her work could take... from surveillance, to photographs, to more in-depth observation.

“I–... oh, it all sounds so sordid, doesn’t it?” Marcus twisted his fingers in a violent emphasis upon the final word in his sentence. “Spying upon one’s wife...” he looked up apologetically upon catching a glimpse of the unreadable expression that briefly flitted across Serena’s face. “Oh, I didn’t mean– I suppose you have done this for most of your life...”

“Wrong, I’m afraid, Mr Dunn,” Serena let out a short chuckle at her employer’s nervous stream of apologies. “I was a successful vascular surgeon until about ten years ago... some would call it a mid-life crisis, others a shrewd career move...”

Smiling at the surprised expression upon Marcus’s face at finding himself in the presence of a fellow medic, she leant forward. “I, myself, would argue that upon the collapse of a marriage due
to an adulterous, alcoholic, verbally abusive husband, and his fatal input into a botched operation that ultimately fell under my watch, that I chose well to get out of medicine when I could.”

Shrugging as she took a sip from a proffered cup of tea, she continued.

“Oh, there would have been plenty of scope for me to continue, had I wished, but I found that the life of a private detective rather suited me and I was somewhat loathed to give it up once I had started. Helping others to find justice in the face of adversity, piecing together the facts, being on someone’s side… it just all appealed…”

Marcus nodded, grateful for the insight that she had offered him. “When can you start?” he questioned.

Present:

“Mr Dunn… I believe that we may need to adopt a different tactic in order to find out what exactly is happening… basic surveillance appears to be revealing precious little other than your wife’s habit of sitting outside during her breaks. Shall I proceed as discussed?”

A note to the affirmative from the other end of the line, and Serena ended the call.

Taking a breath and peering up at the tallest floor of the imposing hospital building, she collected her composure and dialled a number that she had not had to make use of for several years. If all was well, a certain person should still be here…

The phone rang precisely three times before a familiar voice answered.

“Hello? Ah, Ms. Campbell. The joys of Caller-ID: a pleasure to hear your dulcet tones again. What can I do for you? And how, pray tell is the presumably estranged Mr Campbell?”

“Still very much divorced, thank you. After a selfish but wholly predictable attempt from him to lay claim to all of our shared possessions down to the last fish finger in the freezer, I felt obliged to perform an emergency cash-ectomy and full drainage of liquid assets. The patient’s wallet never fully recovered.”

Henrik Hanssen smiled. He could hear the familiar smirk over the phone.

“Enjoyable though exchanging pleasantries is, I do currently have a hospital to run, Ms. Campbell. Perhaps an explanation of the purpose of your call?”

Serena cleared her throat slightly nervously, “Well, Henrik…”

In her varied career, Serena had worked in the States in senior healthcare management before returning to London to assist in carrying out an efficiency overhaul of the various teaching hospitals; eventually marrying her husband whom she had met through a mutual work colleague. Occasional run-ins with the tall Swede at national NHS Trust conventions had forged a close friendship, especially after he had once rescued her from the humiliation of an unwelcome drunken shouting match courtesy of one Edward Campbell in the entrance hall of a prestigious wine reception hosted in central London.

Swaying faintly as he proffered a bouquet of slightly wilted roses in the general direction of his estranged wife and haphazardly shaking the drooping blooms in an accompanying accent to his increasingly slurred sentences, the anaesthetist had begun to hurl insults with a stinging accuracy
for one so physically inebriated. Unravelling bowtie flapping messily at his throat, blotchy-faced and squinting with a forced expression of immense concentration; the timely arrival of one Henrik Hanssen had gone completely unnoticed by Edward Campbell during his lengthy tirade. Most conveniently for Serena, Edward had soon found himself steered into the pitch-black space of what—judging from the metallic crashing of buckets and the probing advances of a licentious broom handle—appeared to be a nearby store cupboard. The faint jangle of a key turning triumphantly in the lock ensured his mysterious absence for the duration of the conference dinner and successfully prevented the further social embarrassment of his soon-to-be ex-wife.

“Ms. Campbell?” a gentle verbal prompt interrupted Serena’s recollections.

“I wouldn’t normally ask… but I am in need of a favour. Quite a large one, really.”
Infiltration

Chapter Summary

Having successfully arranged a means of infiltrating the hospital, Serena sets about engineering a chance meeting with Bernie Wolfe in a bid to find out more information about the mysterious medic...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of your positive comments and feedback, it really means a lot to me to read it!

Morning

A snarl of frustration accompanied the swift trajectory of the unfortunate blouse as it soared high into the air in a flap of red chiffon, gliding gracefully into a crumpled mess amid a mounting pile of its fellow counterparts in the corner of the magnolia-painted bedroom. A stain of clutter amongst the immaculate surroundings.

“No… not that one either!” Serena Campbell pursed her lips impatiently as she flicked through a dwindling stock of coat hangers within her wardrobe, scrutinising the remaining outfits with an accompanying hiss of metal upon metal as her remaining shred of patience gave way to annoyance.

Disguising herself as a temporary member of Holby City Human Resources should not have proven this difficult for a private detective of her ability.

Persuading Henrik Hanssen to allow her to take on the temporary responsibility of heading up an independent ward-management audit scheme had been a positive walk in the park compared to creating a realistic wardrobe for the character of a career administrator.

Harrumphing and snatching up the original outfit that she had selected; a rich, deep blue blouse, and accompanying tailored dark charcoal trousers, she conceded defeat in terms of her attire as she affixed the familiar NHS ID badge to her chest once more. She had far more pressing issues, namely, how to successfully engineer the opportunity of a chance meeting between herself and one Berenice Wolfe.

Afternoon

A categorical awareness of her target’s daily routine, gleaned from several weeks of careful surveillance had proved invaluable in helping such a meeting to come into fruition.

Positioning herself in the bustling queue at Pulses at precisely one thirty-five, Serena knew that she had an above-average probability of encountering the intriguing clinical lead of AAU. It
hadn’t taken much skill to then barge into the blonde-haired woman with a calculated force in order to ensure that she dropped her long-awaited-for coffee from between grasping fingers before the ill-fated vessel had made its way to her parched lips. Copious apologies, muttered expletives and the immediate placating purchase of a replacement coffee order had led the skilled detective to steer her colleague into conversation, seated at a table in the window of the coffee shop, rather than the usual lonely bench that the trauma surgeon appeared to frequent.

“So, what do you really do?” Bernie Wolfe quirked her head mischievously as she surveyed her new colleague, “No… don’t tell me… you’re a secret agent sent here to uncover a dark and dangerous plot… a role in HR sounds a plausibly dull cover story to mask your true intentions…”

“Umm,” Serena gulped awkwardly as her pulse fluttered. Little did Bernie know quite how close to the truth that she had unwittingly stumbled. Devoid of her usual eloquent loquacity, Serena continued to flounder with an uncharacteristically flustered pink blush creeping slowly across her cheeks until her new acquaintance took pity upon her and continued speaking.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell if you don’t want me to...I’m the soul of discretion” she winked conspiratively, taking a playful swig of her coffee and lowering her voice to a mocked hush as she whispered secretively from behind her hand.

“Actually, it’s far less exciting…” Serena cleared her throat for the umpteenth time and found her voice once more, “I’ve been roped in to help out with a new ward management scheme trial that the trust is looking to bring into operation…. Lots of scintillating data collection and patient feedback forms!”

“Thought I’d seen you hovering nearby with a clipboard...” Bernie’s eyes twinkled as she swept an errant lock of blonde fringe out of her face, “Any surgical experience?”

“Plenty, in a past existence,” Serena heard her voice reply of its own accord whilst internally cursing the apparent disconnect between the rigid script that her brain had carefully devised for the situation of the first meeting with her client’s wife and the torrent of betraying words that were tumbling with seemingly carefree abandon from between her own reckless lips.

Concentrate, Campbell... she admonished herself internally, feeling the conspicuous weight of the recording device secreted within her pocket as it nudged insistently against her hip. You are not being paid by the hour to sit around exchanging pleasantries. Next thing you know; you’ll be inviting her over to paint each other’s nails… now, focus!

“But, that was all a very long time ago...” she recovered with a hasty smile, attempting in vain to pick up the scattered threads of her rapidly unravelling conversational tapestry. “So, what brought you to Holby?”

“A bloody big bang, if you must know…” Bernie exhaled and blew her cheeks out with a flippant air of mock cheeriness that defied the ghost of a memory that flitted briefly across her dark eyes. She swilled her coffee with a deft flick of her wrist and drained the stale dregs from the bottom. “IED in Afghanistan, I was an army medic going about my daily business near Kabul… there was an almighty explosion, excruciating pain and I found myself being flown back to England...” she finished briefly, setting down her empty cardboard cup with a hollow thud; an oddly final gesture.

“And now, I’m here…”

“Blimey… I’m sorry…” Serena muttered quietly. Although Marcus had already supplied her with the basic details of his wife’s return it was still oddly shocking to hear her discuss the traumatic experience with such an apparent glibness. “Still,” she prompted gently, trying to respond as if such information was new to her, “must be nice to have some time at home… do you have a family?”
“Oh yes…” Bernie suddenly broke eye-contact as she ran a distracted hand through her hair, the bright, interested twinkle in her eyes snuffed out as suddenly as a flickering candle flame extinguished in a draught.

“It’s great…” her face contorted in what she apparently believed to be an approximation of a cheery grin, which in reality more closely resembled a pained grimace; a hastily adopted mask which jarred with the feigned joviality of her voice.

“Really great…” she added in a subdued murmur, seemingly more to herself than to Serena. Looking down hurriedly, she suddenly became very interested in surveying the abstract pattern ringed stains that previous spilt beverages had made upon the innocuous beige plastic of the table top over the course of the day. Drawing in a steadying breath, she made eye contact once more.

“Look, I–”

Bernie was rudely interrupted by a shrill, impatient volley of bleeps from her pager.

Squinting slightly at the concise information that was displayed upon the small screen, the trauma surgeon quickly sprang to her feet. Gazing down from her impressive height, she threw a brief glance at Serena.

“I’m sorry, duty calls!” Her commanding tone of voice rang out clearly above the low hum of chatter within the coffee shop. “RTC with multiple casualties heading my way imminently I’m afraid…” Bernie shrugged in a faintly apologetic manner as she pushed her vacated chair away with an authoritative scrape against the unforgiving wooden floor.

Her abrupt change in demeanour–narrow frame positively bristling with a vital alert energy–gave off the faint impression of almost welcoming the impending source of doom as a distraction from brooding over the crumbling foundations of her personal life; a taxing but solvable jigsaw puzzle of broken bones and splintered lives to be painstakingly pieced back together by her talented hands.

Messy, tangible, but ultimately fixable.

The previously slumped stance was abandoned, promptly shed like a second skin as any lingering trace of vulnerability was immediately sucked beneath the surface, trapped within a still vacuum, the professional veneer sliding cleanly back into place; a protective veil swiftly drawn upon the frothing jumble of chaotic emotions. “Nice to meet, you?…”

“Serena… Serena Campbell” the brunette supplied, making a deliberate show of peering carefully at the ID badge clipped to the blonde’s waist before the trauma surgeon began to stride away. “Likewise, Ms. Wolfe… I hope our paths cross again…”

Her reply was greeted by brief nod and a swish of blonde hair as the willowy medic turned rapidly upon her heel, throwing a brief smile of farewell over her shoulder as she took the stairs two at a time, her long legs hurriedly carrying her out of sight.

Serena let her eyes linger slightly longer than necessary upon the back of the departing surgeon, a frown of concentration leaving a faint crease in her brow, top teeth worrying a stray sliver of loose skin upon her bottom lip as her brain fought to extract any fresh information from the first exchange with the object of her surveillance. An ingrained habit, which she had never been able to fully disengage from.

Intriguing woman… she thought to herself, reaching into the secure depths of her pocket and clicking ‘pause’ upon the hidden device. Not quite as I’d imagined you… Still, evidently touched a
raw nerve with asking about the family…

She had spent several weeks familiarising herself with the army medic’s routine: the specific bench in the carpark where she chose to spend her lunchbreaks in isolation, her preferred type of caffeinated drink (a simple black coffee, no sugar) which she consumed with eagerness before the start of a gruelling shift, the hidden cubbyhole in that little sports car of hers that hid a surreptitious hairbrush for the occasional morning when the mop of blonde hair was being particularly unruly…. All superficial indicators which had added up to a starkly different version of the woman who had sat and laughed and joked amiably with her just mere moments ago. A woman who was apparently able to detach herself at an instance, emotionally disconnect from the situation in hand…

She was brought to her senses as the tell-tale metallic tang of blood caught her tongue. Lip stinging in protest, she let out a short tut of irritation and hauled herself to her feet; resigned to the looming boredom offered by an afternoon of filling out an acreage of the particular brand of mundane paperwork favoured by NHS management.

**Evening**

Straightening a weary spine with a satisfying crunch of vertebrae, Serena triumphantly clicked ‘send’ upon her last email of the day and swept the contents of her desk into an awaiting handbag in a single fluid movement. Productive as ever, she was comfortably ahead of her own demanding schedule, leaving her a free day to wander unobserved amongst the wards tomorrow and possibly discover the mysterious ‘Alex’ whom Marcus had mentioned. Given the insights from her surveillance of Berenice Wolfe, it was clear that she had precious little in the way of a social life outside of the bounds of the hospital, so it was a fair assumption to make that the other party in the affair (if indeed he did exist) worked at Holby City as well.

Swinging her dark coat around her shoulders, she couldn’t help but feel a faint isolated twinge at the base of her stomach as she watched her junior co-workers chatter in a giggly throng, crowding around a shared mirror as they reapplied a flurry of powder and gloss ahead of their impending trip to the pub; exchanging comment upon the juicer rumours that were currently circulating the hospital grapevine in a raucous cacophony that set Serena’s teeth slightly on edge.

Prior to being thrown back into the chaos of a shared office space, Serena was certain that she had favoured the remoteness offered by solo working: content to set her own agenda, work to her own punishing standards without fear of snide comment or opposition. And yet… there was that strange twist of loneliness within her gut once again as she contemplated her return to the empty solitude of her immaculate apartment and her somewhat pressing appointment with the lion’s share of a rather good quality bottle of Shiraz.

Letting out a sharp exhalation of impatience at her own brooding sentimentality, she crammed her furry hat onto her head with slightly more vigour than necessary, tightened her scarf with an irritated wrench of protesting woollen fibres and strode purposefully past her vacuous colleagues. The overall pretence of confidence was slightly undermined by the mild humiliation of having to return collect her stray handbag several minutes later.

Sighing as she waited an eternity for the lift to finally deign to arrive, Serena tapped an impatient heel upon the floor in a staccato tattoo; the interminable wait only serving to fuel her growing sense of exasperation.

“Oh, for goodness sake…” she hissed, abandoning any hope of the fable existence of the lift and stalked angrily towards the stairs, beginning the long, arduous descent from the sixth floor in
heeled leopard-print shoes that were already punishing her aching feet for their unwise choice of footwear; each tentative step extracting a cruel throb of pain.

The reverberating echo of a slammed door several floors below had her swiftly press her back into the camouflaged confines of the cold stairwell, skulking out of sight in the shadows in a well-practiced move. Glancing around tentatively, Serena gently lowered herself to sit upon an icy step and peered cautiously downwards through the metallic mesh which joined bannister and floor, whilst fumbling for her phone with adrenaline-pumped fingers.

“Wait!” familiar tones, constricted with a layer of anguish called out in despair as a sliver of Bernie Wolfe’s distinctive hair become visible from Serena’s lofty vantage point. Heart thudding wildly upon the chance discovery, Serena quietly zoomed her video recording in as close as the range of her device would allow, holding her breath in an irrational fear of being overheard several floors below.

Clearly distressed, Bernie was addressing a figure hidden well out of sight of Serena’s gaze.

“Don’t go… please… can’t we talk this through, Alex?”

The vocal timbre of the reply that came fazed Serena momentarily.

“Bernie…” a quiet voice, unmistakably feminine in register replied in a soft Northern accent, “I wish you knew what you wanted…”

“But, I do…” came the urgent whisper, “I–”

“It’s not enough…” a dark haired woman crossed in front of Bernie, her palms raised in a position of surrender as she shrugged in confusion, “One minute, you want me… the next I mean nothing to you?”

“Alex–”

“I’m going home Bernie… so should you… back to your precious family where you belong…” The reply was spat with a vicious agony; a futile bid to hold back a choked sob from escaping.

“Oh, Alex…” Bernie looked around exceedingly furtively before cautiously stepping closer and placing a tentative hand upon the other woman’s shoulder; a move which was resisted all but for a fleeting moment before Alex relaxed and allowed her lover to offer a brief squeeze of reassurance upon her shoulder. “What a bloody mess… but, I promise we’ll sort things out… I promise…”

“Really?” Alex’s voice trembled with suppressed emotion as she turned to stare at the trauma surgeon, dark eyes meeting in a gaze so intense that it pulled their lips together with a magnetic attraction. Time stood still for a fleeting second before the taller woman stiffened and flinched, pulling away as if burned as an overwhelming awareness of the public nature of their tryst overtook any deep-seated notions of romance.

“Umm, I should be heading back…” Bernie gestured weakly over her shoulder as they broke apart, wild, surreptitious eyes flying in all directions… “still got a couple of hours left until I clock off…”

Alex nodded curtly, clenching her jaw tightly as she drew her coat closer around her and set off down the staircase.

“See you tomorrow?” Bernie’s quiet inquiry went unanswered as she watched the other woman stride away, helpless to intervene. Letting out a deep sigh, she turned upon her heel and walked dejectedly out of the narrow range of sight that Serena was able to observe.
A slim digit tapped ‘stop’ and committed the damning evidence to the memory of the mobile device: coded in a series of ones and zeros; a pattern of two seemingly innocuous digits which in reality, when placed in the correct sequence, had the seismic power to destroy a marriage. Massaging an aching forehead in bid to alleviate a reeling brain which was suddenly awash with new information, Serena Campbell hoisted herself into a standing position courtesy of the bannister and continued upon her downward descent.

Case closed? Her professional senses encouraged her to present Marcus with the recording, supply the evidence that he had requested and then remove herself as far away from the potential fallout as humanely possible. It was not in her remit to act as a relationship counsellor, merely to supply the cold, hard facts that were requested.

Input request, output data. Collect fee, and, as one of her favourite acronyms instructed, FOH.

Still, best to be completely sure… her traitorous brain prompted her teasingly. Tomorrow was another day, and there were still many loose ends, burning questions surrounding Berenice Wolfe that her intrigued senses required further information in order to resolve and satisfactorily disengage herself from the case.

“I think I’ll pay a little trip to AAU tomorrow…” Serena smiled wryly to herself as she finally reached the ground floor and walked out into the chilly embrace of the evening. She paused briefly to admire the faintly sparkling constellation of stars which hung across the inky canvas of the night sky; an appreciative huff of air escaping from between her lips in a small cloud of steam as she strode towards the welcome interior of her awaiting car.
Dilemma

Chapter Summary

As Serena gets to know Bernie better, the strict line between her personal feelings and professionalism becomes blurred and hampers her judgement, setting a decisive train of events into motion.

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much for all of your lovely comments, I hope you like this chapter! It's a little slower moving, but is setting up some important events for future chapters.

A trembling wrist haphazardly sloshed the last dregs of wine into an awaiting glass before slamming the empty bottle down next to an identical twin which had also met a similar demise in the same evening. The final bead of ruby red Shiraz slid a slow descent down the inner wall of the glass, watched by a quizzical pair of dark eyes as a feverish brain mulled over a taxing predicament.

“Oh, for goodness sake...”

Cool digits kneaded against a blazing forehead.

“Just do your bloody job!” a harsh reprimand, addressed to nobody in particular, was snarled in uncharacteristically vicious tones.

A multitude of photographs littered the glass-topped coffee table in a chaotic jumble. The same blonde-haired woman featured in every single image; an intimate catalogue of her life for the past four weeks. Secretive portraits which, despite the numerous variations in scenery, cosmetic details and attire displayed a striking number of variations upon a theme: pale, worried features contorted in a familiar frown… dark eyes glittering with an infectious enthusiasm… a shy, downward looking smile, face partially obscured by a descending lock of bleached hair… anxious fingers dancing a ceaseless routine around a nicotine lifeline… slender lips pursed tightly in an angry, hurt pout and then, the one image which stood apart from the rest.

Two women, forms so closely entwined it was difficult to establish where one ceased and the other began in the murky shadows of the staff locker room. Alex Dawson’s eager fingers were wound possessively within Bernie Wolfe’s hair, soft hands resting upon the sides of the slightly taller woman’s jaw, foreheads resting against each other as two pairs of eyes locked in a positively sinful gaze, drinking each other in greedily; a picture of sheer unbridled lust which radiated far beyond the two dimensional bounds of the glossy photographic paper. Serena hadn’t been able to prevent her eyes from wandering once more to the damming image, a mixture of cold fury and betrayal churning within her gut as she surveyed the evidence. Soft sounds of kissing and whispered endearments rang loudly in her ears in an incessant accompaniment to the photography; a dirtied, sullied memory of voyeuristic shame clinging tightly to her, remembering how she had hidden carefully out of sight, forced to listen to the sound of the two women as they stole a brief
moment alone with each other.

“Why should it matter so much to you? Why does it bother you so much?” a strangled whisper hissed painfully from between firmly clenched teeth, “You’ve dealt with hundreds of similar cases before, been undercover and seen far worse in terms of human carnage... always so good at not getting involved…”

An errant hand swiped through the air in a helpless gesture, “your whole life since Edward has been a case study of deliberately not getting involved, not getting hurt again...”

She took a swift gulp of wine, choking slightly at her slight under-estimation of the quantity of liquid remaining in the glass as the alcohol burned in a heady blaze at the back of her throat. Eyes watering slightly, she returned her attention to the image that she was so well acquainted with that each pixel had been well and truly branded into her memory.

“But then, you came along…” Serena Campbell slurred faintly, jabbing an accusatory digit at the photograph as the vast quantity of alcohol that she had consumed swept over her in a numbing wave.

“Berenice-bloody-Wolfe…”

She had given the army medic one last chance, a final stay of execution which had not been received well.

**Earlier**

Since her arrival at Holby, Serena had become well-adjusted well to roaming the wards, talking to patients about their individual experiences with a genuine interest and exchanging playful yet detached chatter with new acquaintances on the hospital’s seemingly endless staff list. Her favourite days by far, however were those spent on the Acute Assessment Unit under the watchful eye of one Berenice Wolfe.

Lupine in both her surname and characteristics, the skilled trauma surgeon ran a tight ship: eager to nurture and support her fledgling junior doctors, but more than prepared to dismiss any forms of incompetence or insolence with a verbal snarl. Since their initial meeting, Serena had purposefully taken the time to get to know the commanding clinical lead and had rapidly found a genuine warmth and source of friendship in her colleague that made it even harder to assume the other side of her dual persona once her shift had ended where she was required to adopt the role of detective once more and continue to carefully investigate her co-worker’s every movement around the hospital.

The two women had found a natural ease around each other, chattering amiably, even attempting to schedule their breaks at a remotely similar time in order to catch up. Bernie’s favourite bench had certainly been mysteriously vacant since Serena’s arrival at the hospital.

Evidence was fast mounting up against the blonde surgeon however, and Serena had known that she was running out of excuses to not contact Marcus. It had been a fortnight since she had captured the incriminating video, and had a wealth of photographic proof to support the case for Bernie’s adulterous behaviour.

Biding her time for an appropriate moment to raise the issue had ceased to provide a satisfactory opportunity to broach the difficult topic, and it was with a heavy heart that she trudged into the consultant’s office on AAU, a small corner of which that she had taken to borrowing as a temporary base on her days spent on the ward.
“Is that an approaching coffee I spy? My hero!” Bernie’s jovial voice greeted her cheerfully from behind a stack of files. “Everything alright?” she frowned slightly in concern at the lack of response from Serena.

“Perfectly,” the brunette replied a little too hastily as she set down the cardboard cup on the edge of the desk, sucking in a deep breath as she prepared herself for a difficult conversation. “Well, actually. Look, Bernie… just to give you a careful warning, I was downstairs in Pulses just now and let’s just say that the jungle drums around here are starting to beat surrounding your involvement with a certain Alex Dawson… not that it’s my place to say, but–”

“What on earth?” Bernie gave her a peculiar glance as she looked up from behind a teetering pile of paperwork, simultaneously both fearful and defensive, her low voice quivering with suppressed rage as she cut cleanly through Serena’s attempts at conversation. “Why did you feel that this was anything to do with you?”

“Bernie… I just wanted to–”

“To what, Serena? Humiliate me further?” hurt eyes met defiantly with hers. “There are enough people in this hospital out to stab me in the back…” she swallowed and looked briefly skywards, collecting herself before quietly adding, “But I didn’t think that you would be one of them…” Suddenly aware of the fact that she had let too much slip, the professional mask was adopted once more as the trauma surgeon rose swiftly to her feet and exited the office without a backward glance, pulling the door closed behind her with a firm click.

“Right…” Serena let out her breath with a slow exhale as she watched Bernie walk away from her final chance of redemption. Closing her eyes briefly, Serena steeled herself for the task that she now had no choice but to complete.

Come on Campbell… pull yourself together. She’s only the mark, a quiet internal voice admonished her. Time’s up. Do what you have to do.

Sliding her mobile phone out of her pocket, Serena cast a furtive look around before sending a brief message to Marcus Dunn.

• Please contact me as soon as convenient. S. Campbell.

The following morning

The weak tangerine glow of the early dawn slowly filtered through an open chink in the heavy cream curtains, inching slowly across the polished wooden floorboards. The intrusive shaft of light clambered stealthily across the prone form of the lightly snoring detective: first illuminating her legs in an emerald hue as the strengthening source of light diffracted through the myriad of abandoned wine bottles, before edging upward along the subtle curves of a slumbering body still hidden beneath a faintly see-through leopard print blouse. Until, inevitably…

“Ugh….”

A deep groan, vaguely recognisable as human in its timbre, was succeeded by a croaked expletive as a suspicious eye cracked open slowly and winced at the blinding sunlight now pouring freely into the airy surroundings.

“Oh god…” Serena Campbell hauled herself wearily into a sitting position, an angry twinge from her back immediately protesting at the indignance of spending a night slumped upon the sofa like
a drunken teenager. Squinting slightly at the empty remnants from her previous night’s escapades which littered the surrounding horizons, she felt the unfamiliar presence of a foreign body. Gently patting her face in confusion, Serena let out an impatient huff before reaching up and unceremoniously unsticking the snapshot that had somehow become affixed to her cheek whilst she slept face down upon the leather seat. A troubled photographic depiction of Berenice Wolfe stared coldly back at her from the glossy surface, evidently displeased at being removed so abruptly from her comfortable place of rest, fluttering slowly to the floor as the occupant of the couch jettisoned the interloping article with a quick flick of her wrist. It took Serena several attempts to swallow; her parched, arid throat reminding her severely why Shiraz was to be consumed by the bottle, and not the entire bloody vineyard in one sitting…

She rose to a pair of slightly unsteady feet and set off in pursuit of the nearest source of restorative caffeine and paracetamol.

The events of the previous day returned slowly to her bewildered head as the aromatic fumes of brewing coffee rose into the air, recollections initially patchy in detail as the jumbled narrative fought to assemble itself into the correct sequence of events.

“Oh…” Serena’s gut squirmed uncomfortably, a faintly nauseous rumbling as the scattered pieces reconnected, remembering her terse message that she had sent to Marcus Dunn in the aftermath of the rejection of her olive branch that she had extended to Bernie. Professional instincts had indeed won out, as indeed they should, but never had she felt less confident in doing the right thing.

A mystified search of the surrounding debris finally unearthed her absent mobile phone, sat forlornly in the crimson dregs of a sticky puddle of spilled wine following its tumble from the sofa in the middle of the night. Wrinkling her nose in an expression of disgust, Serena plucked the unfortunate device from the floor, holding it tightly between finger and thumb and wiping the tacky residue away as best she could. Light flickered angrily across the newly-cracked screen, revealing two unread messages, both from members of the Dunn-Wolfe household.

One, a polite yet formal text response from Marcus suggesting the address of a suitably innocuous café on the other side of the city for their meeting later in the day.

The meeting where I’m supposed to hand over the evidence of his wife’s affair… Serena thought glumly as she typed a brief confirmation of her attendance and clicked ‘send’.

Too late to turn back now… time to turn up, hand over the evidence for Marcus to act upon as he saw fit and then vanish back into the shadows once more…

The other, a message from Bernie which made her stomach drop with a leaden weight of guilt.

- Sorry for being rude yesterday, I realise now that you were only trying to watch my back. Please accept credit for a coffee at Pulses courtesy of me, if you feel able to accept my apology? Hopefully see you on AAU later? B.

Unable to help herself, Serena smiled at seeing the anxious little message, carefully balanced between contrition and humour and wondered how long its writer had spent re-drafting it. She knew Bernie well enough now to know how such a seemingly insignificant act such as sending a text would have preyed upon her mind, anxiety gnawing away at her as a result of her actions regardless of whether she chose to hide the issue or send a message of apology.

Any thoughts of resentment were suddenly quelled, a secretive little grin curling at the side of her mouth as she quickly typed a reply, not wishing to prolong her colleague’s anguish any further.

- Make it a double shot, full fat latte and you have a bargain… shall we say 10:30ish?
Serena pursed her lips, tilting her head in curiosity as her analytical senses began to needle her once more. Why on earth could she forgive Bernie so easily? She had had the dubious honour of been in Marcus’s position herself once upon a time… the spouse who had to endure the humiliation of being cheated upon, of facing the maddening prospect of watching so-called mutual friends and acquaintances disappearing into the social woodwork once more, their flimsy brand of personal support as tangible as smoke, dispersing immediately upon the first whiff of scandal; a collective pricking of guilty consciences which had left her somewhat of a social pariah. Goodness knows how many of those high flying senior surgeons had been indulging in a few little inter-marital excesses of their own… She had only survived because of her decision to distance herself from the source of her troubles, abandoning medicine and deploying her considerable range of talents in helping fellow people who were seeking justice or reassurance of their own.

Her brooding thoughts were interrupted by the simultaneous arrival of two replies.

- Many thanks for your swift reply, see you this afternoon. Marcus Dunn
- Perfect, see you later! B x

Serena drew in a sharp breath as an uncomfortable image of Marcus and Bernie sat either side of a kitchen table exchanging light pleasantries over breakfast entered her mind: a portrait of a marriage hanging by a fraying thread as they both unwittingly yet instantaneously corresponded with the same person, albeit for completely different motives; a move which would ultimately prove final in more ways than one.

The carefully constructed lines between fantasy and reality were beginning to seep into each other, details bleeding as the colours of two separate lives refused to hold fast. Swirling, eddying in a confusing blur as pragmatism drowned in anxious sentiment.

Whether she liked it or not, Serena had become too closely involved. Whichever way she turned, she was going to inflict pain.

It was too late to hold back the inevitable.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

A resolute Serena meets Marcus to hand over the details of Bernie’s affair but finds herself wracked by guilt– has she made the right decision? Bernie and Serena grow closer over a post-work drink, prompting a surprise revelation.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to the lovely 'Ladies of the 11th' in sincere thanks to a wonderful group of people who I've had the privilege to meet through the Berena fandom, who have supported me no end through what has been an extremely difficult time.

Thank you to everyone for the lovely comments and kudos that I've received so far on this fic, I'd love to know what you think of this extended chapter!

“Oh, for goodness sake, MOVE!” frustrated hands slapped the leather steering wheel, a growl of impatience emanating from a driver who was already running behind with her morning schedule and in serious deprivation of her usual caffeine intake.

A group of car horns blared in chaotic agreement as Serena Campbell sat in the gridlocked traffic of the city centre. A shrill chorus of ambulances swept past at speed on the hard shoulder; discordant voices shrieking a sliding descant high above the steady bass rumble of idling engines.

Tutting in exasperation, Serena fiddled with the radio in a bid to find a local news update; the Beethoven piano sonata that she had been listening to disappearing in a storm of static as the radio begrudgingly sought a new station. An irritatingly upbeat jingle preceded a news and weather update.

“Hello, good morning, you are listening to BBC Wyvern. Ted Marsden here! News just in, we’re getting reports of a six car collision on the inner ring road of Holby city centre, all traffic down to one lane and we’re just hearing that the police may yet decide to close off part of the road to allow emergency services access to attend the scene. A quick look at the traffic cams and it looks as if those queues are stretching back for several miles now– you’re definitely best avoiding that route if you’re heading out and about!”

Serena rolled her eyes dramatically and allowed her head to flop back against the headrest.

“I am already ‘out and about’, you imbecile…” she muttered darkly to the empty confines of the car.

“Lucy Grady, our reporter is live from near the scene. Lucy, what can you see?”

“Well Ted, we have just had it confirmed from a spokesperson that Holby City Hospital Trust is to act as the main receptor for casualties from this horrific accident. Ambulances have just arrived on
The young news reporter was cut off abruptly as Serena switched off her car’s engine with a heavy sigh. A silence fell as the occupants of nearby vehicles followed suit.

“Oh goody…”

Taking advantage of the fact that the traffic had become so resolutely stationary that people were beginning to get out of their cars and stroll about the tarmac, Serena reached for her handbag and extracted her mobile phone.

- Hi Bernie, I’m stuck in the chaos in the city centre. Really sorry but doubt I’m going to make it in on time for our coffee this morning, plus I’d imagine AAU is going to be heaving today! Shall we rearrange? S x

She had barely set the device down before a faint buzz made her jump slightly.

- My pager has just gone berserk! Awaiting arrivals… Shall we say drinks at Albie’s this evening instead? I think I’ll be in need of one! B x

“You and me both…” muttered Serena, typing a swift message of agreement as she thought about her forthcoming meeting with Marcus Dunn. She had desperately wanted to have the chance to speak to Bernie, to have the chance to properly establish her friend’s side of events before speaking to Marcus in her official capacity, but that vague hope was now rendered impossible.

Sighing gently, she placed her phone back into her bag and fiddled with the radio once again. Soft piano music filled the air in direct contrast to the noisy pandemonium that was unfolding outside. Serena rested her head back and closed her eyes, plotting her next series of events with caution.

It was going to be a long morning.

Afternoon:

Several hours later, finally freed from the congested traffic, a lime green Saab convertible pulled up into a parking bay outside an expensive-looking little café titled ‘The Apple Tree’ in the southwestern outskirts of Holby. Under the pretence of adjusting her makeup in the rear-view mirror, Serena spied the distant figure of a grey suit-clad Marcus Dunn approaching on foot, evidently having decided to walk the short distance from the nearby St. James’ Hospital.

“Right…” she steeled herself, an uncharacteristic icy squirm of nerves rolling around her gut as she cast an eye at the awaiting folder that sat as an awkward passenger on the front seat.

“Time to get it over with…” she climbed gracefully out of the car, collecting her belongings and walking into the agreed meeting place with an air of professional confidence which did not betray her inner concerns. Ordering two drinks from an exorbitantly priced menu, she settled herself into a quiet corner table and awaited the looming arrival of Marcus Dunn.

She did not have long to wait before a shadow fell across the table as the surgeon slid into the seat opposite.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Campbell,” his face betrayed a worried tic of anxiety dancing in his left eyelid.

“Mr Dunn,” Serena nodded slightly in greeting as she pushed a cup of tea towards her client.

“Shall we get this over with?” blurted Marcus, any last attempt at a calm manner was abandoned
as he took at deep swig from the cup and replaced it in the saucer with a hasty clatter of china on
china. “Sorry—” he apologised and collected himself after earning an arched eyebrow from the
detective. “But, when I saw that message from you, I knew to expect the worst…”

“As you wish, Mr Dunn. But first—” Serena produced a short document and placed it in front of
him. “I insist upon this with all of my clients: it’s a brief agreement that states that any mention of
my name or involvement with this case is kept firmly out of any legal proceedings, publications or
general conversation. I do, after all, have to consider my confidentiality as well…”

Experience had taught Serena that her privacy was beyond price. A naïve mistake in her early
career as a detective had seen her house besieged for days as a target—who also happened to be in
the midst of a rather high profile case of financial misconduct–had vindictively named her openly
in print, accusing her of trespass. Several days had passed in a blur of flashbulbs, cameras popping
in a dazzling constellation as she had peeped out tentatively from behind drawn curtains;
imprisoned by a snarling pack of tabloid hounds seeking her professional blood to appease their
journalistic masters. Since then, a non-disclosure agreement or suitable legal equivalent was her
essential safety net whenever she took on a new case.

“Of course….” Marcus produced an expensive brand of fountain pen from within the depths of
his suit pocket, pored over the legalities of the paperwork and nodded in satisfaction before
placing an ornate, loopy signature at the bottom of the page. “You can’t be too careful
nowadays…”

“Thank you.” Serena slid the completed paperwork back across the table, checking the particulars
of the form before placing it carefully into an awaiting folder. “Formalities, I know, but necessary
ones I find. So—”

She drew in a deep breath, unable to hold back the inevitable for a moment longer, before pulling
a large taupe file from the depths of her handbag and placing it gently in front of Marcus. A
careful hand lingered possessively on top of it as she began to explain its contents in a carefully
rehearsed speech.

“As instructed, I carried out several weeks of surveillance upon your wife, Ms. Berenice Wolfe.
Preliminary work revealed little in terms of specific detail, so, as agreed, I undertook an
undercover role in an administrative post at the hospital in order to gain closer access.”

She paused to extract several photographs of Bernie in a variety of poses outside of the hospital
and placed them in front of Marcus.

“By moving freely between wards, I was able to establish that all members of staff regard your
wife in a generally positive light, and, there was little in the way of general gossip to suggest that
anything out of the ordinary was happening.”

Several anonymised written statements gleaned from staff interviews were added to the pile.

“However,” Serena extracted a photograph of an unsmiling dark haired woman and set it down
exceedingly gently, almost as if aware of the potentially explosive nature of the subject’s identity.
It hadn’t taken much effort to take a glance at a certain individual’s staff records to piece together
the missing details.

“This is Alex Dawson, a locum anaesthetist currently working on a short-term contract at the
hospital. She, like your wife, also served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was also
medically discharged from service following injuries from an improved explosive device. A
distinguished service record indeed, including reportedly saving the life of her commanding officer
in the aftermath of the same explosion that brought about her own injuries.”
Marcus’s hand was trembling slightly as he slid the photograph towards himself, eyes widening in realisation.

“Alex?” he questioned, “As in? –”

“Mr Dunn,” Serena broke away from her pre-rehearsed script, her tones softening as she regarded her client. “I believe that you may know what I am about to say–”

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Marcus whispered, picking up the photograph and staring at the mysterious medic. “She’s the one who…” his eyes glistened faintly, “She’s the one who Bernie has been seeing behind my back…”

Swallowing, Serena nodded apologetically as she reached into the folder and spread out a small pile of incriminating photographs, video stills and a typed transcript of the stairway encounter. Portraits of a hidden relationship, conducted behind the shadows of the hospital walls; two women attempting to maintain a secret romance in the confines of civilian life which had been birthed in the heightened reality of a warzone. The scenery may have differed starkly, but the personal scars inflicted by such a fight bore a striking resemblance.

“It would appear so,” she added quietly. “I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Believe me, if there was an easier way to have done this, a kinder version of events to have shared with you, then I would have.”

“Indeed.” Marcus replied flatly as he shuffled haphazardly through the pile of damning images.

An uneasy silence hung between them, occasionally punctuated by the glossy slide of photographic paper as Marcus continued his own visual torment, unable to tear his disbelieving eyes away from the glimpse into his wife’s secret life.

After sitting in a muted hush for nearly ten minutes a polite cough from Serena broke into Marcus’s obsessive contemplation.

“Umm, Mr Dunn? Is there anything else that I can do, anything else that you want?”

Silence.

“Perhaps it is for the best if I left you to think about this in peace–”

“What do I owe you?” A blunt question cut cleanly through Serena’s gentle probing.

“I’m sorry?” the detective was momentarily flustered by the harsh tone of voice.

“For your work. How much?” the surgeon repeated impatiently.

“Oh? No need to hurry…” Serena attempted a quick smile as she rose from the table, “I’ll send over a final invoice in a few days.” Her voice softened, “I think it’s only fair that you have as much time as you need to consider exactly where you go from here, Mr Dunn, and I think that a petty matter of zeros on a cheque pales into insignificance before deciding how you wish to broach this somewhat delicate topic of conversation with your wife...” she tailed off as Marcus’s eyes hardened, his lips clenching in a firm, bitter line as he swiftly divined the gesture of appeasement hidden within Serena’s careful choice of words.

“What on earth is there to discuss?” he spat darkly, his fist closed tightly around the damning evidence, swiftly crushing his wife’s likeness beneath unforgiving fingers. “She’s the one who cheated, who lied straight to my face, to our children’s faces...” Taking in a steadying breath, he
slowly relinquished his hold upon the crumpled paper which fell lifelessly from his hand; skittering lightly across the table, crushed beyond recognition.

“I’m sorry…” he gestured weakly to the innocuous beige folder, “It’s a lot to take in…. hearing all of your worst suspicions confirmed like this. You know—” he broke off helplessly, drumming his fingers upon the table top in an agitated rhythm, an uneasy duet which was accompanied by the metallic buzz of his teaspoon rattling tunelessly in the saucer of his abandoned drink. “It’s not the fact that it’s a woman that she… I could forgive her for the old cliché of falling for someone else…” Confused green eyes stared up at Serena as he continued, “It’s the fact that she lied… Bernie, my Bernie has always been so honest… the first to call out any form of deceit, always so fierce in standing up for her principles…” he tailed off quietly, “All of that was a bloody lie, wasn’t it? A sham…”

Serena leant forward and briefly patted him on the hand. “With the greatest respect, Mr Dunn,” her dark eyes held his gaze unflinchingly, “whilst it is not in my remit to act as a marriage counsellor, I have very much seen how this situation works from both sides. Acting impulsively in this sort of situation only leads to you being left with more questions than answers. You owe it to twenty-five years of marriage to at least sit down with your wife and talk to her about this, no matter what she has or hasn’t done…”

Marcus uttered nothing but raised a faintly questioning eyebrow at the detective’s advice.

Serena swung her handbag decisively over her shoulder. “Let’s just call it personal experience…” she added with a wry smile.

Marcus drew in a deep breath, pursing his lips thoughtfully before slowly nodding in assent. “You’re right,” he admitted with a faint tilt of his head, “Thank you, Ms. Campbell. I know that this outcome was far from what I wanted to hear, but thank you for handling matters with such sensitivity.” He extended his arm in the rare invitation of a handshake which Serena accepted courteously.

“Well, all the best. I doubt our paths will need to cross again.” Marcus’s cool hand felt faintly clammy as it closed tightly around hers.

“Good afternoon, Mr Dunn.” Serena replied, feeling a wave of relief pass through her as she simultaneously released her grip upon the surgeon’s hand and her involvement in his marriage; free to walk away at last from the confusing double-life that she had inhabited. Short of settling her outstanding fee and completing the remaining fortnight of her temporary contract at the hospital, her life could return to normal once more.

_Ah, normality..._ she found a small, nagging twinge of regret immediately disturbing her inner peace as she contemplated a return to the lonely solitude of her day to day existence. Wrenching open the café door with slightly more effort than required and stepping out into a cool breeze which lightly ruffled her dark hair, she was disconcerted to find exactly how little enthusiasm the prospect of returning to routine was seemingly met with within her mind.

_By rights_, she thought to herself as she hitched her handbag slightly higher up her shoulder, _she should text Bernie and cancel their meeting as no further evidence was required, but as technically she was no longer the target of an investigation, there was nothing to stop two friends from meeting up for a drink, was there? Nothing out of the ordinary?

Even if one of those friends had just spent the afternoon in the company of other’s husband, showing him incriminating photographs of his wife being decidedly intimate with another woman.

_Completely normal then._
“Oh God…” Serena clapped a weary hand to her forehead, her protesting brain thrashing uncomfortably beneath the skull as it fought to untangle itself from the tangled strands of interwoven lives.

*Better make that a large drink.*

**Evening:**

Half past seven precisely.

Serena checked her watch nervously for the umpteenth time before inspecting her makeup in the bathroom mirror once more and deciding that the occasion warranted a further layer of mascara. She ran a nervous hand through freshly cut hair—a spontaneous decision from her drive home which she was still questioning as being the right course of action—appreciating the texture of the blunt ends beneath her fingers as she smoothed the marginally shorter version of her brunette bob neatly into place. A delicate pair of teardrop pearl earrings were carefully selected to compliment a soft navy cashmere waterfall cardigan and slim-fitting black trousers. Heeled leather boots and a slick of ruby lipstick completed her look to her satisfaction before she left her flat with characteristic punctuality. It was nice to have an occasion worthy of dressing up slightly for, even if it was merely an after work drink.

“Serena!” a familiar voice cut cleanly through the background music and chatter of the bar as Serena walked into the room, a tall willowy figure, elegantly clad in a cream blouse and tailored grey trousers, immediately standing up and beckoning her over towards a secluded corner table.

“Lovely to see you! Nice hair, by the way—have you had it cut?” Berenice Wolfe complimented her by means of greeting and cautiously proffered a brimming glass. “I had a hunch that you were a red wine kind of girl? Shiraz alright?”

“Just what I need,” Serena accepted the drink gratefully and settled comfortably into the plush sofa, momentarily allowing her head to sink back in exaggerated exhaustion.

“Busy day?”

“Not as hectic as yours, I’m willing to bet,” Serena replied, “how bad was the fallout from this morning’s incident?”

“Don’t…” Bernie yawned tiredly, “Multiple cases of concussion and smoke inhalation, five complex fractures, three dislocated shoulders, two ruptured spleens—”

“And a partridge in a pear tree…” Serena added to Bernie’s lengthy description, exhaling with a sympathetic puff of her cheeks as she reached for the bottle of wine which sat between them and refilled Bernie’s dwindling glass with a satisfying splash, “Sounds like you’re more than in need of this then…”

“Oh yes…” Bernie took a grateful swig before she continued. “And then, to cap it all, a patient collapsed on the ward with a suspected subarachnoid haemorrhage. Neuro had their work cut out to stop the bleed but he should make it, thankfully.” She smiled apologetically over the rim of her glass, “Sorry, talking shop again! I don’t want to bore you already…”

“Oh yes…” Bernie replied with a knowing tilt of her head, “I used to thrive on that sort of chaos. Never happier than when I was getting stuck in in theatre piecing some unfortunate person back together again!”

“Ah, of course. Leading light in vascular surgery St. Bart’s for a while, before overhauling the
entire London NHS Hospitals teaching framework? I forgot who I was talking to,” Bernie replied with a respectful nod.

“Wasn’t aware that I had a stalker,” Serena chuckled lightly, her insides performing an uneasy roll at the casual reference to her past life.

“Not at all. I may have done a little background reading after the unfortunate time where we literally ‘bumped into each other’ in Pulses. I knew I recognised your name from somewhere, plus when you said you’d had plenty of surgical experience…well, let’s just say it didn’t exactly take Holmesian powers of deduction to establish who you were!”

“Indeed,” Serena took a rather large gulp of Shiraz, anticipating the inevitable question. She didn’t have long to wait.

“So, far from wanting to pry, how come you’ve made the jump from operating theatre to admin? Doesn’t seem an obvious route for a revered consultant such as yourself?”

Serena bit back the initial retort that she would have happily thrown at anyone else who dared to poke their nose into her business, instead falling more in favour of a diplomatic approach.

“Well, a number of factors… mostly arising from a small matter known to most readers of the tabloid press as the ‘Wattis Scandal’…” she murmured, deliberately addressing her comment to her wine glass than to the blonde surgeon who sat opposite her.

“Oh…” Bernie’s face twitched uncomfortably in shock at the recognition of the infamous name, “Several years back now? That anaesthetist who–”

“The alcoholic anaesthetist who slipped under the radar? The incompetent idiot responsible for the completely avoidable death of that MP during a routine operation? Yes, that would be the one…”

Serena’s face was unreadable as she interrupted her colleague before continuing in a blank monotone. “A rather high-profile case of professional negligence was brought against my department by his grieving widow, which resulted in the powers that be deciding someone higher up the food chain should be held responsible… I was lined up to carry the can for it, so I jumped before I was pushed.”

“Serena, I–”

“Of course, it’s even better when it’s your own husband who was the guilty party.” Serena finished bluntly, setting down an empty glass with a dull thud, for once appreciating the candour induced by the alcohol. “My very much ex-husband, I should say,” she added with a knowing glance. “A nasty piece of work who finally cheated, lied and drank his way out of my life, but hey, life moves on. I found an alternative career path which I much prefer.”

“Husbands can be rather problematic…” Bernie added quietly, “I had to fight Marcus tooth and nail to let me return to work after the children were born. Apparently motherhood and medicine don’t mix.”

Serena raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Oh yes,” Bernie nodded, “But if he thought for one second that I was going to throw away everything that I had fought for in a career where as a woman that I’d had to take two steps for his every one to reach the same position…” she swallowed uncomfortably, “he was very much mistaken. I went into the army, found something that suited me at last. A chance to set my own agenda, find my own way to make a difference. But now…” She sighed deeply, summoning up a remaining modicum of courage before looking directly at Serena.
“Serena, about that rumour that you warned me about the other day—” she began resignedly.

“About Alex Dawson?” Serena countered, carefully arranging her face into a faintly puzzled expression which defied her prior knowledge.

“Yes.” Bernie’s face contorted in guilt. “I–, please, I haven’t told this to anyone,” her gaze widened in fear, dark chocolate eyes beseeching Serena to be merciful in a scared glance as she swept an agitated hand repeatedly through wisps of hair which were beginning to escape from her ponytail. “It’s true…” she breathed, panic-stricken as she covered her face behind her palm, the first time that she had dared utter reference to her affair, the glass walls of her constructed fantasy cracking and shattering as she finally gave name to the secret which she had carried with her for several months.

“Bernie…” Serena whispered, patting her gently on the shoulder, aware of what it had cost her to be truthful, “Oh Bernie, what a mess…”

“And now she’s gone.” Bernie’s voice was slightly muffled from behind her hand before it snapped abruptly forward towards her awaiting glass which she downed in one. “Left today for good. So that’s that.” She swiftly refilled her glass and Serena’s without question.

“And Marcus? Does he know?” Serena questioned, maintaining a pretence of ignorance knowing full well what the correct answer was. Bernie shook her head slowly.

“It doesn’t make it right; I know…” the quiet whisper eventually came from opposite the table, “But there were so many times when I suspected him of seeing someone else when I was away on tour, so many times when he played the devoted father card whenever I dared to question him, knowing full well that he had been there for Cam and Charlotte when I hadn’t…when I’d just buggered off and left them. I was powerless to suggest otherwise as he was right, I just hadn’t been there for them–”

“Hardly mother of the year material, eh?” a light attempt at humour died upon her lips as she shrugged helplessly.

“Rubbish, you did everything that you could, and more,” Serena’s hand immediately reached out and gently clasped the back of Bernie’s. “It’s not easy, being a surgeon and a super mum before you even begin to throw in the overarching matter of having your life put in danger every day as a matter of course! I’m sure that you never ever failed to put your children first.”

“Thank you,” Bernie smiled softly as she regarded Serena, eyes now twinkling with warmth. “Nobody’s ever put it quite like that before.”

“You’re welcome,” Serena returned with a swift grin, before holding up the empty bottle and wrinkling her nose in disgust at the apparent lack of Shiraz that it contained. “Now, before we stray further into maudlin territories and examinations of the soul, may I suggest that we equip ourselves with suitable rations?”

“I’ll drink to that!” chuckled Bernie with a bark of laughter as the brunette let out a positively naughty cackle of approval and hurried off to the bar to purchase another bottle.

The night passed by all too quickly as the two women chattered easily, a warm glow of happiness settling comfortably within Serena’s chest as she effortlessly conversed with Bernie over matters both comical and serious, political and general, delighted for once to find an intellectual equal prepared to explore the varied avenues of conversation with her. Even as last orders were called and both women rose reluctantly to their feet, Serena felt a twinge of regret at the evening having
sped by so rapidly.

“I think I’m walking home tonight….” Serena gestured meaningfully at the small collection of empty bottles that sat upon their abandoned table. “Thankfully, I’m not required in the office until later on tomorrow, so I can at least schedule in an appropriate hangover for the morning. You are a very bad influence, Ms. Wolfe….” she gently nudged Bernie with an accompanying conspiratorial wink.

“Oh, once in the army… and all that jazz…” Bernie countered cheekily as she buttoned up her coat. “It somewhat heightens your capacity for the booze. Still—” she glanced down in agreement, “I’m definitely over the limit, so probably better to hail a cab, as I don’t think I really fancy walking all of the way across to the other side of the city at this time of night.”

A chilly blast of night air greeted both women as they stepped outside the bar.

“Well, thanks for tonight,” said Bernie as she wound a scarf around her neck in a bid to keep warm, “It was lovely to have a proper chat.”

“Thank you,” agreed Serena, “That was the best evening’s company I’ve had in a long time.”

“Even though you now know how I’ve been lying and cheating my way through the past few months?” Bernie bit her lip awkwardly as she fiddled with her coat. “Because, I’m not proud of that you know… Marcus deserves to know. I’m going to have to tell him…” she tailed off quietly.

Serena took a rather rash step forward, touched by the pained look on the other woman’s face. “Come here,” she offered gently, wrapping her arms around the ex-soldier in a friendly hug which was stiffly resisted for all of a moment before Bernie relaxed into the welcome source of support. “Thank you,” came a quiet voice of acceptance in her ear.

“What else are friends for, eh?” Serena added as she patted Bernie on the back in reassurance, feeling the unfamiliar warmth of another torso against hers, welcoming the first human contact—save for the occasional formal handshake—that she had experienced in months.

Except, she’s not just a friend, is she? She hasn’t been that for a very long time… why else would you keep finding ways to avoid presenting that evidence to Marcus? Why else would you keep finding ways to spend time with her? Just imagine if you found those pretty lips pressed against yours… a snide internal commentary broke rudely into Serena’s awareness.

Oh…

Serena’s heart began to flutter with the wild chaos of an alarmed bird in light of her dawning realisation; her chest suddenly tightening and violently forcing the breath out of her startled mouth in a chilly cloud as a formidable throb of desire flooded through her first time in several years. A heady rush of chemicals coursed within her veins as she felt the parameters of a toned physic pressed gently against her; inhaling a trace aroma of a citrus-scented shampoo from the loose curls of blonde hair which nestled gently against her nose. What had been initiated as a friendly hug swiftly deepened into a close embrace, the initial slight resistance in the taller woman’s shoulders easing as she leant forward and relaxed into the contact. Warm breath, which carried the faint spiced tang of red wine tickled the exposed sliver of flesh on the side of Serena’s neck, sending an electric shiver jolting down her spine; her erratic heartbeat matched in a sensual pulse of desire at the apex of her thighs.

No, no, no…

Gulping frantically, she desperately tried to persuade her reluctant brain—which was currently
swimming in a generous quantity of Shiraz– to conjure the dourest, least erotic thoughts in a bid to attempt to recapture control of her body’s physical responses, whilst internally muttering a desperate plea to any listening deity that Bernie would not feel the crazed hammering of her heart beneath the soft woollen fibres of her coat. The urge to flee was proving overwhelming.

The mechanical rumble of an approaching taxi proved to be the cue for their separation.

“Well, night then,” a faintly wistful look flitted across Serena’s face as the two women broke apart. Despite her panic, her bereft arms missed the close contact immediately. What had felt like an eternity had lasted mere seconds in reality.

“Night…” Bernie smiled shyly as she looked down, a slender hand raising to brush her long fringe out of her eyes.

Serena nodded mutely, her treacherous heart ignoring her internal remonstrations and continuing to pulse wildly, a faint pink flush inching delicately across her complexion as she cajoled her reluctant feet into moving; forcibly lifting the leather boots in turn from the concrete where she had happily taken root in Bernie Wolfe’s captivating presence. Walking swiftly away across the frosty tarmac, her head whipped around immediately at the sound of other woman’s voice.

“Serena? Thank you for today… for everything…” devoid of further words, the trauma surgeon tailed off with a fond smile and a slight, grateful shrug of her narrow shoulders as she clambered into the awaiting taxi.

*You wouldn’t be saying ‘thank you’ if you knew what I’d done… if you knew what an almighty storm was waiting for you when you get home tonight…* a bitter internal monologue supplied.

“My pleasure,” Serena smiled in reply, protesting facial muscles holding the grin firmly in place until she turned away and heard the cab door slam with a hefty thud; a safety barrier established once more between the two women. Freed from the task of attempting to maintain a united defence, her head and heart turned inward, clashing swords and waging a noisy war between each other, a bloody conflict only fuelled by a rapidly escalating sense of overbearing guilt and a rush of raw, unchecked desire–frightening in its sheer intensity.

*Oh you stupid, stupid woman… what on earth have you done?*

A trembling hand drifted subconsciously to her lips, a myriad of deafening thoughts ricocheting manically around the internal confines of her skull like gunfire. It was no longer a case of being in too deep; she was so far involved that she was now drowning beneath the colossal tidal waves of her own making.
Serena and Bernie both reflect individually as they head home from their evening together. How long will Serena be able to sustain the double life that she has found herself trapped in once Bernie’s home life begins to crumble?

Many thanks for all of your lovely comments on this work so far, it really brightens my day to read them! As you may have noticed, the rating has edged up slightly on this fic in light of events in this chapter and future content.

Berenice Wolfe smiled fondly to herself as she looked through the mist of condensation which spread across the back window of the taxi; a misty cloud propelled by her own warm breath. Reaching forward and wiping away the hazy vapour with the cuff of her coat revealed the retreating figure of Serena Campbell who was walking briskly away across the frosty tarmac with a characteristic swiftness.

*That was the most wonderful evening I’ve had in ages…* Bernie thought to herself as she turned and settled comfortably into her seat, a warm glow of alcohol and contentment radiating through her.

“Excuse me, where to please?” the polite voice of the taxi driver cut abruptly through Bernie’s musings.

“Oh, sorry!” she chuckled, “114, Pinehurst Lane, please.”

Her driver nodded, selecting an appropriate gear and pulling away with a low rumble from the engine.

Resting her tired head against the window, Bernie was free to observe the multitude of streetlights flickering past in a steady rhythm, watching the bustling landscape of the city—which she had begun to call home once more—slip idly past. Traffic lights hurried them on their way in an emerald guard of honour, flanking the cab on either side as it accelerated through the concrete inner-city jungle of bridges, junctions and roundabouts.

The familiar route once again felt alien, a million miles away from normality. Despite the fact that it had been the best part of nine months since her unscheduled return from Afghanistan, Bernie’s military life had seeped into her everyday experience so completely that even now it was proving hard to disentangle herself from its overarching influence. The painful loss of Alex from her life had finally severed her final tie with her past existence, leaving her a solitary figure in an unfamiliar no man’s land once more: unable to return to the army, yet equally incapable of finding a solid footing in the shifting sands of everyday family life. The only constant had been Alex, and now even she had finally tired of being caught up in the midst of Bernie’s emotional dilemma and
walked away in pursuit of a different life.

But, despite recent events, this evening she had laughed heartily for the first time in ages, genuinely enjoyed someone else’s company without her distracted mind aimlessly wandering. Serena Campbell had slowly but surely crept beneath her defences and sown the seeds of friendship, which had quickly blossomed into a close bond with a likeminded soul which Bernie was unaccustomed to having. Physical contact was something that the ex-soldier preferred to keep the bare minimum: there was no way that she would have ever dared to permit even the closest of colleagues to hug her, but the surprising gesture from her new friend had been an unexpectedly pleasant experience.

“Just here, thanks” she leant forward and instructed the driver as the taxi drew up on the curb outside the family house.

17, Marshdale Lane:

At approximately the same time as Bernie was fumbling awkwardly in her purse to extract the correct change for the cab, Serena was clambering up the short flight of stairs to her first floor flat, whirling mind awash with a heady mix of shock, elation and Shiraz.

She tutted impatiently as she jigged the awkward key in the lock until the door finally deigned to grant her access to her home. A familiar floral scent greeted her as she stepped over the threshold, a snap from the nearby switch flooding the Georgian-style abode with light- the usually welcoming décor suddenly seeming cold and isolated as the heavy door closed behind her once more, sealing her off from the outside world.

Why, oh why did you have to fall for Berenice Wolfe? She questioned herself for the umpteenth time as she kicked off her heeled boots and massaged the aching arches of her feet. The walk home had been somewhat longer than she had estimated thanks to setting off in completely the wrong direction thanks to her disorientated brain frantically attempting to analyse the source of her apparent romantic interest in the wife of her client.

“Did you really have to make things even more complicated than they already were in this case?” she sighed as she made her way wearily to the bathroom and began to get ready for bed.

Even when she had been in the throes of her supposed romance with Edward in the early days of their courtship, she had never felt quite so unnerved by the giddy intensity of feelings which she was currently experiencing, previously dismissing the prospect of being ‘head over heels’ as mere meaningless romantic sentiment. Not that she was prudish… Serena chuckled as the thought of some of the decidedly risqué antics of her student days crossed her mind, but the prospect of having such feelings for another woman was certainly a new and interesting phenomenon.

A tired hand reached up and began to remove her makeup; slowly unmasking herself now that she was free from the scrutiny of public eyes, washing away the layers of cosmetic protection and exposing the personal imperfections and blemishes which had hidden successfully beneath the calico layer for the duration of the day.

But, to tell Bernie how she felt? To make a move on the person who she had first been introduced to as the target of an investigation?

Highly unethical? Yes…

Ridiculously unprofessional? Downright unthinkable? Yes, and yes again…
Better to just hand in your notice at the hospital early then, make a clean break of it before things can get too messy and you can distance yourself from her immediately... The steely voice of experience nudged her once more.

A bare-faced woman stared back at her in the mirror, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth at the saddening prospect of removing her only close companion from her life.

A countering influence of optimism answered. But, she’s a good friend as well... just think of what a lovely evening you had together tonight- the first time in ages that you have found someone who you can just ‘be’ with without effort.

Even if her opinion of you is based solely upon a lie? Her common-sense chided insistently. Even if it means returning to being lonely once again? Sentiment clouded her better judgement.

The reflection sighed as she brushed her teeth, knowing full well the path of uncertainty that her doppelganger’s feelings were unavoidably steering her down.

So, be her friend then... but nothing else... her duelling senses came to an uneasy truce.

114, Pinehurst Lane:

Bernie’s key turned easily in the lock as she let herself into the family home to be greeted by a familiar scene. Whilst reminded painstakingly each day about her decision to leave the Army and spend more time with her family, it had soon rapidly become clear that whilst they shared an address, the four members of the household shared precious little else in terms of everyday experience. A quartet of disconnected actors forced to occasionally inhabit the same stage.

Charlotte was sprawled across the sofa in the darkened environment of the living room, invisible in the gloom save for her face which was illuminated in a spectral hue within the white glare thrown up by the screen of her tablet as she stared intently at whatever series boxset she had decided to binge-watch in favour over completing her impending university deadline. Brunette head bowed in concentration, communication barrier firmly established by her headphones– a seemingly permanent extension to her young form–, she failed to acknowledge her mother’s presence as she entered the house.

A quick glance around established the fact that Cameron was predictably absent, given his established habit of hibernating during a rare day off before heading out for an evening of drinking with his fellow juniors; however, a large pile of his dirty washing had miraculously found its own way downstairs and was sat expectantly next to the washing machine in the small utility room.

Marcus was sat at the kitchen table, unintentionally pushing the greasy ochre remnants of a takeaway curry around his plate in slow, brooding laps whilst pouring over a *Lancet* special edition from behind a pair of reading glasses which sat upon the bridge of his nose.

“Evening,” Bernie offered a quiet greeting as she walked into the kitchen and set about removing her coat.

“Where did you get to this evening? Thought you were on an early today?” Marcus questioned, failing to look up from his intriguing article. “We ended up having a curry instead of waiting for you to get home.”

“Went for a drink after work with some colleagues...” Bernie muttered as she vigorously scraped the sparse remnants of the meal out of the metallic containers into a bowl, impatiently rolling her
eyes at the culinary disappointment which greeted her. “Lost track of the time…”

Marcus nodded disinterestedly before finally deigning to look up as Bernie joined him at the table. "Oh, talking of colleagues, I ran into an old pal of yours today," he said a taut smile ghosting across his lips, "Alex Dawson sends her regards,”

"Alex..." Bernie choked on a mouthful of rice before desperately attempting to feign a thoughtful glance as her pulse became a blur, a wave of white hot guilt pushing tightly against her oesophagus. "Oh, ex-RAMC?" she added lightly.

"That'd be the one," Marcus nodded, closing his journal, "pretty good anaesthetist by all accounts. Interviewed her for a permanent position on my theatre staff. Would you recommend her at all?" He threw a direct, almost expectant glance at Bernie.

“Umm, yes. Pretty highly skilled from what I remember. Did some locum work at City a while ago I think…”

“Yes, she said…” Marcus added, stretching and yawning before swallowing the remainder of his glass of wine. “Glad to hear you approve, I’m meeting with the rest of the panel to discuss her tomorrow.” Glancing at his watch he climbed wearily to his feet.

“Anyway, it’s been a long day. Should probably head up to bed if I’m on an early tomorrow. Night Bern.” He lent forward and dropped a faint kiss upon Bernie’s cheek.

“Night…” Bernie smiled carefully, watching her husband’s figure retreat up the flight of stairs before immediately turning her attention to her mobile and sending a frantic text to Alex Dawson.

- Thought you said you were leaving Holby today? Marcus said you had an interview at St. James’? What’s going on? B x

Setting down the phone upon the table with a soft thud, Bernie massaged her aching head before finally deciding to head to bed.

17, Marshdale Lane:

Several miles away a brunette sprawled peacefully across a large double bed, relishing the warm cocoon of expensive cotton sheets beneath her tired bones which had been forced to endure the painful indignity of sleeping in a slumped heap upon the sofa the night before. Regardless of her best efforts to not trespass within the marked territories of the newly designated emotional exclusion zone which aimed to protect her from the punishing effects of romantic fallout; a tall, slender blonde medic stalked seductively beneath the murky clouds of her dreaming subconscious.

“Serena”, familiar low tones whispered teasingly in her ear as the warm weight of Berenice Griselda Wolfe—apparently clad in precious little save for a tightly laced corset; an elegant burgundy satin garment covered in exquisitely delicate black lace which perfectly showcased her enviable figure—crossed the room in a couple of swift strides from her long, exposed legs and proceeded to straddle Serena’s lap with a flirtatious confidence; anchoring her conquest’s hips firmly into the mattress below.

Serena’s breath quickened, her chest heaving slightly as she looked up at the vision before her. Dark eyes with pupils blown wide with a potent cocktail of desire and need collided seismically with hers. A shiver of yearning rippled slowly through her whole being as cool, slender digits traced an inquisitive path of exploration across her décolletage, shortly to be replaced by a pair of
soft lips, peppering a trail of bruising kisses from one collarbone to the other.

A low moan slipped from between Serena’s sleeping lips at the moment that the decidedly coquettish Bernie Wolfe of her subconscious chose to lean forward and suck sharply upon the sensitive pulse point which nestled in the side of her neck; a sharp, possessive bite of teeth claiming the small area of ivory flesh as her own.

“God…” a faint exultation of approval was accompanied by Serena’s hands clutching blindly upward in a bid to find a steadying grip upon Bernie’s shoulders before feeling the taut muscles flex responsively beneath her fingers. A faint chafe of lace tauntingly grazed her bare breasts as Bernie swiftly drew their bodies to fit closer together.

“You look absolutely wonderful,” dark eyes twinkled in awe as Serena tentatively brought a gentle hand up to rest upon Bernie’s jaw before decisively guiding the other woman’s lips forward to meet her own. What started as a soft kiss quickly deepened into a searing exchange as Serena wound her fingers tightly into the tousled blonde locks, a gentle tug on the roots successfully anchoring Bernie tightly against her impatient mouth in a desperate bid to satisfy the rapidly growing demands of a raging new addiction. Snatched breaths came between the frenzied demands of lips upon lips: a deep, almost feral growl of desire emanating from Bernie as she suddenly abandoned any hope of polite restraint and used her superior height and strength to push Serena’s wrists firmly behind her head, pinning her firmly into the soft embrace of the luxurious bedding before grinding her hips confidently downward. The increased pressure incited a heady moan of encouragement as the composed detective allowed her usually impermeable defences to fall, cautiously relaxing into the surprisingly liberating freedom of relinquishing control to the simultaneously passionate yet caring ministrations of the Army Major. A deep-seated throb of desire ached persistently between tops her thighs; so intensely aroused that it lingered deliciously upon the right side of the narrow border between pain and pleasure.

“Now then…” Bernie leant forward and swiftly sucked an unsuspecting nipple into her mouth, a slow smile apparently relishing the sharp buck of surprise which came from the prone body tucked securely beneath hers.

“What am I going to do with you, Ms. Campbell…?” A pair of dark eyes gleamed wickedly as a series of careful kisses and whispered intentions inched tantalisingly lower and lower down Serena’s naked stomach; the tickling of warm breath causing an outbreak of goose bumps to raise upon the pale flesh. The maddeningly slow pace met with a series of increasingly desperate verbal pleas flying in a disconnected babble from between Serena’s flustered lips as Bernie’s descending mouth finally connected with its intended target.

“Bernie! Oh–”


Serena’s eyes flew open at the urgent sound of her alarm clock: heart thudding wildly as she was jolted rudely into consciousness and ripped brusquely away from the erotic designs of her teeming imagination.

Sitting up slowly, she allowed a faintly alarmed sigh to slip slowly from between pursed lips before gently running a hand across a brow which was caked in the same cool sheen of salty perspiration as the rest of her trembling body. Kneading her eyelids with the heels of her hands proved an ineffective method of erasing the wild blur of images from her dream which were now burnt irreparably into her mind’s eye; internal snapshots equally enthralling and terrifying in their vividness.

“It wasn’t real…” she murmured carefully to herself– half in reassurance, half in a thinly veiled
stab of frustration— as she threw back the suffocating mass of bedclothes, shivering as a cool
draught of air whipped around her bare form, chilling the sweat-drenched skin. Padding softly
across the room, she decided that a shower was more than called for and proceeded to stand
beneath the scalding jet of water and scrub at her protesting skin with such a determined vigour it
was as if she were attempting to reach deep beneath the dermis and wash away the positively
sinful thoughts of the night’s slumber in a steamy cloud of essential oils.

“You just can’t…” a strict inward voice corrected her for the umpteenth time as she thoughtfully
massaged shampoo through her bobbed hair, “She’s already had her heart broken by Alex
Dawson, and—thanks to you— is set to lose her marriage as well. Be a friend—if you must—but you
can’t, you mustn’t, get any more closely involved…”

114, Pinehurst Lane:

Bernie woke to the cold embrace of an empty pillow next to her, covers neatly turned back from
where the previous occupant of the other side of the mattress had rested. Over the years, she had
become accustomed to waking alone due to a combination of military service and antisocial shift
patterns, but the sight of Marcus’s striped blue pyjamas folded neatly upon the pillow next to her
proved unsettling as her mind once more turned to the topic of her betrayal.

Discovering a world beyond the confines of her limited life experience had opened her eyes to
new heights of destruction, pain, loss but also passion and love. Had the relatively naïve twenty-
five-year-old Berenice known, or indeed actually finally dared to allow herself to recognise the
fact that she was more than slightly attracted to other women, she may have found herself in a
situation startlingly different to the uncomfortable bed of lies which she currently inhabited whilst
married to Marcus. Brought up within the strict confines of a decidedly conservative military
family, the topic of homosexuality was rarely broached and never in a positive manner when it
was, and as such, the terrifying teenage revelations surrounding her sexuality had been well and
true buried within the psyche of the young Bernie Wolfe. Numerous crushes and flirtations
during her university days had been lightly dismissed internally as the result of alcohol-induced
promiscuity before the sober realisation of ‘doing the expected thing’ and accepting Marcus’s
awkward, fumbled proposal at their graduation.

A welcome aroma of brewing coffee inched tantalisingly upstairs; swiftly prompting an
accompanying growl of hunger from Bernie’s newly-awakened stomach. Pulling on the first
clothes which came to hand, she dressed swiftly and collected her belongings before heading
downstairs.

A subtle vibration from her pocket resulted in her heart plummeting in fear, a surge of cold dread
as she read the ill-timed reply that flashed up upon her phone’s screen as she entered the kitchen.

- Bernie, when I said I was leaving Holby for good, I meant every word. Currently up in
  Manchester for a job interview at the Royal Infirmary later on this week. I really do hope
  everything works out in the way that you’ve decided that you want it to. Best of luck for the
  future, Alex

But, if Alex wasn’t at St. James’ yesterday…. her mind was reeling in panicked realisation.

She was trapped.

“Morning,” Marcus had his back turned to her as he slowly dragged a butter knife with ominous
precision across a faintly charred piece of toast, the prolonged rasping noise immediately setting
Bernie’s teeth on edge as she slid herself into a chair and helped herself to a glass of orange juice.
Never had a polite greeting carried so many hidden connotations.

“Morning,” her best attempts at friendly tone of voice choked and died in her throat with a spasm from her usually infallibly steady hand which slopped sticky juice in a messy puddle on the white linen cloth; a dark, wet stain which crept steadily across the ruined fabric.

The oppressive weight of the silent atmosphere was suffocating as Marcus painstakingly spooned a heap of scrambled eggs onto two willow patterned plates with a screeched hiss of metal spoon grating repeatedly upon saucepan before placing a portion in front of his wife with a dull thud.

“Thought we might have breakfast together this morning,” he offered with a brief attempt at a smile which failed to reach his eyes. “Given that dinner didn’t exactly go to plan yesterday…”

“Thank you…” Bernie muttered in acceptance as she awkwardly pushed her breakfast around the plate, the faintly sulphurous smell of the egg prompting a roll of nausea from her churning gut.

“Coffee?”

She nodded tersely, attempting a tentative bite of her cooked breakfast.

A slow trickle of steaming liquid was poured into an awaiting china cup, hitting the porcelain with the magnified roar of a waterfall; a colossal din which echoed loudly within Bernie’s whirling senses.

She drew in a deep breath, feeling her pulse flutter as she finally approached the inevitable conversational prepuce that she was about to take a running jump towards.

“Ummm. Marcus, look–”

“I know, Bernie…” Marcus cut cleanly across her, his features unreadable as his dark eyes met unflinchingly with hers.

Any shred of courage died in the short route from Bernie’s brain to her mouth, words of admittance freezing in her throat as the fear closed over.

“Know what?” she attempted weakly, offering a faint shrug of her shoulders before retreating behind the flimsy shelter offered by cowardice and denial.

A storm cloud whipped across her husband’s previously blank features; a devastating maelstrom of unbridled fury.

“Don’t give me that!” roared Marcus. An impatient hand slammed down angrily upon the table, resulting in a percussive cacophony of upended crockery and glassware. Disturbed by the unprecedented force of such a manoeuvre, an empty tumbler plummeted to the stone floor and abruptly smashed into a glistening pile of smithereens.

“Don’t you *dare* sit there and lie to me yet again… I gave you *so many* chances to just be honest, to just tell me the truth…even last night…” his raging voice wavered and cracked, frame slumped wearily as he supported the weight of his aching head upon the heel of his hand.

“But, you couldn’t even bring yourself to do that, could you Bernie?” a bitter observation was spat from between disbelieving lips.

“Marcus, I–”

Bernie fell silent as the surgeon reached wordlessly into his pocket and threw down a crumpled
photograph on top of the mangled carnage from the breakfast.

“Where the hell did you get that?” she whispered, staring at a snapshot of her and Alex wrapped in a tender embrace on the doorstep of Dunn family home.

“I have my sources…” Marcus countered bluntly. “All of those lies Bernie, even inviting her here when my back was turned…for goodness sake…” he gesticulated helplessly with a free hand.

“You know…” he leant forward, brow crinkled in confusion, “Ever since you got home from Afghanistan it’s been like living with a stranger, like a part of you was permanently left behind when they brought you back on that spinal board.”

He paused to collect himself.

“The Bernie I knew, the Bernie I married and whose children I helped bring up… she’s gone, blown to pieces months ago in an IED explosion…and I don’t recognise this stranger that she’s left in her place: who lies, who cheats, who turns her back on her family without a second thought…”

Each damning accusation was emphasised by an irate swipe of his hand into the still air; generating enough of a breeze to slightly ruffle the stray un-brushed blonde hairs which messily framed Bernie’s features.

Marcus reached out and ran a careful finger slowly across the back of Bernie’s quivering hand, ghosting lightly across her plain wedding band. “And I don’t even pretend to understand her…” he added with a heavy sigh.

“You paint yourself to be this figure of perfection: the brilliant surgeon, the caring father, the devoted husband…. and yet, you were more than happy to pretend that nothing I had worked for mattered; that my purpose in life was to content myself to settle for being elbow-deep in dirty nappies and domestic chores… to constantly settle for being second-best… I worked so hard to get where I was… and it was the Army that saved me, Marcus– whether you like it or not. I’m not professing to being ‘Mum of the Year’, but no matter what, I always tried my best for our children.”

A tic was starting to dance threateningly above Marcus’s left eye.

“So all of this is my fault?” he questioned incredulously, “a twenty-something year old chip on your shoulder the sole justification for your actions? Leaving me, Cam and Charlotte to sit and watch the news every day, paranoid about wonder whether you would even make it home alive, whilst in reality you were off having the time of your life with somebody else!”

“Oh, far from it…” Bernie whispered, finally raising her eyes to meet her husband’s, a faint sheen of tears beginning to build and blur her vision, “I should have been braver, I should have been more honest, but this particular coward couldn’t quite bring herself to let go and tell the truth–”

“Oh, spare me the self-pity act,” steel shutters fell over Marcus’s eyes as his gaze hardened. “I wanted to have the chance to sit down discuss this properly with you, to work out where we went wrong…how to fix our marriage…”

He rose to his feet shaking his head.
“But what on earth is the point?”

A heavily slammed door announced his departure; a violent explosion of sound which rattled the rectangular panes of glass in their mountings. Bernie sat blankly surveying the debris in front of her: toppled crockery, scattered morsels of food and fractured shards of glass littered the surroundings in a chaotic collage; the collapsed wreckage of her marriage.

A faint sob escaped; a breathy utterance forcing its way harshly out from between determinedly pursed lips. Her reeling senses were unable to detect whether it was primarily in relief or sorrow.

The sound of spilt coffee dripping slowly to the floor was the only other sound which permeated the silence.
Handle With Care

Chapter Summary

An anxious Serena is left to consider the broader consequences of her actions after Bernie fails to arrive for work. Is it too late for her to put things right, or will her romantic feelings or growing friendship with Bernie cloud her professional judgement once more?

Chapter Notes

Many thanks for all of the lovely comments and kudos that have been left upon this story, they really are appreciated! I apologise for the delay in updating, but life has been a little chaotic of late- hopefully the next chapter will be up a little more promptly!

“Excuse me…” came a wheezy gasp as a gossiping circle of mothers and pushchairs were abruptly scattered in a squawking flurry of designer coats and handbags as a dark-suited figure came pelting at breakneck speed along the pavement, wisely avoiding the temptation to hurdle a stray toddler which lay beating its fists upon the floor in a full-scale tantrum and instead choosing to swerve erratically around the screaming obstruction. Vacuous chattering fell momentarily silent as a series of slender, bleached-blonde heads swivelled in simultaneous intrigue at the rapidly departing, somewhat dishevelled figure who had fleetingly intruded upon their morning stroll.

The mysterious interruption to their conversation was an uncharacteristically flustered Serena Campbell who had practically jogged the distance from her flat to the hospital. Pink-cheeked and huffing slightly–unused to exercise more strenuous than a brisk walk–an expensive leather handbag beating time upon her hip in sync with her stumbling canter, she inwardly cursed Bernie Wolfe as she rounded the gate of the outer perimeter of the hospital at a slowing trot and threw a petulant glance at her car which smugly occupied its usual parking space; not having moved an inch from the evening before.

Berenice-bloody-Wolfe strikes again… Serena slowed to a halt, bending over and bracing her hands against her thighs, blood pounding wildly in her ears as she caught her breath.

The graphic events of her dreams had stalked beneath the surface of her consciousness for the majority of the morning, pounding as relentlessly upon the insides of her skull as the steamy droplets of water from the shower faucet which bounced off her naked form. Her confused contemplation had only been halted by the unprecedented arrival of a flood of icy cold as the final remnants of hot water ran out; supplies finally exhausted by the lengthy deliberations that had taken place. Swearing at the sudden chill, Serena had been jolted rudely into awareness before realising that she had lost the best part of an hour from her schedule to anguished self-inflicted romantic torture.

A subsequent tornado of activity had whirled incessantly around the flat: simultaneously scooping up the necessary paperwork for a hitherto forgotten cross-departmental review meeting, blasting a
damp bob one-handed with a hairdryer whilst replying to an urgent email with the other, before haphazardly retrieving the individual components of an outfit. It had taken several feverish attempts at buttoning up her emerald green blouse before she realised that it was inside out and wrenched it from her body with a snarl of building frustration. The final straw to her fraying nerves had been to snatch up her car keys only to remember her decision to stumble home from the bar on foot the previous night. Muttering darkly beneath her breath, she had set off at a gallop with as much surviving dignity as she could muster.

This has got completely out of hand... she chided herself once again upon the repercussions of her love-struck pining as she walked through the Wyvern entrance and entered the lift which was blissfully empty for once. A furtive glance around preluded a swift reapplication of makeup and the restoring of order to stubbornly tousled hair between floors. Professional integrity reapplied, a business-like Serena Campbell anchored a smile to her lips before marching decisively out of the lift as it halted on the top floor and into the large meeting room which was slowly filling with colleagues.

Wandering around exchanging pleasantries with the various members of hospital staff, she wasn’t sure whether her curious senses were patrolling the hubbub of the crowd with the aim of seeking out the recognizable blonde mop of hair or familiar bark of laughter for the purposes of attraction or avoidance, but felt a definite pang of disappointment when an empty seat marked with ‘Berenice Wolfe, Clinical Lead, AAU’ was left at the large pine table when the meeting commenced.

Where is she? She’s never ill...

A stream of worried thoughts flooded sickeningly into her mind, a nagging suspicion of personal responsibility for Bernie’s absence at the memory of Marcus crushing the photograph unforgivingly beneath his fingers. She slid her hand discretely beneath the table top whilst feigning a focused concentration upon the introductory remarks and sent a short text to Bernie.

- Are you alright? Surprised not to see you at the meeting this morning? Hope the hangover isn’t too harsh? S x

“Ms. Campbell?” a polite cough from Henrik Hanssen seated to her right jolted her to her senses, head snapping up guiltily as she stowed her mobile phone quickly back into her handbag and flashed a nervous smile. “Ms. Campbell from Human Resources will now take us through the preliminary data from the wards audit scheme.”

“Ummm, yes. Thank you.” Serena cleared her throat and climbed to her feet. She squinted at the page of figures and charts which swam queasily in front of her vision.

Concentrate, Campbell...

“Thank you, Mr Hanssen. It has been a pleasure to be able to share some of the preliminary findings from the scheme, and to have the chance to observe this hospital in action.” She drew in a deep breath and stepped towards an awaiting slideshow, forcing herself to regain a professional composure as she relayed the findings and recommendations of the first stages of her report.

Several hours later, Serena sat at her desk watching a cursor flash tauntingly upon the blank page on her computer screen; irritating in its repetitive reminder of her brain’s inability to currently focus upon the task in hand. She had somehow managed to blag her way through the presentation with a heavy reliance upon her professional charms, which had seemed to satisfy the notoriously
hard-to-please members of the hospital board, but there was still considerable headway to be made upon the conclusion to her report, a draft of which Hanssen had requested to see before the end of the week.

Absentmindedly draining the stewed dregs from her cold cup of coffee into her mouth and subsequently wincing at the bitter taste, she relented to the demands of her uneasy curiosity and pushed her chair back, muttering a vague excuse to her disinterested colleagues about needing to check some patient statistics with AAU as she swept from the room.

“Are you looking for Ms. Wolfe?” Adrian Fletcher poked his head around the corner of the deserted consultant’s office.

“Just wanted to double check something,” Serena nodded in confirmation.

“Well, for the first time in known record, she’s just rung in sick.” Fletch raised an incredulous eyebrow, “Personally speaking, I never thought she’d dare let a pathogen near, let alone develop an illness.” He paused, a teasing smirk danced around his lips as he bowed his head respectfully. “Mind you, legend has it that you both made a fair attack on the bar supplies in Albie’s last night? Never met anyone who could outdrink the Major, most people would fall at the first fence where she was concerned….”

“I hasten to remind you, that I am not most people, Nurse Fletcher,” Serena added amusedly with a roguish wink which concealed the anguished squirm from her gut as she exited the office.

Where was Bernie?

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Earlier: 114, Pinehurst Lane

“Christ…” Bernie exhaled and leant back in her chair and surveyed the kitchen ceiling intently. Scalding tears pooled within her eyes and spilt, trickling noiselessly down her face in warm tributaries of desperation.

The front door slammed with a jarring crash as Marcus swept out of the house.

What a bloody mess.

Deciding that it would be more apt for her to take some form of solace in the mind-numbing normality of clearing away the ruined breakfast rather than brood upon the smouldering wreckage of her marriage, Bernie allowed the final dregs of emotion to fall slowly down her face before taking a deep breath and retaining her usual iron control as she set about gathering up the upended crockery which littered the surface of the kitchen table.

Her attention was drawn to a set of light footsteps creeping cautiously across the wooden floorboards in the hallway as the occupant of the space sought to exit in his father’s footsteps without being detected.

“Cam?” Bernie straightened up quickly, brushing impatiently at her cheek and inwardly cursing the tearful croak which had temporarily replaced her voice. “Is that you?” She moved swiftly across the kitchen to stand in the doorway.

Her cautious question was met with a wordless, sullen glare from her adult son as he fought to scramble into a charcoal grey coat. A thin, fresh cut surrounded by a faint shadow of clotted dark blood sat squarely upon a prominent cheekbone; the latest souvenir from an alcohol-soaked night out.
“Cam?” Bernie heard herself almost plead weakly as she reached forward tentatively, fully aware that her child had almost certainly overheard all of the heated exchange from moments earlier. “Oh, you’re hurt, Cam… here, let me…”

Cameron stepped back swiftly and Bernie’s gently probing hand closed abruptly upon thin air.

A weighty hush hung awkwardly between mother and son; each defying the other to concede and break the silence first.

“Cam… about what happened just now…” Bernie whispered eventually as Cameron’s dark eyes narrowed in faint disgust.

“Bit difficult not to overhear, mum…” a sharp retort came as the junior medic wound a scarf tightly around his throat and snatched up an awaiting leather satchel. The ghost of hurt flitted briefly across his bony features before swiftly being replaced by a calculated façade of disinterest.

“I’d imagine that you and dad will want to talk to me and Charlotte later then… explain that ‘whilst Mummy and Daddy love you both very much, and always will, that they can’t stand each other any longer because Mummy’s actually been having an affair with somebody else’”.

The flippant lightness of his childish tones struck an uneasy quell of fear into Bernie’s chest.

“Something like that?” Cameron questioned sarcastically with a resignedly raised eyebrow. “Mind you, as a family we’ve never been that great at the whole ‘emotions’ side of things, eh mum? The whole ‘opening up to each other’ game was never one we all went in for…” He swung the tan leather bag decisively over his shoulder.

“Cam, I–” Bernie’s words stuck uncomfortably in her throat at the bitter expression which was slowly etching itself upon her son’s face, unable to deny his accusation towards her adultery and then visibly seeing a social chasm of her own making open between them as Cameron slowly shook his head in disbelief.

“Why did–? No, actually, I don’t want to know.” An odd expression, almost of realisation, briefly crossed his thin face as he surveyed his mother before throwing an impatient hand into the air in an aimless gesture of frustration as Bernie cast her eyes downward in defeat. Cameron strode resolutely across the hallway and wrenched open the front door. “Nobody tells the truth in this house. You’re all as bad as each other…” he spat tersely and swept out into the morning air without a backward glance. The considerate click of the door as it was gently closed behind him echoed far louder in Bernie’s mind as she watched her child walk away.

You knew what was at stake. And yet, you still did it, you selfish cow. She cursed herself inwardly as she walked into the living room and sank wearily into the soft leather embrace of the couch. Every thread of the fabric of the house was woven with the familiar familial ties: numerous laminated certificates of academic achievement (mostly belonging to Charlotte) hung from the walls, the smiling portrait of Bernie and her teenage children frozen forever in the autumnal photograph which sat in pride of place upon the mantelpiece, directly above the small scuff upon the fireplace where a very young Cameron had smacked his head after a misguided attempt at imitating Superman and trying to take flight off the end of the sofa had been swiftly halted by the indisputable laws of gravity. It had taken endless hours of patient cuddling and the administration of countless medicinal Milky Buttons to quieten his anguished howling.

Oh Cam… Bernie smiled sadly at the empty space as she reminisced. I’m so sorry that it all had to come out like this. I’m sorry for not being braver sooner, for telling the truth like I always tried to bring you up to do. No matter how much you run, you can’t bury things forever.
Her lips twitched awkwardly as she fought to find a way to verbalise her reflections before her established internal protocol managed to swiftly step in and shut down access to emotions in a well-practiced manoeuvre towards self-preservation.

*How many more people are you going to hurt?*

A pair of restless eyes fell upon an older picture of her which sat on a nearby table; the once vibrant colours of the print now slightly faded by exposure to the sun. A newly promoted soldier stood smartly to attention in full RAMC dress uniform upon receiving a special commendation for her bravery in the field. Marcus stood by her side in a navy suit and tie, the vision of a supportive husband, a protective hand resting gently upon the shoulders of a preadolescent Cameron who, judging by his cheeky grin and the surprised pout of indignation from blonde-haired toddler standing to his left, had evidently managed to get away with yanking at his younger sister’s carefully plaited hair just before the photographer had pressed the trigger.

*Funny thing, bravery. Bernie sighed, something that I’ve been told that I’m good at ‘doing’, and yet I’m not that certainly I’ve ever actually felt all that brave…*

Her phone buzzed quietly, breaking into her reflections.

- Are you alright? Surprised not to see you at the meeting this morning? Hope the hangover isn’t too harsh? S x

*Five minutes. Just give yourself five minutes to get your head together.*

Bernie exhaled and dropped the phone onto the seat beside her as she kneaded her aching forehead.

The concerned message sat ignored in her inbox without reply.

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**Afternoon: Holby City Human Resources Department**

“Anyway,” Miranda Bracken’s pale grey eyes sparkled with a slightly malicious interest as she wrapped slender manicured fingers around a steaming mug of coffee and perched lightly upon the edge of a nearby vacant desk, lowering her voice conspiratorially as she turned to Rosie Jameson once more. “Turns out that Ms Wolfe, has rung in sick today. Not that surprising given that her husband has finally put two and two together about the fact that she’s been having an affair…”

The fashionably dressed, slender brunette—a junior member of the Holby City Human Resources team—tilted her head knowingly to one side, idly swinging a foot adored with a glossy patent leather high heel, barely unable to contain her gleeful excitement at being the premiere source of a particularly juicy piece of gossip.

“But, you’ll never guess in a million years who the other person was…” she took a delicate sip from her drink whilst daring her colleague to ask for more information with an excited wriggle of her cashmere jumper-clad shoulders.

“Who?” Rosie, a marginally naïve twentysomething with bobbed cherry red hair broke away from her typing and pushed a pair of slightly severe black-framed glasses back onto the bridge of her nose, intrigued by the sparse clues being dangled in front of her by her slightly superior friend whom she was faintly in awe of.

“Alex Dawson, that locum anaesthetist that was working here until this week!” Miranda paused for dramatic effect, a smug smile dancing across her thin crimson lips as Rosie’s mouth fell open in a neat O-shape of shock. “I bet she left pretty quickly after hearing everything was about to
come out, shame that she–"

“Excuse me?” a low snarl interrupted the secretive conversation.

Two heads whipped around guiltily at the sight of Serena Campbell standing in the doorway, arms folded tightly across her chest; a smouldering vision of unbridled fury.

“We were just chatting, Ms. Campbell…” Miranda’s attempt at a winning smile died upon her lips at the icy glare that she received in return.

“Oh, well that’s alright then,” Serena’s expression lifted as she swept into the shared office, closing the door behind her and adopting suspiciously light tone of voice.

“Don’t let me interrupt your little girlie chat…” she added in a saccharine tone, seating herself gracefully at the desk before looking upward and feigning an exaggeratedly sunny pretence of thoughtfulness; tapping a slender digit against her lips.

A dangerous pause hung uneasily in the air.

“Oh wait, except that you’re both actually here to work…” She lowered her hand in mock realisation and her face darkened rapidly as seething eyes fell downward with a steely flash akin to a knife blade. Unleashing the full devastation of her notorious wrath, Serena raged onward.

“Not to sit around idly stirring up potentially libellous gossip about the private life of an eminently respected senior consultant of this hospital. Do I make myself understood?!” The palm of her hand crashed down unexpectedly upon the surface of the desk, making the two gossiping juniors flinch in shock.

“Yes, Ms. Campbell…” her juniors meekly relented and scuttled back quickly to their respective desks and busied themselves once more with paperwork.

“Good…” Serena breathed quietly, more to herself than anyone in particular, her chest heaving with a mixture of rage and indignation.

See what a mess you’ve caused? She chastised herself once more, aware that news of the collapse of Bernie’s marriage would be carried swiftly around the hospital grapevine by the vicious tongues of the local gossips, rapidly turning her friend into a figure of ridicule.

She had barely typed her login details into the computer with faintly trembling hands before a confident knock on the door jolted rudely into her thoughts.

“Oh for goodness sake, who is it?” she snapped impatiently, daring the next person to enter the office at their own peril.

“Ms. Campbell, a word if it is convenient?” The quiet yet firm tones of Henrik Hanssen had her hastily biting back any further criticism and swiftly regaining a more professional level of personal composure.

“Of course,” she cleared her throat and stood up.

“My office, if you please.” The tall Swede held the door open for Serena as she attempted to walk past her colleagues with as little embarrassment as possible.

“Bad timing?” light tones enquired of her as the two colleagues set off.

“Something like that,” Serena muttered absently, striding out in a bid to keep pace with the CEO
as they swept around the corridors towards his office.

“So, this morning’s presentation to the board.” Henrik settled himself comfortably into an ergonomic seat and motioned for Serena to follow suit. An unreadable expression sat serenely upon his face. “Coffee?”

Serena shook her head and politely declined. “Look, Henrik, I must apologise for my somewhat distant—” Serena began nervously before Hanssen cut across her with a rare smile.

“I have had numerous commendations made to me by senior members of the hospital trust who were most impressed by your preliminary findings and the conscientious manner in which you have sought to liaise with patients and colleagues alike.”

“Well, I—” Serena allowed a small smile of pride to creep modestly onto her lips. “I’m pleased to hear that. AAU in particular have been very supportive of the audit scheme.”

“Indeed. Ms. Wolfe speaks very highly of you.” Henrik added with a respectful inclination of his head. “In fact, the hospital board have tasked me to approach you with regards to a possible extension to a more permanent role within the hospital.”

“Ah.” Serena allowed the words to wash over her, frantically considering how she could attempt to manoeuvre the discussion towards a different path without mention of her ulterior motives for wanting to temporarily become a member of Holby staff.

“I am aware that your intentions were very much aligned with a short-term post, Ms. Campbell, but I don’t believe that I would be speaking out of turn to express my support for the board’s recommendations. It is a rare commodity to have a person such as yourself who is equally skilled in terms of surgical ability—even though you are currently not practicing—and organisational acumen, and I believe that your talents would indeed be a particular asset to the hospital should you wish to consider this. It wouldn’t exactly take Holmesian powers of deduction to realise that your skillset aligns rather well with the ethos of this hospital now, would it?

An amused smirk accompanied a cryptically raised eyebrow before the CEO carefully straightened a stationary holder that sat upon the otherwise immaculate desk.

“I— How long have you known?” Serena tailed off with an incredulous chuckle.

“Officially speaking, I wouldn’t know what on earth you are referring to, Ms. Campbell,” Hanssen added with a feigned air of confusion. “After all, whatever investigative endeavours you choose to pursue in your own time is of no official interest to the hospital, unless it directly contravenes existing ethical conventions…” He left a meaningful pause and met Serena’s gaze.

“Please, do give some consideration to the board’s offer.”

“I certainly will give it some careful thought, Henrik.” Serena replied, absently worrying her bottom lip with her teeth, a flustered hand idly drifting through her bobbed hair. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Campbell. I hope to hear from you with regards to your decision in the near future.”

Her conflicted internal senses were beginning to squabble once more, unable to establish whether the opportunity to stay at the hospital—especially within the same parameters as Bernie Wolfe—would in fact be a blessing or a curse in its timeliness.

Diagnostic eyes probed deep beneath her skin without need for an incision as she rose to her feet.
“And Serena?” a light question hung in the air.

“Yes, Henrik?” Serena turned once more to face the CEO who surveyed her thoughtfully over the tips of long, steepled fingers.

“Please tread carefully.” A small, faintly concerned smile accompanied three words of advice which resonated far deeper than their transient meaning.

She nodded briefly in assent before retreating respectfully.

_Bloody man... you know me far too well..._ she sighed fondly to herself as she closed the door behind her.

**Evening: 114, Pinehurst Lane**

Bernie Wolfe pulled the door of the family home closed behind her with a soft click. The silence of the evening air was infiltrated once more by the crescendo of an escalating argument beginning to rage once more behind the closed door. An entire afternoon of heated discussion with both Marcus and the children surrounding their future had yielded little in terms of positive developments, but revealed an overflowing pool of destructive pent up resentments and vitriol. The icing on the cake had been Charlotte screaming in her face before slamming the door to her bedroom in a thoroughly obnoxious manner that she hadn’t adopted since the infamous summer of 2010 and the breakup of her first serious relationship. Marcus’s subtle contributions to the discussion had been more than effective in steering the blame of the emotional fallout from Charlotte squarely onto Bernie’s shoulders.

Cameron, for his part, had been strangely quiet throughout the shared discussions, looking suitably guilty over his earlier outburst and had offered a sympathetic pat on the arm to his mum whilst she was explaining about Alex; a small gesture, but none the less one which had given Bernie a shred of hope that not all was entirely lost with regards to saving her relationship with her children.

“Perhaps this is for the best...” she breathed as she hauled the overnight bag onto her shoulder and stepped towards her awaiting car. “Just to let the dust settle for a night or so.”

_Just exactly how many concerned voicemails could one colleague leave for another and still be considered as acting within the bounds of polite etiquette?_ Serena pondered idly to herself as she scrolled through her recent call history which was distinctly biased towards one particular number. _Would seven missed calls in a six-hour period be tilting distinctly towards the stalker-esque end of the social pleasantries spectrum?_ Deciding to answer this question to the affirmative, Serena let out a slow sigh as she decided against having another awkward, one-sided conversation with Bernie’s answerphone and slid her phone reluctantly back into her pocket.

_This is all your fault, Campbell._

Stepping out through the automatic doors of the Wyvern entrance into a chilly blast of air, her face crinkled in faint displeasure as she surveyed the inclement charcoal skies, the percussive drumming of raindrops pelting the nearby expanse of grey concrete and setting a chaotic yet insistent ostinato beat. Pursing her lips and drawing her coat more tightly around her in a bid to shield herself from the fat droplets of rain which were plummeting insistently from the stormy evening sky, Serena braced herself for the aquatic assault course posed by the numerous puddles that were obstructing her path across the car park. Subsequently being soaked to the skin by a
passing ambulance ploughing up a large tidal wave from a nearby pothole somewhat took the
dge off preparing for such a trivial ordeal, and it was with a look of tetchy resignation that Serena
restrained herself from offering an appropriate hand gesture to the rapidly disappearing culprit and
stalked suddenly towards her awaiting transportation.

“Oh, don’t you dare…” came a hissed threat from between gritted teeth as the shivering detective
wrestled a jangling bunch of keys from within the cavernous depths of her handbag and stabbed
an impatient button upon the remote several times before the car deigned to permit her entry;
finally conceding when confronted with an icy glare from its owner.

“What a day…” Serena muttered darkly as she reclined tiredly within the welcoming leather
driver’s seat, frowning at her own reflection in the rear view mirror as she attempted to tidy
dripping tendrils of hair away from her face. A hazy mist of condensation began to slowly inch up
the glass windows; a ghostly shield temporarily separating Serena from the surrounding scrutiny
of the slowly emptying hospital car park. Indecisive fingers hovered over the keys in the ignition,
at first wondering idly if she should drive home via Bernie’s house (She lives on the other side of
the city, if that qualifies as ‘on the way’ her inner thoughts remarked sarcastically) and attempt to
see if the distinctive little Mazda MX5 was still sat on the drive, before Hanssen’s thinly veiled
warning rang clearly within her mind once again.

Please tread carefully.

Thankfully, Berenice Wolfe put paid to such emotional and professional dilemmas by choosing to
ring Serena at that precise moment.

Any vague attempt– feeble or otherwise– towards Serena re-establishing her usual collected
composure was promptly shredded by the shrill chirruping from her phone which was vibrating
madly in her trouser pocket. A snarl of frustration and an undignified act of contortion allowed her
to wrestle the offending device out of the folds of material and, upon reading the name that was
flashing insistently upon the cracked screen, hastily abandoned any semblance of irritation and
fumbled to accept the call before Bernie was greeted by the same disinterested autonomous voice
that Serena had been conversing with for the majority of the day.

“Serena?” a small voice whispered from the other end of the line in a muted attempt at the Major’s
usual confident tones which fell well short in terms of imitation.

“Bernie,” the gentle warmth in Serena’s voice upon the relief of hearing the voice of the object of
her affections glowed like a small chink of sunshine, inching out tentatively into the gloomy
surroundings and bathing the relentless grey in a soft golden hue; a small reprieve from the stormy
uncertainties. Aware of the resemblance between her current tones and that of a giddy schoolgirl,
Serena fought to restore a layer of nonchalance into her voice in a bid to mask her raging
apprehension. “Are you alright? I was wondering where on earth you were today—”

“Ah… well…” came a stumbling reply from the other end of the line, “Look–”

Serena felt her blood run cold at the broken quality in her colleague’s tired voice, her throat
suddenly constricted as crushing fingers of fear closed around her throat in a vice-grip of guilt. A
rapidly accelerating pulse throbbed noisily in between her ears as she licked her lips nervously,
anticipating multiple horrific answers to her tentative question.

“What’s up?”

A thick snuffle accompanied a faint attempt at denial as the trauma surgeon cleared her throat
before managing to utter, “Nothing…” with a false brightness to her voice.
“Bernie?” Serena prompted gently, her voice steady with a calm patience which belied the inner quake which trembled resonantly as her stomach churned violently upon an acidic cocktail of culpability and anxiety. “What’s happened?”

“I–” Bernie’s rebuff faded and died in her throat.

“Where are you?” Serena insisted anxiously.

“The Queen’s Park Hotel.” came the tired reply. “Let’s just say the whole ‘open and honest discussion about Alex’ thing didn’t go as well as hoped. Marcus and I agreed it would be for the best if one of us were to move out for the moment so that we get some space and, crucially as the house and all of the assets are in his name, I was the one to draw the short straw on that front. Looks as if we’re definitely heading for a divorce now… and he’s starting to turn the financial screw already.”

You did this.

“Ouch…” was the best reply that a dumbfounded Serena could muster. “Look, Bernie–” she heard herself offering before her brain and mouth could connect in some semblance of common sense, “I don’t live that far away from Queen’s Park, please don’t think me overly pushy, that’s if you wanted some friendly company or something hot to eat…” she trailed off awkwardly as the logical part of her brain began shrieking wildly in dissent.

What on earth are you doing, Campbell??

“Oh Serena,” the detective could almost hear the little half-smile in the trauma surgeon’s voice, “I wouldn’t want to impose…”

“Not at all…I’m sure I can rustle up something vaguely warm and edible, plus I do have a rather enviable stash of a particularly nice Shiraz in stock at the moment….” She let the casual invitation hang in the air for Bernie’s consideration.

“Well, I can’t deny that it would be appreciated, Serena.” Bernie eventually replied with a warm air of gratitude in her voice.

“Fantastic, shall we say half-eight then?” Serena agreed, “Just to give me time to pop home to throw something in the oven? And you can come over, we’ll have a glass of wine or two and as much or as little conversation as you like with absolutely no obligation to discuss your delightful husband?”

“That would be lovely…”

Serena quickly told Bernie the relevant details for her address and hung up.

She’s just a friend…. a friend who you have hurt through your actions… surely cheering her up is the least that you can do? she fought to justify her actions to her sceptical voice of reason.

A friend who you shouldn’t have made in the first place as she was a mark, whose husband you are still yet to invoice for several weeks’ worth of surveillance and that you should in all rights be backing well away from at all speed before all of this blows up in your face? Her internal voice shot back immediately.

Marcus Dunn signed a non-disclosure agreement. There’s nothing to implicate you in this. But it would feel wrong to abandon her and walk away now when there’s clearly nobody else there to support her. It was true, she was in far too deep to justify leaving Bernie to fend for herself.
It’s not your place to get involved. Input request, output data, collect fee, FOH. That’s all that you had to do. Nothing more complicated than that.

You caused this mess, you have to sort it out before you walk away.

Serena nodded in agreement with her own reasoning, accustomed to seeking her own advice from many years of self-preservation. At least if her usually finely honed judgement proved to be off, she only had herself to blame.

However, it occurred to her as she started the engine and put the car into gear, she had never actually envisioned inviting Bernie Wolfe over for dinner, regardless of her professional or personal qualms.

Oh, this is going to be interesting… her snide internal voice piped up dryly as she accelerated onto the main road towards home.
Serena invites Bernie over for dinner and nervously contemplates how to go about managing the situation. How can she be of support to Bernie and yet be truthful? Both women reflect upon experiences which have led them to this point.

What a day.

She let herself in and set about restoring order to the chaos which she had left behind in her wake in the morning, not allowing herself to think any deeper than the meticulous act of restoring tidiness, of straightening the edges of her external environment and attempting to hold onto a shred of control over her rapidly unravelling situation.

Cold panic began to rise in her chest as she realised the implications of her light-hearted invitation. Bernie Wolfe: her simultaneous best friend, apparent object of subconscious desire, work colleague and former target of intensive professional surveillance was coming over for dinner.

Methodical fingers extracted a handful of potential ingredients from around the various nooks and crannies of the gleaming kitchen, pondering exactly how one could create a nutritionally balanced yet flavoursome meal from the sparse selection on offer. Tutting disapprovingly at the mismatched collection, Serena resorted to scrabbling through the freezer and found a couple of surviving portions of a rather successful lasagne she had made a few weeks ago when actually equipped with the necessary ingredients.

She was quite thankful that dinner preparations merely involved reheating. Although her previous career had certainly taught her how to wield a knife, the necessary steadiness in her hand was somewhat lacking this evening and she feared that it would have not necessarily been diced onions but sliced fingertips that would have ended up on the menu had she proceeded with her original plan.

Reaching up carefully, Serena extracted two large wine glasses from within the kitchen cupboard, setting them down upon the marble worktop with a soft clink. A particularly fine bottle of Shiraz was selected with thought from a nearby rack and uncorked in readiness; the detective nervously aligning the glasses and bottle in order to achieve a desired air of casual nonchalance which definitely did not suggest the anxious lengths that she had gone to in selecting a bottle which she hoped would be to Bernie’s liking.

What on earth was she going to say to her?

It was Serena’s hatred of being lied to and manipulated which had led her into her current line of
work; helping those who had been cheated and lied to find the answers that they were seeking, following the collapse of her own marriage. Except, she had never given much thought to those people that she surveyed at a distance; mere specimens in a glass jar, a list of carefully jotted field notes matched with her photographic ‘Rogues Gallery’ of adulterous characters.

Everyone was different. Each had their own motivations to lie, to cheat, to manipulate.

It was to her perturbed discomfort that Berenice Wolfe had made her realise that she was no different in this instance.

She had so desperately wanted to keep the other woman at arm’s length like the majority of her clients, but there was just something about her; a brave face which shielded a seething pit of anxieties and self-loathing for her actions which Serena could identify with on such a deeply personal level, and thus the lying and manipulating to achieve her own ends had continued.

_Selfish hypocrite_, she thought dully with a rueful purse of her lips as she pulled out a chair with a defeated scrape and sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

Rummaging through her nearby handbag, she extracted a familiar burgundy leather notebook and flicked back to the initial notes that she had made several weeks ago whilst seated awkwardly upon the edge of Marcus Dunn’s sofa.

Marcus Dunn, now there was an enigma. Outwardly, the senior surgeon gave off an air of familial loyalty which would make even the most devoted of fathers question their individual commitment to their offspring. But that momentary look which had clouded across his face when he had crushed the photograph, a dark, possessive glare, had worried Serena intensely. She wanted nothing more than to set Bernie free and to walk away whilst she still had the chance, but the selfish part of her clung stubbornly, obstinately, almost protectively to the blonde medic in the knowledge that it had been her actions which had set the disastrous chain of events into motion, that had placed her in the frontline position for the inevitable fallout.

Ah. And then there was the other matter yet to be addressed; the Sapphic elephant lurking increasingly self-consciously in the corner of the room.

Although previously secure in a self-assumed heterosexual orientation, Serena had attended a rather exclusive all-girls school in her youth, and, despite numerous hysterical warnings from aging matriarchal members of staff about the dangers of ‘fraternisation’, there had of course been some teenage experimentation between the hormonal adolescents of St. Winifred’s School for Girls. Her mind floated back to one particularly balmy summer’s afternoon when her Deputy Head Girl Pippa Ringley had once leant over casually during a shared free period spent outside in the long grasses of the school grounds—supposedly revising the internal structures of plant cells for their impending exams—apparently upon the pretence of carefully brushing a blade of grass from her friend’s loose brunette hair and instead choosing to press a soft, lingering kiss upon her curious young mouth. Interrupted by a slamming door in the distance and the busily chattering arrival of the Under 15’s rounders team, the two teenagers had flown apart from their hesitant embrace, Pippa’s tentative hand snatched away from beneath Serena’s pale blue blouse as if scalded. The fleeting incident was never subsequently mentioned or repeated, and chalked up to nothing more than mere sexual curiosity by a young Serena McKinnie.

Several boyfriends—some more serious than others—had come and gone after that incident, mostly deterred by her mother’s notorious brand of questioning which would have put many a special forces interrogation expert to shame. And then, in her second year at university, the studious young medic had met the man that would ultimately be her downfall in more ways than one; Edward Campbell.
“How did I end up in such a mess?” Serena muttered darkly to herself as her eyes swept abruptly across a wealth of neatly printed field notes in her familiar, sweeping blue biro hand. The heavy ivory pages had gradually metamorphosed from an initial collection of sparse, sketchy facts into a three dimensional living, breathing being; alive with a tangled mass of raw emotions and feeling that could no longer be sufficiently contained within the pale leaves of the book.

Casting her mind back to when she had first seen the photograph of the willowy medic with her children, she remembered having felt a rare stab of a complex emotion which had been impossible to diagnose. Anger? Jealousy? All directed towards a woman who, upon initial viewing seemingly had it all: tall, blonde, good-looking, clinical lead of a hospital department, beautiful house, two children, and yet, the deeper she had peered into the fabric of Bernie Wolfe’s life, the less her original hypothesis seemed to hold fast. As much as her established boundaries and prejudices would have had her dislike the woman intensely for being the perpetrator of the affair, the closer they had become, the more she found herself subconsciously justifying her friend’s actions.

Her self-control failed in the face of the onslaught from her fretting thoughts and she nervously sloshed a small quantity of red wine into a glass. A tight knot of anxiety sat uneasily in her chest as the hands upon her watch dawdled increasingly slowly towards half past eight.

She hadn’t felt this lost, this helpless in years.

25 December 2000:

Snowflakes eddied and whirled within the silent early of hours of Christmas morning, slowly drifting downward in a powdery blanket of ice as it softly coated the slate-roofed road of expensive houses, momentarily transforming the suburban street into a wintery paradise. Soft footsteps padded quietly downstairs, skilfully avoiding the penultimate step in knowledge of the tell-tale creak which was frequently heard from the old timbers. An intrepid pair of dark eyes, smarting slightly from a lack of sleep–the avoidance of fatigue fuelled by an excited festive exuberance–peer curiously around the bottom of the carved oak banisters. Cold, bare toes shivered uncomfortably when lightly tickled by the icy fingers of the winter draught which crept between the front door and its frame. Light pooled gently into the darkened hall, weak rays inching outward from the kitchen. A sudden, audible catalyst caused the fledgling miscreant to crouch suddenly, frantically pressing their small frame close to the shadowy camouflage offered by the darkened hallway.

Youthful innocence was abruptly snuffed like a candle flame, embers flickering and dying in shocked disbelief. Guilt crawled beneath pale skin like a rash as small feet–momentarily rooted to the floor in shock–stealthily took flight once more as the observer exited unseen.

Several counties away, a conflicted Serena Campbell allowed her eyes to idly follow the second hand in its repetitive circuits around the brass clock face of the antique which adorned the mahogany mantelpiece in her parental home. A reassuring, familiar chime from the old timepiece chided her gently for still being wide awake at a decidedly unsociable hour of the morning. Flopping back dejectedly into the familiar embrace of the elderly burgundy settee, she drew a comforting woollen blanket closer around her, her teeming thoughts enough for once to ignore the interminable itch of the favoured ivory cloth.

Following her recent decision to leave her position at St. Bart’s’ in the wake of the Wattis scandal hitting the press, Serena had decided to visit her parents in their quiet Surrey cul-de-sac for a quiet family Christmas. Without Edward.
A seasonal offering of concerned berating and slightly stale goodwill had hung awkwardly between mother and daughter as Adrienne had learnt that her high-flying offspring had not only recently become unemployed and was heading for an imminent divorce after nearly thirteen years of marriage, but that she was also seriously contemplating the seemingly nonsensical life options of: A) Drowning in a vat of Shiraz until a better plan came to mind B) Chucking in medicine for good C) Chucking in medicine for good and becoming a private detective or D) Constructing a full-scale model of Windsor Castle from duvets and blankets and hibernating within until a better life plan came to mind.

Her reeling brain was still trying to process the outcomes from a late evening chat with her father. The pair of them had sat at the pine kitchen table, quietly commiserating over a glass of their respectively preferred alcoholic tipple once her mother had finally talked herself to a disgruntled standstill and taken to bed with a surreptitious rustle of paracetamol and a glass tumbler of water clutched tightly in her bony fingers.

“I’m sorry dad….” Nervous fingers fiddled awkwardly with the elegant necklace which always adorned her neck, a 21st birthday present from her father. “All my life, I’ve worked so hard to be the best that I can be… and what with everything that’s happened, I don’t really know, for once in my life, where I’m going or what I’m doing… and it scares me, just the teeniest bit!” She attempted her usual humorous bravado, but the necessary harmonies failed to align within her larynx and a supposedly jokey repost actually arrived in the form of a stifled sob.

A warm arm slipped comfortingly around her shoulders and held her wordlessly as he had done at all of the other trying times in her life. A stream of scalding tears which had been held back by a concrete emotional dam for several months finally escaped their imprisonment and flowed freely from her exhausted eyes as she relinquished control to the tiredness. Words were not needed, because each knew precisely what the other thought.

“I’m sorry–” Serena eventually broke away with a self-conscious chuckle as she swiftly brushed away any remaining trace of tears with the backs of her knuckles. “That’s hardly St. Winifred’s behaviour, is it now?” she offered with a watery bravado.

“Nonsense,” George McKinnie chided gently, resting a hand lightly upon his daughter’s arm in slight concern. “Remember what I always say Rena? Do what makes you happy, and let others be the ones to worry about the rest. How else do you think I’m still married to your mother given her proclivity for critiquing other’s work, albeit well meaning? Because, she makes me happy…” a fond smile twinkled in his green eyes as he swallowed the last dregs of his whisky. “Even if she does drive me around the bloody twist at times!”

He leant forward upon seeing Serena’s face lift slightly as she chuckled. “That’s better now, isn’t it?” he added with a raised eyebrow. “If what makes you happy is walking away from that old life of yours and becoming ‘Miss Marple’ rather than ‘Ms. Campbell’, then that’s what you have to do. A fresh start may be exactly what’s needed after the year you’ve been through my dear. I always find that it takes far more courage to walk away at the right time, but only you can make that decision. Besides,” he added with a tilt of his head, “with a house in London to sell, you’re hardly going to be a pauper until you find your feet again, are you? Unless that rather dubious soon to be ex-husband of yours…”

“All of the paperwork has been switched solely to my name, all assets, the house everything. Even his beloved golf clubs!” Serena added confidently with a satisfied smirk at Edward Campbell’s impending financial downfall.

“’Atta girl. Glad to see that shiny Harvard MBA of yours has been put to good use!” George winked proudly as he rinsed out his glass in the sink and set it down carefully upon the draining board.
“Get some sleep and think it over for a while,” he placed a soft kiss upon her forehead and patted her lightly on the shoulder before heading up the familiar maroon-carpeted stairs to bed. “Night, Rena.”

“Night, Dad.” Serena smiled gently over her shoulder until the hem of her father’s bottle green dressing gown disappeared out of sight around the corner.

15th February 2001:

Seven weeks later, a disheartened Serena trudged wearily back to her rented apartment, shivering violently in the bitter chill of a Massachusetts winter despite cramming her trusty fur hat down onto her head as far as it would go. Her hands were trembling violently in the cold, so much so that it took several attempts to guide her quivering key into the icy lock, letting herself back into the lonely space once more. Another evening of marking student assignments stretched out like an interminable road ahead of her. A perfect distraction, a safe place to flee from the collapsing wreckage of her personal life and professional status back in England as the predatory tabloids redoubled their efforts to wring every last drop of scandal from the high profile Wattis storyline as the court case continued. Having given her evidence to the inquiry and ultimately being deemed not responsible for the fatal outcome, Serena had chosen to escape the incessant sea of flashbulbs and bellowing journalists who had somehow gleaned the details of her London address from a leaked source in favour of the peaceful solitude of a trans-Atlantic posting.

She had, in fact, after much badgering from her mother (accompanied by many secretive eye rolls from her father) decided, perhaps at first against her better judgement, to return to Harvard and seek out her old professor in the hope of finding some form of temporary employment in the school’s medical faculty. A glowing recommendation from the ever-reliable Henrik Hanssen made her a formidable candidate, accepted unquestioningly with open arms by the prestigious university.

Several hours later, she awoke from her sprawled slumber across the small glass-topped dining table which was serving as a temporary office space; a smudge of lurid green gel ink tattooing a temporary pattern of constructive feedback in scrawled reverse-printed font across her forehead where she had fallen into an exhausted sleep across her marking.

“What the?” the shrill peal of her telephone—seldom yet heard during her short stay in her new abode—cut cleanly into her dreaming state and jolted her rudely into consciousness.

“What the?”

“Hello?”

“Rena?” a trembling voice enquired tentatively.

“What? Mum, are you alright? What is it?” Serena’s astute brain was already assessing the sparse information that she had received in pursuit of a rapid yet accurate assessment.

Late night phone call despite the time difference? Check.

Unscheduled communication from the definitive master of the art of managing Filofax appointments? Check.

Terrified voice and immediate use of her childhood pet name? Check.

She was greeted by the sound of gasped, breathless sob at the other end of the line; Adrienne McKinnie’s formidable iron resolve shattered into pieces.
Present: The Queen’s Park Hotel

An open holdall sat squarely upon the chintzy floral bedspread, whilst a sparse collection of clothes and trinkets littered chaotically across the small single room. The sole occupant of the space had passed the point of caring about a tidy aesthetic for the time being, and the belongings had stalled mid-route from suitcase to wardrobe as the chaotic events of the past day had finally swamped over her.

Bernie Wolfe exhaled slowly as she leant back awkwardly against the distinctly flat pillows which had evidently accompanied many a passing traveller’s sleep over the years. A sudden longing for a cigarette overtook her as it often did on the eve of a tough day. She twirled a silver lighter (an engraved present from her old regiment) dextrously between slender digits, cursing Marcus for the umpteenth time for purposefully taking the medical and moral high ground and insisting that she quit one of her only truly enjoyable vices. She knew the risks, the medical pathology that she had seen over the years spoke for itself, and yet, she found herself craving a return to her old, rebellious ways; itching for an illicit drag of nicotine to sparkle sweetly along her all-too eager neural pathways. Ah, dopamine…

Bloody smoke alarm probably doesn’t work in here anyway… she glared dejectedly at the utilitarian plastic box above her head before petulantly releasing her grip and hearing the metal lighter hit the bed and bounce slightly as it made contact with the sagging mattress.

Fine. You win, Marcus. Happy now?

Bernie’s somewhat fragile back was already protesting her thrifty choice of accommodation with a knowing twinge.

Come on Wolfe, pull yourself together.

She steeled herself for the inevitable surge of agony which seared through her spine as she steered her lanky frame into a sitting position, attempting to find a clean outfit from the scattered, crumpled clothing that she had stuffed somewhat roughly into a bag before leaving the family home.

A black collarless shirt, made of a soft jersey fabric and a pair of grey stonewashed skinny jeans appeared to be the least creased items of clothing in her current possession. Normally, the prospect of socialising after a day such as this was not a prospect overly welcomed by the somewhat reclusive Major, however, the kind invitation for dinner from Serena Campbell had been met with little resistance from her reeling brain.

Serena. The sparkling-eyed brunette who had swept into her life with a cascading waterfall of spilled coffee and a swift, charming apology. Someone who had successfully managed to slip beneath the usual guarded defences thrown up by the notoriously controlled surgeon, and strike up a genuine friendship in the weeks that they had known each other, a shoulder to cry on, a sensible voice of reason in the maddening politics of the hospital’s pompous hierarchy.

And rather easy on the eye as well… a stray thought buzzed temptingly at the back of her mind like a persistent bluebottle at the memory of Serena’s twinkling gaze from across the table at Albie’s; a low drone of hopeful intrusion which refused to budge until swatted away angrily by an angry rebuttal from her better sense.

Not again. Besides, she’s clearly straight. Don’t throw away the one true friendship that you have
Reaching into her bag, Bernie reluctantly placed the sole framed photograph of her family upon the cheap bedside table with a dull thud which echoed in the sparsely furnished room which was to be her home for the foreseeable future. An empty cell of her own making.

- Hope you are settling in alright Mum. C

A short message, but one of hope all the same, flashed up quickly upon her abandoned mobile phone. A weary smile traced fleetingly across tired lips. Perhaps there was a chance at salvaging a relationship with at least one of her children, despite the fractious scenes which had taken place earlier in the day.

Just as she had been initially afraid to let go of any pretence of hope of salvaging her family, she had clung just as stubbornly to the sinking ship that was her relationship with Alex. Clearly, this particular warzone romance, fuelled by jangling nerves and exhaustion and characterised by fraught, stolen, grubby moments of lust in the desert heat had been doomed from the outset as Bernie’s two worlds had spectacularly collided in the explosion that had sent her back to England on a spinal board. And now, she belonged in neither.

“Thanks Cam,” she gently stroked the faded photograph of herself in military dress uniform, surrounded by her young family.

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16th February 2001: Morning

“Come on, we’ll be late, you know what the traffic’s like at this time of the morning!” Marcus snarled impatiently as skilled fingers which could perform the most intricate of surgical procedures fumbled awkwardly as he tried to secure a protesting Charlotte into her car seat. A particularly well-aimed right hook from the wailing young child—interrupted brusquely from her breakfast Cheerio’s and subsequently bundled into the family car, crucially devoid of the reassuring company of the precious ‘Mr Snuggles’, the little panda bear which had to travel with her at all times—connected soundly with Marcus’s jaw.

Wincing and clutching his throbbing face, the surgeon fell back upon a well-used phrase which usually sent medical assistance scuttling hastily in his direction.

“Can I get some help out here?” he bellowed over his navy-suited shoulder towards an open front door where a uniform-clad Berenice Wolfe was straightening her son’s unruly tie which had mysteriously become undone for the fourth consecutive time that morning.

“Hang on,” she tutted, more to herself than her impatient husband as she deftly wound the tie into an appropriate fastening. “Better, Cam?” she questioned lightly, troubled by the sullen, disinterested glance that her son had taken to throwing at most things of late. Her young son had apparently not taken the temporary separation from his mother well when she had departed for her first tour of duty with the army. Bernie chided herself for the umpteenth time at the sudden change in her child’s demeanour, blaming his quiet withdrawal upon herself once again as the ten-year-old shrugged his shoulders mutely in reply. “Suppose so…” he added. A quiet, nod of thanks was evidently a sign of reaching the limit of his conversational output for that morning.

“For goodness sake, can I have some help here!” Bernie couldn’t quite hide a smirk at the wild desperation in Marcus’s voice as his youngest child continued to put up an impressive fight against
“Just coming,” Bernie motioned to Cameron to join his father in the two-person operation which was currently flailing noisily in the back seat of the car.

“Don’t want to!” howled the pigtailed child, her cheeks flushed a blotchy pink from exertion.

*God. This four-hour journey is going to be a barrel of laughs.*

“Got it!” a triumphant voice called down the stairs of 114 Pinehurst Lane. A slender, blonde-haired young doctor, still very much tousled from sleep and clad in her black vest top and chequered pyjama bottoms bolted haphazardly down the stairs whilst brandishing the elusive panda which had been the source of all of the commotion.

“Mr Snuggles had evidently been to the hairdressers again,” Keeley Jones explained with an amused smile. “Found him in the bathroom sink…” She squeezed a sodden paw and a small trickle of peach-scented water dripped apologetically from the damp bear.

“Oh, not again!” Bernie rolled her eyes as she dubiously accepted the furry miscreant and held it between finger and thumb with a fleeting look of mild disgust at her youngest child’s treasured companion.

“Thank you though, you may have just saved my eardrums!” she smiled gratefully at the willowy young woman, one of her ‘waifs and strays’ as Marcus termed the young medics that Bernie had taken under her wing during her career. Following an exceptionally messy breakup with her then-boyfriend and hospital accommodation flatmate, James Carson, and faced with the unappealing prospect of being stuck in the same toxic environment until the end of the academic year, Berne had offered the use of their spare bedroom to the appreciative junior doctor who had accepted without hesitation. Two years later and a fully-qualified Keeley was set to move out in the near future to move to Cardiff to take up an exciting post in orthopaedics. The diligent, hardworking young student had reminded Bernie so much of herself at first, and she had soon taken her under her wing when the promising medic had begun to arrive late for shifts; eyes still red and blotchy from the vicious arguments that had doubtless been the tense prelude to her morning. A temporary arrangement, which had somehow worked out for the best, especially when Bernie commenced her tours of duty abroad with the military.

“Bernie? We’ll be late at this rate!”

“Coming,” she sighed, throwing a brief glance at her unusually tidy reflection in the hall mirror. Accustomed to treating whichever broken wreck of tangled bones and flesh which was wheeled in front of her in the dusty heat of the Middle East, the pomp and ceremony of an awards ceremony seemed a glittering, unnecessary affair. Taking a deep breath and muttering a quick “see you later,” to a sympathetically smiling Keeley, Bernie summoned up the surviving dregs of her fading ‘Maria Von Trapp’ persona and set off to reunite a delighted Charlotte with her sodden companion.

16th February 2001: Afternoon

Serena Campbell’s plane– the first available trans-Atlantic flight that her trademark brand of persistent authoritative snarling had been able to book her onto– glided smoothly downward in a descending circuit of the English countryside, a patchwork quilt of assorted emerald and brown fields, littered with minuscule houses which appeared to belong within a dolls house from her lofty perspective. The rolling fields and metallic urban sprawl were cleanly dissected by a broad expanse of grey tarmac which was currently resembling a glittering serpent of stationery cars,
ground to a halt in the usual Outer-London traffic.

Far below her, a tense Marcus Dunn drummed his hands impatiently upon the steering wheel, muttering darkly about the congestion. Bernie Wolfe stared detachedly at the clear skies, her wandering eyes idly tracing the snowy exhaust trails left upon the wintery ozone by the crisscrossing planes queuing patiently for landing at the nearby airport, still not completely sure where she belonged in this civilian scene, or indeed why she was about to receive an award for bravery when two of her younger subordinates had died in front of her despite her best ministrations; crushed by falling debris from the battered remnants of the local hospital as it finally collapsed beneath the weight of the gunfire assault from the militant rebel forces.

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted by an ominous, “Mummy, I don’t feel very–” from the back seat before a deep retching sound announced the surprise return of half-eaten breakfast cereal from earlier in the day, now coloured an interesting shade of lilac following the unwise consumption of a carton of blackcurrant squash by the carsick child.

“Mum, Charlotte’s been sick.” Cameron added disinterestedly before immediately returning his attention to the Harry Potter book that he had spent the majority of the drive engrossed in; the weighty tome already half-devoured by his eager eyes since their departure.

“Oh joy…” hissed Marcus as he followed suit with all of the other cars, abandoning any surviving optimism towards moving any time soon as he reluctantly switched off the engine.

Bernie snorted with mirth, a suppressed smirk at the absurdity of the brewing situation getting the better of her social reflexes and escaping with a loud honk. “Sorry,” she smiled apologetically at her increasingly exasperated husband as he threw her a perplexed glance. “Couldn’t help it.” Unclipping her seatbelt and inwardly thanking the strong stomach gifted to her from many years medical training, she set about the dreaded ‘Operation Clean-up’. Charlotte, now devoid of her breakfast, happily decided that now would be the ideal time to introduce Mr Snuggles to the delights of plane-spotting and took to shrieking excitedly in Marcus’s ear every time a large jumbo jet passed overhead.

A couple of miles north from the teeming traffic, Serena Campbell impatiently snatched up her sparse luggage from the conveyor belt and hurried for the terminal exit at an uncharacteristic run. Even as she switched on her mobile phone with fumbling fingers and hurried out of the airport, she had a gut-clawing intuition that she was too late. A hurried phone call– accompanied by frequent snapped instructions to the harangued taxi driver to speed up– confirmed her fearful suspicions before she eventually arrived at the large imposing hospital, barely ten miles from her family home. A shivering Adrienne McKinnie, for once devoid of words as she waited in the hospital entranceway, slumped wearily into her daughter’s arms, tears of shared grief beginning to fall from two pairs of eyes as they clung tightly to each other– any sense of traditionalist British reserve abandoned momentarily in the raw experience of mutual loss.

Present: 17, Marshdale Lane

Her beloved father’s passing had left her with a bitter legacy. So much anger. So many unanswered questions. Serena had devoted her subsequent life to helping others find their own answers to their questions, no matter how well concealed such revelations may be.

*Come on, brooding is getting you nowhere…*

Serena swallowed the dregs from her glass in a single gulp as she swept any potentially incriminating evidence into her handbag and stowed it safely out of sight.
A shy knock on the door was enough to nearly make her drop the china dish from between her nervous oven-gloved hands as she set about checking on dinner which was currently bubbling away merrily within the oven.

“Perfectly timed!” she opened the door and beamed in greeting as her blonde-haired colleague stepped into her abode- the first visitor in a while. “Lasagne alright for you?” she added over her shoulder as she hastened back into the kitchen.

“More than alright, thank you!” Bernie Wolfe yawned appreciatively as she unbuttoned a taupe trench coat and carefully draped the garment over the back of a nearby chair.

“I thought you could possibly be in need of this?” Serena was already back at her side, eagerly brandishing a brimming glass of ruby wine with a knowing smile.

“How did you know?” Bernie muttered gratefully, with only a hint of sarcasm as she accepted the drink and took a steadying sip.

“Let’s just call it intuition…” Serena offered with a wry smile, seating herself comfortably upon the sofa and motioning for Bernie to join her.

Berenice Wolfe offered a smile by means of reply, a tired gesture which failed to reach her ashen-ringed eyes.

“Thank you, for this…” she eventually broke the silence which hung between the two women, gesturing aimlessly with her free hand as she addressed her wine glass rather than look her best friend in the eye. “Sorry to be such crap company, it’s just–”

Bernie broke off as her vocabulary deserted her, sucking in a sharp intake of air as the enormity of her change in circumstances caught up with her.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Serena reached forward, tactile as ever, and placed a warm, reassuring hand upon Bernie’s arm; voluntary contact, which the ex-soldier once more failed to shy away from. “You’ve had the day from hell, after all. I’m guessing Marcus was far from pleasant, you’ve ended up staying in quite possibly the most generously over-starred hotel this side of Holby, and to cap it off you’ve got an evening of my cooking to look forward to... you poor woman, you really are being put through it!” she squeezed Bernie’s forearm gently, a fond gesture of caring concern lingering perhaps slightly longer than necessary.

A genuine smile finally made it to Bernie’s eyes as the corner of her mouth twitched in response to the well-meaning teasing.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Serena added softly, “I’ve been there, done that. I know what cruel bastards estranged husbands can be. But, if you ever need a chat you should just, call me.” She made to move, conscious of the fact that she may have slightly overstepped the mark.

“Thank you,” a quiet voice acknowledged, stopping her in her tracks. “It’s not easy to hear all of your many character faults being thrown in your face, especially when it’s coming from your children as well as your husband.”

Bernie’s voice hardened slightly as she gritted her teeth. “There was I thinking that we were mature enough to manage something slightly more amicable in terms of discussion, but apparently not.” The stormy grimace broke and she turned to look beseechingly at Serena from beneath a heavy lock of blonde fringe; her dark eyes glistening slightly.

“I don’t feel guilty for finally realising that I had been lying to myself for all of this time, but I do feel terrible for the hurt, for the pain that I have caused to so many people, just because I wasn’t
brave enough,” her hushed voice cracked slightly, stumbled words flowing from between her lips in a fraught stream as she reflecting out loud. “I tried so hard to make things right, to make it work. But it just wasn’t enough, was it?”

“You did everything that you could,” Serena reassured, “besides, it’s all still very fresh, very raw. There’s nothing to say that there’s nothing salvageable from this? Husband, maybe not, but I’d hope your kids would come around eventually? From what you’ve told me of them, Cam and Charlotte seem pretty level-headed young things? They know that the last thing that you’d want to do is hurt them as well?”

Bernie pursed her lips and nodded dejectedly; her conversation exhausted after her small yet draining outburst.

“Talking of which,” Serena hauled herself reluctantly to her feet and headed out to the kitchen to save the dinner before it became akin to charcoal. “Not much, I’m afraid, but it is homemade,” she bustled back into the room carrying two steaming plates aloft.

Not much conversation was exchanged as the two women ate hungrily, Bernie’s growling stomach reminding her that she had barely eaten all day as she hastily devoured her meal.

“Hungry?” Serena questioned, evidently pleased at the enthusiastic reception that her culinary efforts had received.

Bernie nodded slightly distractedly as she set down her cutlery with a thoughtful clink. “Thank you, it was lovely.”

“Well, it was nice to have someone to make a bit more of an effort for,” Serena paused and took a sip from her glass. “Cooking for one is never really as satisfying when you know you’ll be eating the same meal for two days straight unless you bother to freeze it.”

“I suppose not.” Bernie agreed absently, her mind clearly elsewhere. “What did I miss today at work?” she changed the topic abruptly.

“Not much, unless you’re counting the cross departmental meeting which had completely slipped my mind until approximately an hour beforehand. Trust me, it’s harder than it looks, typing a speech and washing your hair at the same time…” Serena raised an eyebrow at her own lapse of memory and the chaos of the early morning.

“I can only imagine…” Bernie chuckled softly, “Care to demonstrate?”

“Only after considerably more wine…”

Conversation flowed as readily as the alcohol on offer, diverting occasionally into an angst-ridden observation from Bernie, a throwaway anecdote from Serena or a reassuring pat on the arm.

It was only several hours later when Serena stepped into the darkened living room with two steaming mugs of tea that she stopped and stared transfixed at the sleeping vision which lay gracefully across her sofa. A halo of tousled blonde hair curled gently around defined features bathed in a soft yellow light from the nearby lamp, faint lines of tension and worry eased momentarily beneath the veil of slumber, long legs curled up protectively beneath a slender frame. Finally, exhausted from the day of revelations, Berenice Wolfe had succumbed to the peaceful reassurance of Serena’s home and quietly nodded off in the comfortable embrace of the sofa.

“Bernie?” she enquired gently, receiving only a soft snore in reply from between the other woman’s slightly parted lips.
“Bernie?” she tried again, slightly louder as she set down the crockery and perched gently upon the very edge of the cushion.

“Bernie?” she collected her nerves and reached out, gently brushing the back of the surgeon’s hand with her own soft fingers, desperately trying to ignore the inappropriate fizz which flew through her veins at the contact with the warm flesh.

“Are you awake?” a final, futile attempt at waking her colleague fell upon deaf ears.

Straightening up and gazing fondly down at the ever-growing dilemma which was now sleeping soundly in her living room of all places, Serena bustled off to her bedroom, extracting a familiar woollen blanket from its usual home and returning to drape it protectively around Bernie’s prone form.

“Night, Bernie.” She found herself carefully brushing a stray lock of blonde hair behind the other woman’s ear before extinguishing the light and turning to walk away.

“Night, Serena.” A soft, groggy voice replied, accompanied by a dreamy smile which flitted across Bernie’s drowsy features as she snuggled closer into the safety of the blanket cocoon.

Serena would have leant over there and then and placed a tender kiss upon Bernie’s brow if it hadn’t been for the loud shrieking emitting from her rudely awakened common sense.

Instead, she chose to freeze stock-still.

What on earth do you think you’re doing?

It took precisely ten swift paces for Serena to exit the living room, her nerves jangling almost audibly as she closed her bedroom door behind her and leant heavily upon it; bracing herself upon a temporary wooden shield between herself and her chaotic feelings.

How on earth are you going to tell her now?

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to everyone who has left comments or kudos on this work so far, it really means a lot to read your thoughts! Apologies for the slight wait between uploads, but life keeps getting in the way at the moment!

I would also like to make this chapter a little dedication to the wonderful friends who I went to see ‘What the Butler Saw’ with last weekend in Leicester– thank you for being your lovely selves!
Chapter Summary

After many failed attempts, Serena finally steels herself to tell Bernie her true purpose for being in Holby. How will Bernie cope with Serena's revelation, especially as the relationship between the two women has taken an interesting turn...

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos or comments on this story so far, it really makes my day to read what you all think!
A little warning- there is a bit of bad language near the end of this chapter, as well events taking slightly angsty turn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday:

*You’re definitely going to have to tell her tonight.*

Serena snapped her notebook shut with a reluctant grimace and slid it back into her bag with a weary sigh. After two weeks of attempting to address the needling guilt and revealing her true purpose to Bernie, she was still no closer in her unenviable challenge.

Following that first evening dinner where Bernie had spent the night asleep on Serena’s sofa, the two women had fallen easily into a quiet routine whereby most evenings when Bernie’s shift pattern managed to align with Serena’s distinctly more sociable office hours, the trauma surgeon would have an open invitation to dinner at 17 Marshdale Lane. An unspoken rule immediately dismissed the need to dress up or wear makeup, but just to come over if Bernie ever wanted a hot meal and understanding company.

A list of crossed out plans and brief observations occupied the last two pages in the book, and yet there never seemed to have been an ideal opportunity present itself to Serena to tell Bernie.

“It’s got to be tonight...” Serena told herself firmly as she rose to answer the door upon hearing Bernie’s familiar knock. “No more excuses…”

The previous Monday:

*You’re going to have to bite the bullet and just tell her…*

Except, when Bernie arrived that evening, she had the appearance of a woman who had barely scratched the surface of an hour’s sleep; inky dark circles ringed heavily beneath her tired eyes. Conversation was minimal, but Serena was able to glean the fact that Marcus’s solicitors had been haranguing Bernie all day surrounding the divorce and her claim to any shared financial assets.
“Definitely not appropriate timing…” Serena had tutted firmly to herself as she turned her managerial eye upon the preliminary legal demands made of Bernie, set out in neatly typed paragraphs upon embossed company paper. A slim pair of recently purchased tortoiseshell reading glasses perched upon the bridge of Serena’s nose as she pored over the lengthy missive, her frown of concentration occasionally disrupted by triumphantly circling questionable requests in red pen as if completing the world’s most cryptic word search. “I’m no expert,” she declared before setting down her pen, and looking incredulously over the top of her spectacles at Bernie, “But I highly suggest that you employ a more diligent solicitor in the future. They’re out to fleece you for every penny at the moment. Trust me, I should know.”

“Here,” she fished a business card out of her writing desk after a lengthy search, “Sian Kors, an old friend of mine from university. Runs her own legal practice now. Tell her that I’ve sent another member of the ‘Embittered Ex-Wives Club’ her way… she’ll understand!” she added with a wink as Bernie gratefully accepted the card with a nod of thanks and slid it safely into her handbag.

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The previous Wednesday:

Tonight then, Campbell.

Two days later, Serena invited Bernie over for dinner again, this time having prepared more of an introductory speech in her head. Words abruptly fell out of her mind at the sight of the hopeful little smile playing around Bernie’s lips as Serena walked in carrying the dinner plates.

“Cam texted again,” Bernie offered shyly by means of explanation at the slightly raised eyebrow from her colleague. “Slow going, but I think we’re getting there in terms of building bridges.”

She shuffled into a more comfortable position as she eagerly accepted her homemade shepherd’s pie before scooping a large forkful into her mouth, closing her eyes and letting the utensil slide slowly from between her lips in mock bliss.

“God, you’ve no idea how good that tastes after the day I’ve had!” she grinned happily at Serena who, upon witnessing the positively explicit manoeuvre, suddenly lost the ability to coordinate her hand and mouth. A slight twitch from her wrist jettisoned a scalding lump of mashed potato down the inside of her shirt and caused her to hop around the room swearing and attempting to fish out the invading intruder without flashing her cleavage, whilst Bernie suddenly corpsed with a tell-tale honk of laughter, the first time she had genuinely laughed in weeks.

“Oh, I’m sorry Serena!” she wiped tears of mirth away from the corners of her eyes, continuing to snigger as the brunette–now wearing a clean top–returned to her dinner with an exaggerated pout, stabbing the remaining potato with slightly more vigour than necessary. Serena met her gaze and suddenly found her own face creasing up in laughter as Bernie’s infectious guffaw echoed around the room.

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The previous Saturday:

For goodness sake woman, you’ve got to tell her!

Children became the topic of conversation once more as a slightly bedraggled Bernie, drenched to
the skin, arrived unannounced upon Serena’s doorstep in full jogging gear; apologetically begging
the use of a hot shower as the somewhat dodgy plumbing in the hotel bathroom was on the blink
once more.

“That’s better, thank you so much!” Bernie flopped comfortably upon the sofa, a cranberry towel
turban adorning her head somewhat ridiculously as she relaxed in an old pair of Serena’s striped
pyjama bottoms and the baggy long-sleeved black t-shirt that had been the surviving memento
from the brunette’s brief flirtation with exercise classes; long since relegated to the back of her
wardrobe.

She took a sip from the mug of hot chocolate that she was cradling between two icy hands and
smiled sadly over the rim at Serena.

“I was running over towards the St. James’s side of the city. Thought I’d drop in on the kids if
they were at home and cadge a shower and some fresh clothes, but only Charlotte was in and it
was pretty clear that she wasn’t in the mood for visitors.” Bernie’s voice tailed off lightly as she
shrugged and took another sip as an excuse not to have to continue with her current sentence as
the memory of the front door slamming shut in her face came back into her mind.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Serena patted Bernie reassuringly on the back of her hand, “Hang on,
did you run here from St. James’s? But that’s?”

“Ten miles, approximately as a round trip,” Bernie muttered, straightening her aching legs out in
front of her with a faint smile at Serena’s incredulous stare. “It helps to clear my head,” she added,
“I’ve still got a lot of things to sort through with the kids…”

“Even so,” Serena replied, “I may be completely out of place in saying this, but I don’t think
ignoring her own mother is the best way for Charlotte to go about this…”

“She’s always been a Daddy’s girl,” Bernie smiled wistfully, “Despite what Cam might say. And,
since everything about Alex came to light, Marcus has been doing everything he can to get the
kids on side with the divorce.”

She pursed her lips before swatting a nearby cushion in frustration. “Getting them to write
statements, saying that I was never there when it really mattered, that Saint Marcus was the one
who always picked up the pieces… desperate for the moral high ground, as ever.”

She drew in a calming breath, looking skyward. “I’ve said it before, it far from excuses what I did,
but he always used his position as the ‘perfect father’ to undermine everything I did, whether it
was choosing to go after a promotion at work, or going off on tour, every time he knew exactly
how to make me feel guilty…”

“I’m sure he’s been far from perfect as well,” Serena nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I’m sure, but it’s pointless trying to prove it… I’ll admit it was rocky to start with, especially
when I went off for my first tour,” Bernie tilted her head as she remembered trying to explain to a
nine-year-old Cameron that she would be gone for a little while, having to try to console him
when he realised that she would miss his birthday… “It was never an easy decision to make, but
one that I just felt too passionately about to turn down. Thank heavens for Keeley, she helped to
make the transition a little smoother…”

“Keeley?” Serena questioned gently.

“Ah, one of my ‘waifs and strays’ as Marcus would have so kindly put it.” Bernie smiled, “She
was one of my junior doctors, who nearly found herself homeless after a particularly nasty split
from her boyfriend of the time. We had a spare room, and she lived with us for a while until she was offered a job in Cardiff. Nice girl, helped around the house, always really good with the kids…”

“Sounds like Elinor,” Serena nodded. “The fact that I never had children was probably my greatest failing in my mother’s eyes. I don’t think that she ever quite forgave me for it, despite her being the one who always told me to put my career first. There was never the right time after Edward and I married… and then we eventually found out that we couldn’t anyway…” she broke off distractedly, fiddling awkwardly with her hair before continuing.

“But, I took in the odd student here and there, especially after Edward and I had separated. The rent in London has always been so astronomical, especially for youngsters, and Elinor was a lovely girl. Heart of gold, albeit well-hidden at times– I'll never forget when I came home early from a conference to find a house full of drunken students all completely off their face… we were still fishing them out of the garden the next morning after that party of hers!”

She chuckled fondly, “I still get a Christmas present and a birthday card from her every year. She’s an arts journalist for *Le Monde* now: lives in Paris, the lucky girl! Always going to see all of the most exciting new shows and concerts... she’s invited me to stay several times, probably as a belated apology for projectile vomiting all over my bathroom all those years ago... I always mean to visit, but never quite get around to arranging it…”

Bernie smiled, her eyes slightly watery–a sign that wasn’t missed by Serena’s powers of observation.

“Come on,” the detective patted Bernie on the edge of her bony knee as she collected the now empty mug of hot chocolate. “I think we need something a little stronger than hot chocolate this evening…”

Several glasses of wine later, and Bernie Wolfe spent the night asleep on Serena’s sofa once more.

**Present: Tuesday**

“How about we play a little game?” Serena challenged Bernie with a fond twinkle in her eye as the two women sat contentedly in the living room after their meal.

“What did you have in mind?” Bernie replied with a faintly suggestive twitch of her lips as she drank deeply from her glass of wine.

“Well, seeing as I would say we know each other fairly well now…”

“Aye, aye” Bernie nudged Serena gently, slightly emboldened by a couple of glasses of Shiraz.

“Behave!” Serena prodded back cheekily, “How about we play a little game? We each say three things about ourselves, one of which is a lie, and the other has to guess what it is?”

Bernie considered it briefly before setting down her glass thoughtfully.

“Alright,” she nodded, “And it can be anything?”

“Anything.” Serena agreed, her pulse suddenly quickening as the carefully planned list of truths and lies drained out of her head at the sight of Bernie’s expression.

“Well,” Bernie started, “ummm, firstly, I am actually a master poker player. I was the unbeaten champion of my unit when I was deployed on tour.”
“Plausible,” Serena pretended to mull over the statement with exaggerated thoughtfulness.

“Your turn,” Bernie smiled, “I evidently need to think of something more convincing…”

“Well…” Serena pondered for a convincing amount of time, “In my youth, I was once arrested for disturbing the peace, and spent the night in a prison cell in Margate…” she offered with a suitably coy expression.

“You rebel…” Bernie raised an amused eyebrow. “Anything else?”

“Umm…” Serena steeled herself, feeling her pulse flutter as she sought to speak the truth, a faint blush creeping across her cheeks.

_Here goes…_

“I am, in reality, a private detective and you were actually completely right from the start when you guessed that my role in HR really is a cover story…” she offered in a breathless rush, finishing with a cautious smile, uncertain of what to expect from Bernie.

“Ha! Well, I think I know which one to discount so far…” Bernie chortled disbelievingly, “I think you’ll have to do better than that, Serena…”

_Oh God. No, no, no…. Tell her she’s wrong…_

Serena’s brain was reeling as she pretended to listen closely to Bernie’s next statement suggesting that she once sneaked away from boarding school to attend a rock concert without permission and was nearly expelled. _Less plausible_, she deduced, _especially given Bernie’s self-professed tendency to like to follow the rules_…

“Your turn,” Bernie prompted Serena.

It was at this moment that Serena realised that she had been entirely truthful up until this moment.

_Quick, think of a lie… anything! Her senses screamed in panic._

“Well…” she started slowly, desperately trying to look nonchalant as she reached forward for the wine bottle at the same time as Bernie, their hands brushing lightly as they made contact with the bottle, a burning jolt of intensity crackling between the two of them.

“The truth is,” Serena attempted to continue, aware that her hand was still resting on top of Bernie’s, “I have a secret, which I haven’t told you… a very dark secret….”

She swallowed, feeling her pulse throb in her neck as she became aware of quite how close they were sitting. She could feel the warmth of Bernie’s leg against hers, the two women having migrated closer and closer despite the ample space at the other end of the sofa.

“I–” the breath stilled in Serena’s throat as she saw what could only be a flicker of desire pass across Bernie’s face. She could feel the other woman’s breath tickling softly across her cheek. Surely she couldn’t–?

Her internal questioning was silenced for once as Berenice Wolfe’s soft lips met with hers and reality momentarily collapsed around her. She was kissing Bernie Wolfe, two pairs of lips gently caressing in an exploratory dance, her hand moving of its own free will to gently nestle beneath the warm, loose blond curls at the nape of Bernie’s neck, deepening their embrace with a soft moan of desire as any remaining semblance of logical behaviour was washed clean away in a
deluge of sensual madness, unable to tear herself away from the intoxicating pull of Bernie’s lingering mouth.

Wednesday morning: The Apple Tree Café

Marcus Dunn stirred his coffee idly, inattentively opening the little packets of sugar which sat in a glass ramekin upon the tabletop and emptying them into the sweet emulsion whilst staring nervously out at the passing traffic which moved at a steady crawl past the broad picture window as he anxiously pondered the implications of his next move.

Foolish? Ill-advised? Probably, although loneliness was indeed a powerful motivation.

“Ugh...” he winced as he took a sip of the saccharine-sweet drink and pushed it away from him, cursing his wandering attention for the umpteenth time that morning.

Fidgeting digits tapped restlessly upon the table top, fuelled by a passionate disregard for lateness as he glanced at his watch for the fourth time in five minutes.

Perhaps the hands had stopped?

He nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone rang, earning himself a reproachful glare from an elderly woman at the table next to him as his flailing arm nearly knocked her saucer flying from the table.

“How about The Apple Tree?” he suggested tentatively after a while. “It’s about five minutes south of St. James’s. Nice little place. I’m free until one if you want to join me?”

Holby City Hospital:

Footsteps clattered noisily upon the utilitarian stairs as Serena’s shoes collided resonantly with each step in her eagerness to escape. She had spent the majority of the working morning staring distractedly at a blank computer screen as the vivid events from last night replayed in her guilty mind on loop. Snapping viciously at her gossiping juniors once more as they quietly exchanged the latest details circulating about impending Bernie’s divorce, Serena had swept out of the office in a fearsome mood which had left other staff members to scatter out of her path as she strode briskly along the lofty corridors. A bold health and safety notice affixed to the steel door was given a disparaging look and swiftly ignored as she swept past the restricted area sign and into the light breeze which whipped downward into the musty, dim stairwell.

Peace at last.

Squinting slightly in the sunlight, she walked slowly over to the railings which enclosed the rooftop space. She took a deep steadying breath as she gripped the steel pole tightly for safety; simultaneously fearful and in awe of the dizzying perspective as she gazed down upon the sprawling city, laid out like a glittering mountain range of metallic peaks and valleys in front of her. Miniscule dots of people, dashing hither and thither, each wrapped up tightly in the suffocating detail of their everyday existence, oblivious to her omniscient gaze as her dark eyes raked the surrounding landscape.
Presumably, hidden somewhere amongst the teeming masses in the labyrinth of urban sprawl, was Marcus Dunn; a man she simultaneously felt gratitude and loathing towards. She would have never met Berenice Wolfe if it hadn’t been for his somewhat clipped, business-like email, for better or for worse, given the current state of emotional dilemma that she now faced.

You kissed her.

She groaned, tilting her head skyward, feeling the weight of her situation tugging insistently upon her shoulders.

You kissed Berenice Wolfe.

Despite everything that she had firmly promised herself, she had committed an unforgivable breach of everything that she stood for. For weeks, she had hoped against hope that she would have been able to have found a way of resolving the seemingly unresolvable moral quandary that she had imprisoned herself within, finding ever more inventive excuses as a means of lying to herself in order to avoid having to step away and let go. Even the bloody invoice for her investigative services sat unsigned on her computer desktop, taunting her every time she dared look.

The two women had eventually broken apart for air, a curious mixture of guilt, surprise and desire radiating between the two of them. After a series of exploratory kisses, Bernie had eventually nervously made her excuses, citing the need to be up early for her shift and left for the night, but not without placing a soft kiss upon a shocked Serena’s cheek and agreeing in stumbled tones that they needed to talk at some point about this latest unexpected development.

When did it all go so wrong?

Her brooding was curtailed when she suddenly realised that the stationary dark object at the corner of her vision was in fact a surreptitiously lurking CEO, clad in a longline dark mackintosh; sipping contemplatively from a flask of tea as he quietly surveyed the somewhat distressed member of his staff as well as apparently basking in the inclement weather.

“Can I help, Henrik?” Serena inquired icily upon discovering her observer, asking as pointedly as she could manage without turning around and betraying her anxious features. She sensed the tall surgeon get to his feet instead and walk across the roof to join her.

“I see that I am not alone in being summoned by the siren lure of the hospital rooftop from time to time,” she received a customarily dry reply as Henrik Hanssen leant on the railing next to her, “Whilst a lesser-experienced medic may seek solace in the stock of the bar in Albie’s, I prefer the lofty solitude; a quiet place to gain a little perspective upon one’s problems, don’t you think, Ms. Campbell?”

“Indeed...” Serena sniffed delicately, looking downward at the multitude of hospital workers milling around the dull grey concrete like a gaudy swarm of ants.

Hanssen allowed silence to hang between the two of them for a calculated interval before softly adding, “If there is anything I can do, to help ease an individual burden? I sense a rather weighty predicament is resting upon your shoulders at the moment, Serena?”

Serena pulled nervously at her bottom lip with her teeth by means of reply.

“I also don’t wish to press you for an answer, but I have been receiving some rather impatient correspondence from hospital board members wishing to know if have been able to persuade you to stay on at the hospital for a longer period of time....” Henrik raised a knowing eyebrow as he
regarded Serena. “Have you been able to give the hospital’s offer any further consideration since we last spoke?”

Serena took a deep breath, still avoiding making eye contact with her friend and superior.

“Have you ever heard of the Serenity Prayer?” she eventually replied, apparently changing the topic.

“I must admit that it has escaped my notice until now.” A faintly puzzled look crossed the Swede’s elongated facial features.

Serena smiled tightly as she stared contemplatively across the city landscape.

“My late mother used to call it the ‘Serena Prayer’, whenever she found me to be particularly trying.” She smiled fondly to herself in memory of many a childhood scolding before continuing in her usual alto tones.

“Grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

"And yet,” she turned to Hanssen upon finishing her recital, "I fear that I have lacked that necessary wisdom of late.” She drew in a breath, pulling her cardigan closer around her, nestling into the feeble protection offered by the woolly fibres.

"I have, by definition, caused harm to others by interfering beyond my remit. The precise opposite of what I set out to do as a medic, as a friend, as a confidante.” She paused, looking her superior in the eye for the first time.

“I don’t think somehow that it would be right somehow for me to take on a position where I had to ensure that minimal harm was caused to others and that professional etiquette was always maintained. I seem to have caused enough damage of my own making of late by following my own selfish desires rather than acting in the best interests of others.”

“I see…” Hanssen nodded thoughtfully, “However, regardless of the implications of your various extracurricular activities,” he leant deliberately upon the word, fully aware that Serena now knew that he was aware of her investigative side-line, “I struggle to see how external factors would impact upon your ability to execute a role within the hospital? Unless patient confidentiality was in danger of being breached…” He tailed off lightly.

“Usually keeping an undercov—” Serena abruptly corrected herself with a slight tut of annoyance at her indiscretion, “Ush, shall we say, keeping any ulterior reason for my presence in this hospital and professional NHS conduct separate is usually fairly straightforward and doesn’t interfere with everyday business,” Serena returned the secretive verbal stress with a slight smirk at the dry grin which crossed Hanssens’s face, “however, as you doubtless will have deduced, my dear Watson, those usual boundaries have become a little more than blurred in this particular instance.” The small smile disappeared as abruptly from her features as the sunlight behind a cloud. “It’s nothing to do with patient confidentiality, however, I promise….”

“But, it does involve a member of hospital staff, whether directly or indirectly, or indeed, without breach of confidentiality?” Hanssen supplied knowingly.

Serena’s silence was enough to confirm his inquiry to the affirmative.

“Ah…”

“I’ve done everything I could to avoid this from happening,” Serena threw an exasperated hand
into the air, “But, by ignoring my better sense, I have completely messed everything up,” she choked back a wave of emotion which burned within her throat.

“And I have to leave this sorry situation before I cause any further pain than necessary,” she finished simply with a rueful shrug of her shoulders, “It’s the least I owe her–” She cut herself off abruptly.

“In a professional context, I must of course respect your wishes to not take up the board’s offer,” Hanssen laid an uncharacteristically gentle hand briefly on top of Serena’s knuckles which were white from clutching onto the railing, “but, in a completely off-the-record, request,” he looked caringly at his old friend, “I must beg you to fully consider the implications of your departure, upon everyone.”

Concern passed fleetingly over his face before he added softly, “Sometimes, as you suggest, pain or humiliation is indeed inflicted by not being entirely honest with others, however, it is in my experience that the greater harm is usually done when that initial deception is never addressed and instead left to fester; becoming infected, as it were.”

He swallowed the final dregs of his tea and consulted his wristwatch with a satisfied nod. “Humans, although a complicated species, are often incredibly tolerant and forgiving of those whom they love. It is up to you, Serena, to ultimately consider which is the more humane course of action in the end.”

Hanssen turned to leave, “Should you choose to leave,” he added, once again in managerial mode, “I will ask that you arrange a time for a full handover appointment, given the large-scale nature of the scheme that you have been running for us here. We must, after all, continue to strive to do our best for both our patients and our broader community.”

Serena nodded mutely, as his words sank in. “Thank you,” she eventually manged.

“My pleasure,” Hanssen replied over his shoulder as his tall frame retreated towards the fire escape, “And, good luck, Ms Campbell.”

Serena sighed as Hanssen disappeared out of sight.

_Time to do the right thing, whatever that actually is…_

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and sent a quick text to a familiar number, ignoring the repeated requests from Marcus which sat unread in her inbox as he asked to confirm the final sum that he owed her for her work.

- Mr Dunn- further to our discussions of last month, there has been a slight change in my operational policy. Please destroy your copy of the non-disclosure agreement and consider your account settled in full. With best wishes, S. Campbell.

Taking in a deep breath, she stared once more across the city, knowing full well that somewhere within her range of sight, her message would flash up upon another screen.

_Time to go, Campbell._

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_The Apple Tree Café, Holby:_

A sleepy Cameron Dunn yawned for the umpteenth time that afternoon as he ambled slowly along the bustling pavement in the exclusive St. James’s district of the city. Currently on a pattern of night shifts, he had managed a few hours’ rest before deciding to head out for a walk to clear his
Pausing to send a message to his mother, Cameron allowed himself a small smile as the small ‘seen’ appeared immediately next to his text. Whilst things were still fraught between the members of the Dunn/Wolfe family, both him and Bernie were making a concerted effort to speak each day.

Looking up from his screen as he walked slowly past the green exterior of the Apple Tree Café, he nearly dropped his phone in shock as a familiar figure looked up from their lunch at the window seat.

Leaden limbs suddenly finding a burst of adrenaline-fuelled speed, Cameron hurried into the swirling camouflage offered by the energetic crowds of shoppers.

“Charlotte?” he made an urgent phonecall, his sister answering upon the first ring, immediately concerned by the anxious tone in her elder brother’s voice.

“What is it, Cam? Are you alright?”

“Where are you? We need to talk, now…”

17, Marshdale Lane:

This has gone far enough. Time’s up.

It had taken barely an afternoon of feverish packing to tidy the contents of the flat into packing crates; methodically removing the personal touches from the neutral interior and restoring the open-plan apartment to the blank canvas that she had inherited. Only the larger items of furniture remained untouched, looking strangely out of perspective in the newly empty space.

Scrubbed, clinical white walls and bare polished floorboards; a return to anonymity.

Serena sighed sadly as she took in the bare scene before haphazardly piling an armful of books into an awaiting cardboard box with a dusty thud.

She froze at a knock from the door which reverberated slightly in the empty acoustic.

“Serena?” Bernie Wolfe’s immediately recognisable tones inquired from outside. “Serena, are you there?”

Pulse fluttering, Serena found herself reluctantly marched to the door by disloyal feet.

“Serena, I–”, Bernie broke off in surprise as her trained eyes swept across the unfamiliar terrain. “What’s all this?” The first question to fall from her lips.

“You’d better come in.” Serena replied sheepishly, casting her eyes downward as she stepped aside.

“Fletch said he saw you leaving in a hurry earlier, that you looked upset…” Bernie attempted to rest a concerned hand upon Serena’s arm, which the brunette nearly flinched away from; determined to not let herself make contact as if it were possible by denying this to somehow make her departure any easier.

“And, you weren’t picking up your phone, so I just thought I’d pop by to see if you were alright…” she added softly as the two women settled down upon the sofa, “although, it seems I’m lucky to have caught up with you…” She paused, uncertain whether she would be over-stepping
the mark if she continued. “I’m guessing this isn’t just a spontaneous weekend getaway then?”

Serena shook her head slowly, pursing her lips as she sought an appropriate reply.

“No, no I’m afraid it’s not…” she looked up, fear reflected in her dark eyes as she fidgeted nervously. “It’s just that–”

Words failed her as Bernie’s concerned eyes met hers; a seismic pull moving their heads closer together.

“It’s just–” Serena tried again fruitlessly, her voice fading as an unstoppable urge to kiss Bernie passed over her once more.

“Tell me,” Bernie murmured reassuringly, “let me help…”

Serena lost the battle with her self control and leant forward at the same time as Bernie, her lips seeking refuge for one last time, softly claiming a final goodbye and wishing with all her heart that things could have unfolded differently. A soft moan escaped from Bernie as she moved to deepen the kiss, a tentative arm sliding around Serena’s back.

“No…” Serena whispered, steeling herself as she pulled herself away from the embrace, her lips already bereft from the loss of contact. A sob choked from between her lips, the pain reflected in Bernie’s hurt dark eyes only fuelling the misery which was slowly shattering her soul.

“I can’t do this to you anymore…” tears were falling unstemmed from her eyes in scalding salty rain as she raised a trembling hand to rest briefly upon the side of the other woman’s confused face. “It’s just not fair. I’m so sorry Bernie…”

“Serena,” Bernie began quietly, almost earnest in her hasty speech, “if it’s all this that’s making you uncomfortable, then I’m sorry. Believe me, that’s the last thing that I’d want to do–” she broke off forlornly as she watched the shutters close over the brunette’s eyes.

“No, you don’t understand,” Serena let out a stifled sob which she attempted fruitlessly to suppress from behind a trembling hand. “It’s not that, I promise. It’s just that I’ve done a terrible, terrible thing…” she whispered hoarsely. “I was just trying to sneak away quietly, to make you hate me for leaving without a word, running like the coward I am, like I’ve always done… but in reality, it’s so much worse than that. This is all my fault…” the detective hid her face behind her hands, a cold tremor of dread spreading through her core.

_Time to tell the truth, Campbell._

“What on earth is it?” Bernie crouched in front of Serena, her voice uncharacteristically soft in a tone reserved especially for her loved ones. Her cool hands closed reassuringly around Serena’s wrists. “You can tell me, Serena, whatever you’ve done, I’m sure it can’t be that bad?”

Wordlessly, Serena straightened up and walked resignedly over to a cardboard box in the far corner of the open-plan living space on trembling limbs which nearly buckled beneath the exertion. A tight knot of anxiety choked her, knocking the air out of protesting lungs. She deftly extracted a bulging taupe file marked ‘Wolfe/Dunn’ and turned slowly back towards the sofa, holding the destructive evidence at arm’s length like a grenade with the pin removed; aware of the catastrophe which she was about to instigate with her next actions.

“The game…I tried to tell you last night…” she murmured apologetically as she set the file down gingerly upon the glass-topped coffee table, inwardly saying her goodbyes to the blonde medic, aware of what the folder contained. “All I can say is how sorry I am…but you need to know the truth.”
Bernie, still on her knees, frowning confusedly as she traced a hand lightly over the outline of her name on the folder, printed in Serena’s neat italic writing.

“Bernie,” Serena rested her hand gently upon the back of Bernie’s before the medic opened Pandora’s box, almost flinching away in fear of the response that her contact would be greeted with. “Believe me, this was never what I intended.” She tailed off miserably as she removed her hand and forever relinquished her hold upon the secrecy of the file.

Berenice Wolfe still hadn’t said a word.

The blonde medic took a deep steadying breath, unable to avoid temptation any further and slowly opened the folder: extracting a pile of paperwork, photographs, negatives, typed reports, a signed contract on heavy cream paper which bore both Serena’s and Marcus’s signatures and a burgundy leather notebook. A frown of confusion etched itself deep into the existing faint wrinkles which traversed her brow, desperately trying to make sense of the bewildering information which taunted her eyes. Hundreds of photographs, clearly taken over a wide range of time, covertly documenting every single inch of her daily life were spread across the table, fanned out like a deck of cards. Innocent scenes such as sitting contemplatively upon her favoured bench with a takeaway cup of coffee clutched in her hand or brushing her unruly hair in the front of her little Mazda convertible were juxtaposed squarely alongside intimate portraits of Alex Dawson winding her fingers closely through Bernie’s blonde hair, anchoring their hungry lips together in a sultry kiss, numerous portraits of an illicit affair which were starkly intrusive in their construction. The images left little to the imagination but captured the searing emotional intent of each embrace for eternity; etched forever into the glossy paper.

“Bernie?” Serena was unnerved by the silence which hung oppressively between the two women.

Bernie continued to stare almost disbelievingly at the evidence in front of her as if expecting Serena to suddenly leap up and shout “fooled you!”.

“Why?” a single question eventually fell quietly from her lips—the best she could manage. A solitary word, which posed so many other unsaid questions.

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Why did you do this?”

“Why did you let me think we were friends, more than friends?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?

“Why did you sit back and let this happen?”

“Why didn’t you walk when you had the chance?”

“I’m really a private detective,” Serena supplied dully in a flat monotone as she avoided making eye contact, aware of each word of confessional increasing the distance between her and her potential lover. “I have been since early 2002. I specialise in inter-marital affairs. Your husband employed me three months ago because he suspected you of having an affair and wanted concrete proof, which I provided.” Sparse, blunt facts were all that she could muster as she addressed the cream carpet.

Bernie’s eyes began to cloud with tears as she stared at the mound of evidence. Her jaw quivered slightly as she clenched her teeth in a bid to disguise her agony.
“No, no… you can’t be….it doesn’t make any sense….” she murmured.

“You only have to ask Marcus for his confirmation. I was only supposed to be at Holby for a couple of weeks,” Serena laughed bleakly in the unmasking of her deceit, a humourless bark of personal disgust as she disdainfully picked up the signed letter from Henrik Hansson which confirmed her temporary appointment to the hospital.

She looked urgently at Bernie, frantically willing her to believe her version of events. She deserved the full truth.

“But,” she smiled sadly to herself, “I quickly found whatever reason I could to extent my stay, because, despite the somewhat undercover reasons for me being there in the first place, despite the professional boundaries, I very quickly found a friend, my very best friend–” her voice wobbled as she continued, “who I had the most wonderful time with getting to know, who I above all didn’t want to hurt, who I wanted to support through all of the pain and humiliation that my actions had caused, in a bid to try to at least begin to put things right.”

She paused, lifting her tormented gaze to meet Bernie’s. “The same best friend who I had started to develop feelings for, and, despite whatever my better sense was telling me to do, I couldn’t walk away from, no matter how hard I tried.”

Her voice faltered in the intensity of the look that met hers. “I’m so sorry, Bernie…” she tailed off weakly. Her hand, which had flittered nervously towards the other woman of its own accord, dropped like a stone to her side upon the betrayed glare that she received.

“You lied to me, Serena.” Bernie’s low voice had a hard, brittle quality to it as she involuntarily clenched her hands into fists upon her lap, leaving little grooves from her nails buried angrily into her palms. She paused before continuing. “Our friendship, whatever this is… it’s all based on a lie…I–” Bernie pursed her lips as she bit back a particularly spiteful retort, instead settling for brutal honesty.

“I never thought it would be you, of all people, who would do something like this…” Hurt clouded across her face once more. “I trusted you implicitly, you were the one who I told everything to… and all this time, you’ve just been scribbling it down in that precious little notebook of yours, ready to type up and send to my soon-to-be ex-husband no doubt?” Anger started to build, rising within Bernie like a pressure gauge as her reeling senses began to piece together the broader ramifications of Serena’s actions.

“Bernie! No, I–” Serena protested hesitantly, but the army medic cleaved straight through her stammered denials.

“You were quite happy to stand by as my children walked away from me, despite knowing that what you did has seriously damaged my relationship with Cam, never mind the fact that Charlotte still hasn’t spoken to me since she saw that bloody photograph that Marcus was waving around?” Bernie shook her head slowly in disbelief as she looked piercingly at Serena with blazing eyes, unable to recognise the woman in front of her.

“You know,” she continued, voice seething with suppressed emotion, little soft tendrils of blonde hair escaping wildly from her ponytail, “You know what hurts the most? The fact that you sat there, right there on that sofa like butter wouldn’t melt, for all of those nights, listening to me pour my heart out: reassuring me, cooking dinner for me, even kissing me back, leading me on, making me hope above all hope that there may yet be something positive to come out of this shitty year, slowly falling for this wonderful woman who I thought was my friend and you never once said a fucking word…”
Devoid of words, she tailed off from her angry tirade.

“And I thought I was the coward…” she added quietly and rose abruptly to her feet, sniffing deeply as her voice thickened with tears for what might have been.

“I’m so sorry…” Serena barely recognised the devastated howl that escaped from her lips as she reached desperately for a departing Bernie with a trembling hand, catching her arm. “I wanted to tell you, every single time…” her voice rang with sincerity. “Please don’t go… I have no right to ask anything of you, but I don’t want you to go…” came a soft plea.

Bernie turned, her gaze softening momentarily as she took Serena’s hand briefly in hers, brushing her thumb gently across the back of trembling fingers which clung tightly to hers.

“I know, Serena…” she breathed, desperately trying to prevent tears from escaping whilst still in Serena’s presence, “No matter what’s happened, I–” she faltered, sucking in a deep breath of air. “But, I can’t do this… not now... not with…” she gestured aimlessly at the pile of evidence which sat upon the table, “I just can’t…”

A heartbroken sob escaped from Berenice Wolfe’s lips as she hurriedly relinquished her grip and bolted towards the door.

Serena Campbell sat rigidly upon the sofa, frozen as she stared blankly at the empty space which had, until recently, been occupied by Berenice Wolfe.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for leaving it like this! I will try and get the next chapter written up as soon as I can!
Liar, Liar

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Serena struggle with the implications of Serena’s shock confession, but the arrival of a major trauma case on AAU may threaten to begin to expose secrets from the Dunn family’s past which have remained hidden for many years.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to everyone who has read this story so far, left kudos or commented- it really spurs me on to see what you think!

I apologise in advance if there are any inaccuracies in any medical terminology/trauma protocol in this chapter- I am by no means medically trained in any shape or form, but merely trying my best to present the event of this chapter in a vaguely plausible manner!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The early hours of Wednesday morning: Serena

“Oh come on…” tutted Serena Campbell impatiently as she wrenched her steering wheel around in a tight circle and spun her Saab convertible around in a neat U-turn; frustrated by the seemingly never-ending queue of traffic which was starting to grind to a halt on the main road which conjoined the city ring-road despite the early hour. Freed from the stationary scene, she selected a higher gear and engaged the willing mechanical horsepower beneath the bonnet in her rapid gallop towards the anonymous safety of London.

Time to escape.

Guiding her car around a familiar back road she rose quietly over the main carriageway on a high bridge which gave her an eagle-eye view of the smashed remnants of what was once a small hatchback which was now scattered liberally across the dual carriageway; the broken shell eerily illuminated in the pulsating blue lights of the emergency services which were attending the scene.

“Poor bastard” she sighed pityingly, shocked at the metallic carnage which greeted her. The surgical skill that she possessed usually left her unaffected by such scenes, yet Serena felt an unfamiliar twinge of unease nesting heavily in her gut. She pulled over to the side of the road and sat watching the ochre rays of sunlight begin to tease their way across the morning sky, daubing blotchy crimson patches across the darkened canvas; the urban silhouette of Holby slowly emerging from the depths of the night time shroud.

One slip of judgement, one ill-timed decision had been enough to send that poor unfortunate’s world crashing down around their ears; an all too timely reminder about the fragility of life. One mistake enough to change everything.

And what a mistake you made.
Ever since Bernie had fled from the flat, Serena had sat ashen-faced, staring disbelievingly at the seat which Bernie had occupied, willing the ability to erase the past few moments from existence. Instead, a white-hot mass of guilt had overflowed within her, presenting itself in the form of a scalding cascade of tears. Unable to control the situation, an overwhelming urge to flee had overtaken the usually stoic detective, who had given up on trying to achieve even a meagre ration of sleep and snatched up her awaiting car keys.

Idle speculation had led her to believe that perhaps it was no mere whim that had led her into the various career paths that she had chosen: whether it was the ability to remain calm and detached in her role as a surgeon, or the capacity to disappear undercover into the crowd at the drop of a hat when the need required for her detective work, the past few years had seen her adopt a somewhat nomadic approach, never settling still for long.

You ran away to America from the Wattis scandal and the fallout from your divorce, you ran away from your grief after dad died, pretended to everyone that you could cope with mum when the dementia arrived and now you’re trying to run away from Bernie just because you can’t face up to the fact that you’ve made a bloody mess of things once again….

A pair of puzzled dark eyes stared questioningly at their own reflection in the rear view mirror. The scene suddenly blurred and distorted as a filter of teardrops grew within her vision at the thought of the hurt upon Bernie Wolfe’s face upon learning of Serena’s deception. The swooping ecstasy of kissing her, the timeless thrill of feeling her heart flutter and leap as she caught the blonde’s eye. All forms of tentative hope dashed to pieces by her lies.

You at least owe her a proper apology.

Anxious fingers drummed an indecisive tattoo upon the leather of the gearstick.

“Come on then Campbell: stay or go?” she murmured to herself; a question purely rhetorical in its meaning as she already knew what she had to do.

The early hours of Wednesday morning: Bernie

Cold water trickled slowly into the ceramic basin, echoing uncharacteristically loudly in the small ensuite of the Queen’s Park Hotel as Berenice Wolfe abandoned any surviving hope at achieving a state of rest and trudged wearily into the bathroom.

Dark circles stared tellingly from beneath red-rimmed eyes; a sleepless, ashen grey palette adorning pale skin in patchy smears. Her exhausted eyes still smarted, crusted slightly with the remnants of salty tears from the heartbroken walk home to her lonely room from the previous night. Alone and completely isolated from everyone around her, she had stumbled wearily through the door and slumped upon the lumpy, overpriced bed; finally letting her iron resolve crumple in an unstoppable stream of inconsolable tears.

Taking a deep breath, she leant forward and fully submerged her face in the icy water, welcoming the frozen sting with a slightly masochistic pleasure as she slipped further beneath the surface; loose blonde locks of hair eddying lazily in the slow moving currents as she temporarily separated herself from the on-going whirlwind of questions and hurt assumptions that her eager brain was flitting between. A slow chill inched down her spine as a few bubbles escaped from her nose, determinedly pushing herself to the limit of her body’s capacity before she finally conceded and pulled herself back into reality with a loud gasp; tortured lungs seeking the sweet oxygen which they craved.
Better.

It had been a coping mechanism that she had developed upon her return from her first tour of duty in Iraq. Shadowy nightmares had long since stalked her consciousness both awake and in sleep: childish screams and the metallic smell of blood an omnipresent reminder of the horrors that she had seen. A temporary distancing from the emotional turmoil: a slight disconnect from the bubbling turbulence enough for her to seize control once more; raw emotions temporarily dampened and numbed by the cold waters as the business-like Major persona took control once more.

No matter the upheaval in her personal life, no matter the confusion and hurt that stabbed achingly in her heart at the mere thought of one Serena Campbell: today was another day in the life of Ms. Berenice Griselda Wolfe, trauma consultant, and work awaited her as normal. She would have to eventually allow herself time to carefully open the emotional wound for a fleeting consultation, but knew that she lacked the immediate strength to do so.

Towelling off her face and appreciating the soft fibres against her skin, she shook her sodden head in a manner almost canine in its execution, roughly tousling the errant strands before silently declaring herself satisfied by raising a questioning eyebrow at her reflection. Her hairbrush had been missing for several days; probably hidden amidst the possessions of hers which had slowly begun to migrate across to 17 Marshdale Lane.

She dressed swiftly and left the hotel on foot, deciding that the early morning walk to the hospital would be a welcome distraction.

Junior doctors and nurses scuttled obediently out of her way as the revered consultant swept commandingly through the Wyvern entrance, her determined expression a clear giveaway that she was far from in the mood to tolerate any foolish mistakes as she took the stairs two at a time, her long legs more than able to outpace the crowded lift as it crawled reluctantly between floors. Urgent enquiries dealt with, she returned to the ward and sank into her office chair with a sigh; about to take a welcome sip from her steaming black coffee when an ominous trill from the nearby red phone cut shrilly into her thoughts.

Action stations. Focus on the job in hand, Wolfe. She chided herself as she rose immediately to her feet, ready to act.

Her abandoned mobile phone sat unremarkably upon the desk as it charged. Suddenly, a barrage of missed call alerts and voicemails from her son flashed up in a simultaneous flurry as the device restarted and the small screen illuminated.

- Cameron Dunn (5) Missed Calls

- (2) New Voicemails

- Mum- ring me when you get this. C

The previous afternoon:

“Charlotte?” Cameron braced himself against the doorframe, slightly out of breath for having practically ran the entire distance from the centre of the shopping district to the Dunn family home. His breath, slightly ragged from exertion, caught tightly in his throat; forcing him to swallow.
“Charlotte?” he knocked again impatiently.

“What?” The door swung open to a sullen, slightly hoarse greeting from his pyjama-clad younger sister who was clearly still losing a battle with a rampaging hangover. Dyed, slightly greasy brunette hair with tell-tale slivers of blonde peeking through at the roots was scraped up into a high ponytail, exposing a pale, uneven complexion and a pair of slightly puzzled grey eyes which were still boldly framed with an artistically smudged kohl outline from the previous night’s adventures. Slender facial features contorted slightly as she squinted in the unwelcome glare of the weak spring sunshine.

“I need to talk to you, urgently.” Cameron moved quickly into the house.

“Makes a change from normal… are you feeling alright?” Charlotte murmured, raising a sceptical eyebrow at her brother’s unscheduled visit. The vague attempt at her usual sarcastic humour fell upon deaf ears.

“Seriously Cam, what’s up?” any form of pretence was swiftly dropped between the two siblings as they both took a seat at the kitchen table, equally unaccustomed to the particularly open form of emotional display that Cameron’s afternoon experience had warranted.

“I saw someone today in town… someone who I thought I’d never run into again…” Cameron began thoughtfully as he absentmindedly accepted a proffered mug of coffee from Charlotte’s rapidly depleting supplies of caffeine.

He paused, unsure how to air his concerns. Heart to heart conversations were not usually the top of the order of discussion in the Dunn household.

“Do you remember Keeley Jones?” he finally added; somewhat apprehensively.

“Rings a bell… lived with us for a bit when we were both kids, when—” Charlotte’s voice cut off briefly as an unreadable expression passed across her young face. She continued with slightly gritted teeth, a spark of suppressed anger smouldering caustically in her glare which bored deeply into the table top. “When Mum went off on tour for the first time?”

“That’s the one…” Cam swallowed nervously.

“What about her?”

“Well, she was having lunch with Dad at the Apple Tree…”

“So?” Charlotte frowned slightly as she took in the new information, “What’s wrong with that? Dad’s probably enjoying a catch-up with an old friend. I’d have thought he could do with the distraction, given everything that’s happened recently…” her face remained unreadable, but her bony knuckles appeared to be in imminent danger of bursting through the skin as they clenched in a death-grip around the fragile porcelain mug.

“Lottie—” Cam sighed, slightly impatient with his sister’s attitude.

“No, don’t you dare “Lottie” me!” she spat darkly, “You know I hate it. I honestly don’t know how you are still talking to her, especially after everything that she’s done!”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Cameron shook his head slowly, “I mean, I get what she did was wrong, and I couldn’t believe it at first…but now I can’t help but feel just the tiniest bit sorry for her… to be stuck in such an impossible situation, to have to lie, to watch your back the whole time… to know whatever you did you would be miserable…”
“Oh, she’s good at lying…” Charlotte pursed her lips furiously as she interrupted, “She’s done nothing but lie: to you, to me, to Dad!”

“Oh, Dad has really got you roped in hook, line and sinker with all of this divorce talk, hasn’t he?” Cameron snapped irritably, “Don’t you see? You’re all as bad as each other… you’re all liars…”

“I—” Charlotte’s indignant retort was cut down before the words had even gained enough momentum to part from her lips, quivering and failing in the devastation of the look on her brother’s face.

“I know, Charlotte.” Cameron dared her to interrupt with a withering glare as several months’ worth of secrets, now finally freed, began to fly in destructive swarms from his mouth.

“I know that you dropped out of uni ages ago, but are still pretending to everyone, including yourself, that everything is all fine, but in reality hiding from the fact that you failed and dropped out rather than dare face telling Mum and Dad that you were out drinking with your mate instead of studying! How many months is it that you’ve spent writing that fake ‘assignment’ now? Not that they’d bother to even think that perfect Charlotte could possibly fail anyway… Emily Hughes sends her love by the way– she told me everything that had happened with you the other night when she practically carried an unconscious Cerys into the Emergency Department when I was on shift.”

He paused for breath, watching his sister’s defiance crumple beneath the weight of his truthful words.

“I know that Mum regrets everything: wishes that she had been brave enough to have told the truth from the start, wishes that she wasn’t estranged from her children. That she blames herself—and always will—for all of this.”

He paused, remembering the events of the afternoon, of how his heart had dropped like a stone at the sight of the familiar blonde doctor sat opposite his father. *Yet another person recruited in the divorce battle against Mum…* he had thought bitterly to himself.

“And, I know that despite what Dad says, that he isn’t entirely blameless when it comes to the divorce either. He might like to think that boasting to me about how hiring a private detective to spy on Mum to prove his own suspicions correct somehow gives him the moral high ground, but it really doesn’t.” His voice broke off suddenly in dawning realisation: sounding almost pained as his adult senses finally placed a deliberately suppressed childhood memory into the correct context.

“Oh—” he caught his breath in his throat, eyes opening slightly wider in shock. Daylight shone unflinchingly into the darkness.

Charlotte stared wordlessly at her brother as he fought to regain control.

“What do you mean he’s? – Cam, what on earth happened?!” she stammered slightly, panicked by the shaken expression upon her sibling’s face.

“It all happened a very long time ago,” Cameron began quietly as the final piece of the puzzle slotted together in his reeling mind. “That Christmas when Mum was away on tour…I went downstairs…”

“And?” Charlotte pushed for information, her voice trembling beneath the weight of her suspicions.
Cameron swallowed nervously. “I might be completely wrong, but…”

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**Friday 24th November 2000**

“Well, here’s to being unemployed and imminently divorced! I think you wear it rather well, sweetie.” A leopard-print cocktail dress-clad Sian Kors smirked over the top of a brimming wine glass at Serena Campbell in her own inimitable style.

“Easy for you to say, given that your charming soon to be ex-husband’s most redeeming personality trait is the size of his wallet…” muttered Serena darkly as she took a welcome draught of Shiraz and tucked a stray lock of brunette hair behind her ear.

“Well yes, and the size of his–” Sian smiled gleefully before being cut across.

“Thank you!” Serena raised a cautionary eyebrow in mock disapproval. “Which number is this poor unfortunate; I forget now…”

“Husband number three,” Sian looked briefly up at the ceiling in the crowded London wine bar with a feigned coyness, as she swung a hosiery-attired leg with a carefree ease from her lofty perch upon a metallic barstool. “Evidently not my lucky number. Pity–” she regarded the large diamond engagement ring glittering upon her slender ring finger with a nonchalant shrug which almost successfully disguised the look of pain which flitted briefly across her face. “He had excellent taste in jewellery.”

“Oh, I don’t know, he’s lasted four months longer than the last one…” Serena snorted knowingly before gesturing slightly despairingly at herself with a free hand. “Unlike this stupid sod who’s been married to the same cheating, lying bastard for what feels like the past century and is now staring down the lonely barrel of eternal singledom on distinctly the wrong side of thirty…” She sighed heavily, “Despite Edward clearly not getting the memo about being thrown out… did I tell you he had the nerve to gate-crash that NHS management function last week? Turned up reeking of booze, clutching a bunch of distinctly dead roses and started attempting to serenade me in the middle of the entrance hall. Thankfully, a certain Henrik Hanssen persuaded him that it may not be a particularly good idea… I’ve no idea where Edward went, but rumour has it the caretaker had to let him out of the store cupboard several hours later!” she chuckled wryly, a faint bark of laughter which was swiftly sucked beneath the surface of underlying despair.

“Oh Christ, Sian… what on earth am I doing with my life?” Serena set down her glass with a heavy thud. “This time last year I was all set for promotion: I had never heard of Keith Wattis MP or his blessed bowel resection and I was still just about managing to pretend to myself that I had a marriage worth fighting for, no matter what the hospital grapevine would say to the contrary. Now look at me: distinctly jobless, up to my neck in the fallout from Edward’s scandal because I was stupid enough to trust him enough not to have been drinking at work, humiliated by him shagging that bank nurse in the on-call room… what the hell am I going to do?”

“Serena,” Sian silenced her friend in mid-flow, gently placing a reassuring hand upon her friend’s arm. “Edward is, as I have said before, a complete and utter shit, who you deserve far better than. He vomited in your bouquet on your wedding day, and things have never improved much beyond that. So, as we’re all dressed up –” she paused to gesture meaningfully at a passing waiter, “Why don’t we make a bit of night of it?”

“Oh, I don’t know….” Serena tailed off weakly at the heavily pencilled and disapprovingly
arched eyebrow that her feeble attempts to dodge Sian’s plans received. “I’ve got to—”

“You’ve got to be home before midnight or else you’ll turn into a pumpkin?” Sian countered swiftly.

“Something like that…”

“Now then, Serena Ballerina,” Sian looked her squarely in the eye, “I am firmly of the belief that the Serena that I know would not turn down an evening on the town for the sake of anyone, especially not her infuriating husband. Yes, Edward has thrown an almighty spanner in the works, but so what? He’s out of the picture, so go and have some fun! You never know what might happen… besides, as of today you are officially jobless! No need to worry about staggering into work with a hangover in the morning!”

Serena balked slightly at being addressed by her old university nickname. That particular alcohol-soaked night at O’Sullivan’s bar on her twenty-first birthday had gone down as a matter of local legend. God knows where her supposed pole dancing ability had surfaced from, but the suspiciously placed collection of bruises she had found over the course of the week afterwards bore a fairly accurate testament to Sian’s somewhat racy version of events; excruciating memories mercifully forgotten beneath the hazy oblivion offered by the consumption of copious amounts of cheap alcohol.

“Thanks sweetie,” Sian purred gratefully as the young waiter returned and set down a tray of brimming shot glasses in front of the two women.

“Don’t tell me, you’ve shaved your legs especially…” Serena rolled her eyes, unable to suppress an amused smirk as the bartender made a hasty retreat behind the supposed safety of the counter upon receipt of a particularly lecherous glance from her friend. “Oh, leave the poor boy alone… he looks as if he’s barely out of nappies!”

“Darling, I’ve been hairless everywhere since the start of the nineties…” Sian winked meaningfully across the table before her roving eyes moved relentlessly across the room to latch onto her latest target once more.

“Right, um.” Serena didn’t know how best to respond to that particular piece of personal information. Instead, she settled for selecting the nearest glass and swiftly sinking the contents back in one in a slightly reckless manner which she hadn’t adopted since her student days. Alcohol burned the back of her throat, making her eyes water slightly as she placed the empty glass upon the tray with a triumphant clink.

“Oh, go on then,” she feigned reluctance as she smiled back at her old friend. “You are a terrible influence!”

“Now, that’s a bit more like it!” Sian’s eyes sparkled mischievously as she reached for a glass.

It was going to be a long evening.

Several counties away, a young foundation doctor stumbled awkwardly through the emptying city streets of Holby; shivering slightly in her short, low-cut black dress in the chilly evening air. Despite her clubbing attire, she was travelling home early on the first Friday night in a long time without a drop of alcohol having passed her lips. Humiliated tears stung a blazing trail down her slender face; painstakingly applied makeup promptly dissolving into a dark misshapen cosmetic bruise which sat pointedly upon her fine cheekbones. A misplaced step resulted in the momentary
loss of control over her stiletto boots which fought determinedly to move in opposite directions, subsequently pitching Keeley Jones flat onto her face and into the harsh rebuke of the gleefully awaiting concrete paving stones.

“Ouch…” she winced quietly as she sat for a moment upon the floor, accompanied by nothing but a particularly nasty throb from a deep crimson gash which had appeared freshly upon her bony knee.

“Oh, perfect…” she kicked off her shoes dejectedly and wearily slid herself into a standing position: hobbling towards the nearby turning for Pinehurst Lane, keen to move from her ungainly sprawled heap before the raucous din of her alcohol-soaked fellow junior medics– audible from several streets away–caught up with her once more. “Just perfect….”

Another fissure had been added to the collection of semi-healed scars upon her young heart after yet another short-lived attempt to rekindle a problematic romance with her now decidedly ex-boyfriend James Carson. An unusually optimistic outlook for their troubled relationship had been swiftly dashed by walking in on the ever unfaithful James with his tongue stuck firmly down the throat of some unsuspecting blonde trainee nurse. Exchanges between the doomed couple had swiftly turned sour once more and culminated in a blazing row outside Albie’s bar.

“When will you ever learn, you stupid cow?” she muttered grimly as she limped slowly around the familiar sweeping corner at the top of the exclusive road onto tarmac which was bathed in a soft orange glow of street lighting; grateful as ever for the generous offer of a spare bedroom from the Dunn family which had allowed her to leave hospital accommodation and rescue her sinking attempts at a medical career.

“He’s never going to change…” a stray hand formed a loose fist and childishly attempted to scrub the remaining tears from her eyes. “It’s over for good this time… you should have learned your lesson from the previous three times, you stupid bitch…”

Weary fingers raked impatiently through the cluttered depths of an overstuffed handbag in search of an elusive bunch of keys, prompting an exasperated tut from their owner.

“Where’s–?” her broken verbal snarls were further punctuated by agitated rummaging.

“Oh for–” an exasperated snarl resulted in the offending accessory being squarely dropped upon the doorstep and given a harsh kick in frustration.

She had evidently left her house keys at James’ flat.

Peering carefully through the frosted glass into the darkness of the hallway, a small light from the kitchen glowed hopefully from the rear of the house. 

Thank god for that. Marcus is still awake.

Looking up carefully at the darkened rooms on the first floor, Keeley made a mental approximation at how loud it would be possible to knock on the door without possibly wakening Cameron or Charlotte from their slumber. Charlotte in particular usually took a lot of persuading that remaining asleep for the whole night was both to her advantage and the other occupants of the house. That said, Keeley had developed somewhat of a soft spot for both of the young children in the eighteen months that she had been living at the Dunn family home, as well as providing a valuable pair of extra hands to assist Bernie and Marcus in the chaotic attempt to maintain a vaguely functioning home life around the demands of their hectic schedules.

“Marcus?” she whispered carefully through the letterbox, “Marcus, are you there?”
No response.

After several fruitless attempts to attract the surgeon’s attention, a shivering Keeley began to reassess her diminishing options; the most likely of which appeared to be to attempt to climb over the sheer brick wall which shielded the front of the house from the rear garden and then knock on the kitchen door.

“Here goes…” she muttered grimly as she threw her bag and shoes over the wall and attempted to find a foothold on the unforgiving surface; bare feet scrabbling frantically upon the masonry as she fought to haul herself upward.

Marcus Dunn sat at the scrubbed kitchen table, carefully poring over a growing pile of urgent correspondence and unread journal articles that had accompanied him home from work but which were yet to receive his undivided attention after a particularly stressful evening. Marcus had found himself in the unenviable position of simultaneously trying to persuade a wailing Charlotte that macaroni cheese was not necessarily an ideal choice to redecorate the pristine kitchen walls with whilst also attempting to help Cameron with a particularly demanding piece of maths homework. Needless to say, it had taken significant willpower to determinedly scrape the drying clots of Charlotte’s dinner from the ceiling and put both children to bed without a single raised voice.

An abandoned, half-consumed glass of red wine sat wearily to his right.

The large family house had felt strangely empty since Bernie’s departure. The eerie quietness of her absence occasionally being punctuated by an echoing, static-ridden phone call which usually sounded as if her voice was emanating from the bottom of a well, or the occasional arrival of a well-travelled letter which helped to paint a snapshot of an unfamiliar environment. Each sporadic window of contact bizarrely seemed to push Bernie further away in Marcus’s eyes rather than bring the welcome relief that he desperately sought. She had been away on her first tour with the Royal Army Medical Corps since June, a long deliberated-over move that had thrown up its fair share of discussion and conflict between the married couple but had ultimately come down in Bernie’s favour despite Marcus’s reservations as his wife set about her training.

Exhausted eyes dragged slowly across a cramped typed manuscript in a third attempt at gleaning any semblance of meaning from the blank typed jumbled of medical hieroglyphics.

“After THR or TKR, screening by bilateral ascending venography identifies radiological DVT at any level in the lower limb in 30% to 60% of patients, and DVT in the proximal segment in 10% to 20%”

“Come on…” gently probing fingers massaged aching temples in a bid to assuage the crashing stress headache which was pounding mercilessly beneath his skull.

“Last one, then bed…..”

Marcus’s wandering attention was promptly shattered by a loudly shrieked curse and a deafening crash from the back garden as Keeley Jones came off the worse for wear in her short battle with the immutable laws of gravity and plummeted gracelessly earthward in a flurry of clawing hands and surprised squawking.

“Keeley?” Marcus moved hurriedly across the frosty grass towards a long pair of slender legs– the only part of the junior doctor’s anatomy which was currently visible– which were kicking frantically from within the low privet hedge which bordered the red brick wall at the bottom of the garden. Muffled swearing punctuated the chilly winter air by means of preliminary reply. A subsequently awkward decision as to how to best extract his young tenant from her predicament was helpfully avoided as Keeley finally surfaced from the undergrowth: her blonde hair tousled
messily around her bare shoulders and artfully garnished with broken twigs and leaves, numerous muddy stains and smears decorating her arms and legs.

“Evening…” a self-conscious mumble was offered by means of greeting as she snatched up her scattered belongings. “I forgot my keys…”

“Are you alright? Quite an eventful end to an evening….do you want a drink?” Marcus raised an amused eyebrow at the sight of the dishevelled young doctor. “Purely medicinal of course. Or have you had enough already?”

“I–” the usual friendly yet sarcastic retort which was the norm between Keeley and the orthopaedic surgeon died unexpectedly upon her lips as a bewildering wave of tears suddenly rose and choked her; salty droplets spilling freely down her cheeks at the distinctly ridiculous, pathetic state that she found herself in once more courtesy of James Carson. Single, broken-hearted and now completely humiliated.

“Keeley?” Marcus’s voice softened at the unusual display of emotion from the usually guarded woman. “What on earth is the matter?”

“Nothing… really, I’m fine…” Keeley replied thickly, brushed a fist across her traitorously weeping eyes in frustration, further spreading her mascara and eyeshadow in a dark smear, her movements becoming ever more flustered as she attempted to quickly bundle the contents of her handbag back into the correct place and extract her other boot from within the frozen depths of the flowerbed.

“Ok…” Marcus raised his hands slightly by means of a peaceful retreat. “But if you ever need a friendly ear to listen, I’m usually to be found awake at this time of night whilst nursing a glass of wine and a nagging sense of responsibility for the growing mountain of paperwork that I haven’t somehow found an extra three hours in my day to complete.”

“Thank you,” Keeley fixed a watery smile onto her lips, all the while battling the nervous reflex of her own mouth as the two doctors walked slowly across the ground towards the welcoming pool of yellow light from the back of the house which pooled invitingly across the neatly mown lawn. “Just a rough evening, that’s all…”

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear you at the door- I thought you were staying over at James’s flat tonight?” Marcus apologised as he held the door open for Keeley.

“Ah… now that’s part of the problem…” Keeley winced slightly as she limped into the kitchen and seated herself gratefully upon a nearby chair.

“Ouch…” Marcus murmured at the sight of the sticky ooze of darkening blood which was drying slowly upon Keeley’s lower leg; a souvenir from her untimely meeting with a paving stone. “Do you want me to? –”

“James and I split up tonight…” Keeley cut across his well-meaning concerns in a rush as she stared darkly at the marble worktop, more comfortable in addressing the ebony stone rather than looking her host in the eye. “Despite him saying that he had ‘changed’ for good, I found him tonsil-deep in Natasha Connor’s mouth outside the rear of Albie’s when I arrived this evening….we fought, and I left… but by the time I got home, I realised that I’d left my keys at his…”

“Ah…” Marcus’s mouth snapped shut as he bowed his head in understanding contrition. “I’m sorry Keeley…”

“Don’t be… it was my own fault, shouldn’t have trusted him again after last time…. ” She
muttered grimly, more to herself than Marcus.

“You know what?” she looked up and added to her reply in a voice that was pitched slightly too brightly in her attempt to mask her underlying pain. “I think I will have that drink after all, if it’s still on offer?”

“Of course…” Marcus slid an expensive crystal wineglass across the kitchen island, “Red alright?” he added as an afterthought.

“Anything, trust me…” Keeley sighed, taking a grateful sip from the full glass and exhaling deeply. “God…I’ve got to be at work in the morning, but my head’s just all over the place…”

“I know the feeling.” Marcus chuckled dryly and gestured at the teetering pile of abandoned paperwork, “And I’ll tell you now, especially as you’re at the beginning of your career, that each promotion means double the admin work and half the time to complete it in!”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” Keeley added with a quiet smile. A faint frown of confusion crossed her face as she tilted her head and squinted slightly at the space behind Marcus’s head. “Did you know that there’s what looks like pasta stuck to that wall?” she added slightly incredulously.

“Ah, Charlotte’s fledgling attempt at producing an installation for the Tate Modern is still stubbornly clinging onto life then…” Marcus groaned wearily as he fished a dishcloth from the side and scooped up the persistent remnants of his young daughter’s dinner.

Keeley chuckled, a rare smile of fondness crossing her slender features as she watched Marcus. “Tea went down well tonight then?” she added wryly.

“Oh, a gourmet experience as ever!” Marcus added with a faux enthusiasm as he sank back into his chair and took a draught of wine from his glass. “If only–” He broke off dejectedly and sighed.

A heavy silence hung awkwardly between the two occupants of the room.

“Have you heard from Bernie at all recently?” Keeley asked after a while; perceptive beyond her years as she carefully surveyed Marcus’s slumped form.

“Yesterday,” came a quiet reply as Marcus braced his chin upon his hand, “After a bit of translation from the usual storm of static on the line, she told me that she wasn’t going to be able to get leave to come home for Christmas. Let’s just say Cam didn’t take it well at all…”

“That’s tough…” Keeley sighed in sympathy, “I know how much he misses her, how much we all miss her…” Abandoning any qualms, she reached forward and gently patted a dejected Marcus upon the wrist. “But, she’s done four months of her tour now, so hopefully she’ll be back really soon into the new year.”

“I hope so,” Marcus added. “It’s just–” he broke off hurriedly and took another sip of wine so as to avoid having to breach an unprecedented topic of conversation with his house guest.

“You must miss her so much…” Keeley added, “But she’s being so brave, going out to–”

“It’s bloody-minded stupidity if you ask me!” Marcus snapped tersely as he set down his glass, “Walking away from a young family and into the middle of a warzone, just because a civilian job just doesn’t cut it in terms of interest levels any more–” he silenced himself once more with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“It’s understandable,” Keeley tried her best to offer some supportive words, slightly unsettled by the rare display of emotion from the usually guarded surgeon. “It’s a lot of work: running a house,
keeping an eye on two kids, working a full-time job…”

“I know it sounds awful of me to say this…” Marcus began eventually as he stared mulishly at the table top, “But I just don’t know, I can’t tell any more if I miss what we used to have more than I actually miss her…”

“Sounds terrible, doesn’t it?” he interrupted himself and looked up at Keeley with a wry smile, “But everything they do out there on tour is so communal, they always have each other to turn to…. Every time I speak to her or read one of her letters I think it’s going to help, to make me feel less lonely, less lost, yet she sounds so different, so detached, so deeply rooted in another life… I just don’t know quite what to do anymore, whether I’m overreacting or whether we’ve both just changed too much…” he tailed off with a shrug which promptly restored the carefully placed guard upon his thoughts.

“Ah well, enough of my late-night whinging. What I should really be saying is just how grateful both Bernie and I am to you Keeley, for all of the help you’ve given us whilst you’ve been living here- I don’t honestly know how we’d have managed without you at times!”

“Not a problem,” Keeley smiled gently, “I honestly don’t know how I would have survived another year in hospital accommodation with James…” she broke off uncomfortably at the thought of their argument from this evening.

“Keeley,” Marcus began hesitantly, “Whilst it is none of my business–and you have every right to tell me to be quiet– but from what Bernie has told me of him, I think it is only fair to say that not having James in your life will only be to your benefit…”

“It’s not that he doesn’t love me…” Keeley added carefully as she took another sip from her wine, slightly emboldened by the alcohol, “And it’s certainly not that I don’t love him, it’s certainly not even that I couldn’t see a future together for us… it’s the fact that whenever we are together, he will always lie, always cover his tracks… and like the blind fool that I am when it comes to anything surrounding him, I never seem to learn. We’re just toxic for each other in the end. And–” she paused, biting her lip slightly, “ultimately, I think this time we just have to accept that it’s never going to be. He’s nearly cost me my career once; it’s not going to happen again.” She took a deep breath, “I’m worth more than that.”

“Well said,” nodded Marcus as he drained the last of the dregs of his wine glass. “You’ve got a very wise head on your young shoulders.”

“Not really,” Keeley added sadly, “Just made too many mistakes before, which I unfortunately have to carry with me.”

“Well, if you ever need anything, you know where I am.” Marcus clambered wearily to his feet, stifling a yawn behind his hand.

“Thank you,” Keeley smiled thoughtfully, “And Marcus?”

Her host turned in the doorway.

“Likewise, if you ever need anyone to talk to, or need any extra help with anything…”

“I’ll be sure to ask.” Marcus added with genuine smile, a gentle warmth appearing in his voice.

“Goodnight, Keeley.”

“Night.” Keeley watched the older man walk away contemplatively; equally intrigued and bewildered by their evening exchange and subsequent deepened levels of personal understanding before deciding that it would be in her best interests to attempt to dismiss her idle curiosities before
they grew into anything more than mere speculation.

Don’t even go there. Not now.

It was well into the early hours of the morning when Keeley Jones’s teeming mind finally allowed her to sink into the inviting embrace of the cool linen sheets and gain a welcome night’s sleep.

Several hundred miles away, a distinctly worse-for-wear Serena Campbell all but fell out of a patiently waiting black taxi and staggered up the winding garden path to her London townhouse as the sun rose above the urban skies; a pair of long-since discarded high heels swinging care freely from her outstretched hand. What had promised to be a quiet night out with Sian had escalated into the mother of all celebrations at receiving her final notice from work. Whilst the looming threat of the inevitable hangover lingered ominously on the horizons, she couldn’t deny that the raucous night had proved to be just the tonic that she had been unconsciously seeking.

After several vague attempts to guide an errant key into the lock and subsequently loudly shushing the jangling metallic bundle with a pantomime-esque overblown gesture, the tipsy ex-surgeon had finally managed to gain entry to her house before she slid slowly down the length of the door and fallen into a softly snoring heap in the hallway amidst a pile of discarded shoes and shopping bags where she would later be discovered by an amused Elinor.

Present: Wednesday morning, AAU Ward.

“Ok, everyone’s attention please. Listen up!” barked Berenice Wolfe, immediately commanding the attention of her bustling ward: an instantaneous silence falling, punctuated only by the impatient bleeping of several items of abandoned medical apparatus.

“Major RTC incident reported on the city outskirts: car smashed into a central reservation before rolling and collecting two other vehicles in its path. Several casualties on the scene. We’re the designated receiving hospital, so standby for utter chaos in here in the next twenty minutes. Cancel all electives, free all urgent theatre slots where possible and liaise with Keller to see if we can transfer bays 2 and 7 upstairs ASAP. We’ve just received a red phone call to prepare the trauma bay for our first patient who was the driver of the vehicle in question: partially impaled upon stray metalwork, heavy blood loss from debris penetration wounds to lower right abdomen, suspected raised blood alcohol levels. Any questions?” she finished her lengthy stream of instructions in what appeared to be a single breath.

“No? Good. Fletch and Morven—with me now.” And with a final instruction, the clinical lead swept authoritatively across the scrubbed floor, obediently followed by her two subordinates as the noisy hubbub exploded into life once more.

“Update from the ED: they’re on their way up now with the trauma patient,” Jasmine Burrows poked her head through the plastic strips which adorned the entrance to the trauma bay.

“Thank you Jasmine. Everyone ready?” Bernie received a chorus of nods from her hastily assembled team as the familiar rattle of an approaching gurney trundled into earshot.

“Trauma patient, female, aged 40, GCS of…” the introductory remarks from the swarming team of medics swam and echoed meaninglessly in Bernie’s ears as she caught sight of a familiar face, albeit graced by the weathered presence of an additional fifteen years in age and a bulky oxygen mask. Crusted blood dried tackily in a stain into familiar blonde hairline, a broken piece of jagged metal protruding from her lower abdomen framed neatly by the remnants of a bloodstained cream shirt which had been cut away cleanly from the gaping wound.

A dizzying rush of confusion hurtled through her; ingrained military reserve severely challenged
for once.

“Keeley…” she whispered in shock, a cold wave of dread passing through her in a quake of dread.

Her reeling senses had barely had time to register the extent of the doctor’s injuries and start to establish a preliminary route of diagnosis and treatment before a familiar loud bellowing greeted her from the main AAU ward.

“With all respect, you can’t go in there. The trauma bay is for official hospital staff only—” Jasmine Burrows’ determined protestations were cleanly scythed through by an interloping presence on the ward.

“I’m a senior orthopaedic consultant, more than qualified to assist with Dr Carson’s treatment. Now, I insist that you let me through!”

Marcus Dunn burst through the plastic strips with the enraged velocity of a charging bull, scattering junior medics in his impetuous wake.

“Mr Dunn,” Bernie growled before turning on her heel and drawing herself up to her full height, glaring at her estranged spouse with a rare hint of menace, her stare gaining a deathly intensity which halted him in his tracks. “Please say that you have the authorisation from senior hospital management to have set foot in my trauma bay?”

“Bernie, I–” Marcus floundered, gesturing weakly at the prone, semi-conscious woman who lay upon the gurney. “It’s Keeley, she’s–”

“I will only repeat myself once: do you have authorisation to be in here?” Bernie snapped as she returned to her examination. “Ah, here we go…” she addressed the other assembled medics with admirable calm as she carefully carried out the necessary checks to the gaping wound. An ominous bleep came from the machine to her left. “Damn it; sats are dropping. Right, straight to theatre; let’s not mess about here.”

“I–” Marcus stood his ground, unable to give an answer to the affirmative. “At least let me scrub in–”

“If you do not have authorisation to be here, then kindly leave us, Mr Dunn.” Bernie’s voice remained steady, but an undercurrent of emotion trembled at the edge of her thoughts. “At once.”

Mind on the job, Wolfe.

“Bern–” Marcus stood his ground determinedly. “I really think that–”

“I said leave! Preferably before the patient exsanguinates for the lack of correct treatment. Now, step aside.” Patience exhausted, the ex-Major abandoned any pretence at cordiality and snapped brusquely at the intruder before signalling for her team to move the trolley in the direction of the operating theatres.

“I don’t know what on earth you think you’re playing at, turning up out of the blue like this at my place of work, but I suggest that you wait quietly in my office without the further harassment of any other members of staff until I am finished in theatre.” she murmured coldly as she swept past, bravado masking the fact that her insides performed an uneasy barrel roll at Marcus’s impromptu presence in the hospital. A torrent of unanswered queries pressed unrelentingly upon her, especially a particularly raw series of questions about his knowledge of the motives of a particular brunette detective.
Serena.

*Forget them, forget them both for the time being; focus on the job in hand.*

Her lips pursed in a thin line as she deployed a well-practiced technique of firmly pushing all irrelevant thoughts of emotional turmoil to the back of her mind, each stride towards the awaiting theatre allowing her to temporarily disconnect from everything except the essential data needed to execute the operational repairs needed to the best of her surgical ability.

She would worry about the personal intricacies at a later moment. At present, a patient ultimately needed her skills to save her life; nothing else mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks for reading! I’ve enjoyed fleshing out a little backstory to the main characters through the flashback sections and have been dropping a few little breadcrumbs/hints in the past few chapters as to where this may go. I'm hoping to get the next chapter updated soon!
Dishonesty is the Best Policy

Chapter Summary

Whilst Bernie fights to repair Keeley's injuries in theatre, Serena arrives at the hospital determined to make things right between them and runs into Cameron. A guilt-wracked Marcus reflects upon the trail of secrets which have led to this point.

Chapter Notes

*waves*

Thank you all for being so patient- I can't believe it's taken me this long to get this chapter up in a format that I'm happy with! Please accept an extended length chapter by means of apology! Thank you for leaving such lovely comments and kudos as well, it really means a lot to me to see a notification popping up in my emails.

There's quite a bit of flashback material in this chapter (including a glimpse into Bernie's military career), which links up with the scenes in chapters 7-9. Some hints at PTSD/emotional distress, although nothing explicit.

A little warning in advance for some swearing in this chapter. I apologise in advance if any military or medical descriptions are inaccurate- I've tried my best to research where I can!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Where the hell is all this blood coming from?" Bernie Wolfe growled ominously as her dextrous fingers swiftly probed the parameters of her neat incisions. She had carefully assessed the situation, extracted the protruding metalwork from Keeley’s lower abdomen and set about mending the damage to the abdominal wall.

Despite her neat repairs, a dark sanguineous gush still prevailed.

An ominous chime from the multitude of machines surrounding the supine body flagged the tumbling blood pressure.

"Nope. No good. Right, we’re going to have to open the abdomen immediately to find the source of that bleed. Scalpel."

"Now, Dr. Digby." An urgent request as the assisting junior doctor fumbled to quickly retrieve the correct implement.

"Standby with more suction." A simple command, obeyed without question from her supporting staff. A forewarning which brought a momentary reprieve from the crimson sea which threatened to overflow from within the abdominal cavity as the sharp blade cleaved effortlessly through damaged flesh.

"Retractor.”
A swift glance from experienced eyes soon identified the setback.

“Damn it, tear just along the top of the bladder. Looks as if the intrusion from the metalwork has caused more damage than we first thought. Clamps, now.”

Dark eyes scanned the bloody mass meticulously for the signs of further damage.

A reassuring bleep noted a slight steadying in condition.

“Ok, that’s bought us a little time. Let’s get some more packs in there before trying to mend the tear.”

*Come on Keeley,* she willed before sharply correcting herself. *The patient,* always the patient in theatre; she had made the fatal error of allowing sentiment into her work before and paid the ultimate personal price. Experience had taught her that until the chest was closed and the scrubs removed, Keeley Carson had to be of no personal significance to her, nothing more than the current jigsaw of mangled flesh which Bernie was responsible for mending; piece by shattered piece.

The rest could all come later.

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**10th January 2001: An undisclosed Middle Eastern province**

Concealed in the rocky pass, the rebel soldier took a final drag from his cigarette. The surviving sliver of the butt glowed orange as a stench of cheap tobacco escaped into the surrounding dusk air in a wispy blue spiral before he crushed the smouldering remnants underfoot. Watchful eyes restlessly combed the small gathering of ramshackle buildings which constituted the temporary military base. Primary attention was paid to the primitive field hospital from his lofty bird’s eye view: a pale yellow glow from a low wattage, naked bulb serving as a temporary source of illumination which seeped through the small rectangular windows and spilled onto the rocky ground.

What had been a relatively small scale peaceful civilian protest against the suspicious re-election of a corrupt government official had soon escalated into full-blown violence as years of national frustration in the small principality had boiled to the surface. Chaos reigned, sparking a national situation which required immediate intervention from outside forces when the flagging state army was unable to provide sufficient resistance.

He had lost his brothers in a hail of bullets from supposedly peaceful British troops. Nothing remained of his family except a bloodstained heap of undistinguishable corpses and a centuries-old familial home reduced to rubble. A cloud of memories rising in a dust cloud as the heavy timbers collapsed beneath the gunfire.

Nothing left to lose. The glorious rebellion had been all but quashed by the military might of the intervention.

It had all been for nothing.

He motioned behind him for his remaining compatriots to draw the sparse selection of weapons that they had gleaned from dwindling supplies. A suicide mission indeed given the armed guards who patrolled the perimeter of the makeshift camp, but this small-scale assault was not about gaining any form of strategic advantage; this was a simple matter of revenge, a final defiant
Martyrdom awaited. Silence reigned save for the quiet jingle of a machine gun belt being fitted; the weapon being primed with a harsh grating of metal upon metal.

Fingers curled tightly around the cold steel of the trigger; the firearm held by a steady hand which did not betray the quake of fear which rolled through him as he prepared to give his final command.

This is for you, my brothers. He swallowed decisively and took a deep breath.

A swift nod was all it took to transform the peaceful night air into a roaring chaos; makeshift explosives launched simultaneously towards the temporary settlement, a raucous clatter of bullet cases jettisoning and hitting the dusty floor in a staccato blur as the small brigade of men unleashed the final contents of their stricken arsenal and hurtled down the hillside to their impending deaths.

Second Lieutenant Berenice Wolfe stretched wearily as she stepped out of her final surgical procedure of the day: a young private with a shattered fibula from a roadside blast; condition stabilised sufficiently to organise a transfer to a more highly equipped unit. She shed the plastic shield of her operating gown, peeling off the bloodstained disposable gloves and set about scrubbing her hands methodically; slowly letting out a breath that she had not even been aware of holding.

Job done, Wolfe. Another one patched up and ready to move on.

“Good work, Johnson.” She nodded in approval at the young Lance Corporal who had been assisting her. A small smile of pride was permitted to inch across the exhausted young woman’s lips as she joined her superior in sluicing her hands clean.

It had taken Bernie several months to find her feet in the bewildering environment of her first tour, but her ingrained work ethic and ability to maintain a calm demeanour whilst being confronted with whatever horrific injuries were placed in front of her had played in her favour, rapidly earning the respect of the small band of troops under her junior command. Brusque, commanding yet entirely fair; the Second Lieutenant had the unswerving loyalty of her small band of subordinates.

“Ma’am...” the young medic bowed her head slightly: a vibrant shock of red hair tightly constrained within an elastic band, her pale skin liberally dotted in brown freckles. A qualified nurse, Molly Johnson had enlisted in the army upon the day of her graduation; much to the dismay of her somewhat overbearing mother who still firmly believed that women had no place in the Armed Forces. Enthusiastic, able and with a thirst to prove herself, the newly-promoted Lance Corporal had made a marked impression upon Bernie, who had taken the promising young soldier under her personal supervision.

“It’s Bernie, as I keep saying.” Bernie added with a fond grin, “Although, I’m not sure how well that sits with established British Army protocol. Still,” she shrugged, “I don’t overly go in for all of those formalities. I don’t give a damn what you call me as long as you always give your all in your line of duty.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Johnson snapped her head up smartly, eager to impress the revered surgeon.

Bernie’s lips twitched as she fought back an amused smirk. The ever-keen Johnson appeared to be flirting with whiplash given the speed at which she had snapped her neck upward.
“Let’s get Private Mitchell’s paperwork processed. See if we can get him down as an urgent transfer, and then make sure that his family have been contacted.” Her command was met with immediate obedience as Johnson scuttled off to find the correct forms.

A quick inspection of the small makeshift ward found no significant change in the condition of its occupants, the majority of whom were the less severely injured who were still awaiting transfer elsewhere.

Bernie permitted herself a slight yawn as she shuffled into the small window alcove which was serving as a shared office space, resigned to an evening of catching up on the neglected paperwork required for soldier transfers. Administration had never been a favourite activity, but a necessary evil in this instance. Scrawling her loopy signature upon umpteen pieces of buff ivory paper, she smiled gently at the photograph of her young family which sat in pride of place amidst the sea of strewn papers and stationery which littered her messy desk. Cameron: a whole year older now than when she had last seen him in the flesh, several years older than the photographic depiction, his face slightly hidden beneath a mop of dark curls with an impish toothy grin stretching from ear to ear as he held his toddler sister carefully upon his lap. Charlotte was (somewhat remarkably) smiling, a feat even more unusual when considering the tantrum that had ensued in trying to persuade the youngster to wear a particularly loathed tartan pinafore dress for the photograph in question. Marcus stretched out lazily upon an emerald chequered picnic rug in their back garden, a tanned arm draped carefully over Bernie’s shoulder as they both beamed into the camera lens.

Where did it all start to go wrong? Bernie stared unrecognisingly at the slender blonde doctor in the photograph, surrounded by her loving family; seemingly more than content with her lot in life. Whilst they bore a physical resemblance to one another, that was where her current likeness to the Berenice Wolfe in the photo appeared to end. Any remaining shred of naivety or personal weakness had been long since worn away; now used to living amidst the heightened reality of a warzone which bristled with unknown threats, Bernie had soon learnt that it was necessary to adapt in order to survive.

When did it all start to unravel? The blazing rows, the continuing stress of juggling personal and professional obligations, Marcus’s seemingly unshakable belief that Bernie would be better off taking an extension in addition to her maternity leave in order to look after the children, even going so far in his mission as to make a recommendation to her superior at work that he offer her a sabbatical in order to regain a balance between her professional and familial life. Despite the wondrous connotations attached to motherhood and all the marvels it entailed, Bernie couldn’t help but feel slightly guilty at not being entirely fulfilled by her new status; deemed selfish for apparently wanting both parenthood and medicine. After several months of being stuck in the doldrums wrestling with her conscience, a golden opportunity had been gifted to her when she had been personally headhunted by a senior officer in the RAMC; apparently highly impressed by her conference paper presentation on the surgical management of liver trauma. Many terse arguments with Marcus and several sleepless nights of soul-searching had finally led her hand in her resignation to accept an offer of a place on an accelerated training scheme at Sandhurst.

Forms completed, she set down her pen and stared out at the darkened landscape which surrounded her lonely vantage point. Not long until she had to return to reality once more. She wasn’t sure which scared her more: the fear of the unknown threat which had surrounded her for the past six months, or the unresolved business which awaited her in England; the trepidation of having to pick up the familiar threads of her old life once more.

Several weeks later–flown back early before the official end of her tour of duty—when asked by her commanding officer about her observations of the events of the evening of the tenth of January 2001, a battle-scarred Second Lieutenant Berenice Wolfe slumped wearily back into her chair
before reciting in a dull voice that whilst completing paperwork, she had caught sight of the faint light dancing upon the darkened hillside, briefly illuminating the shadowy figures hidden amid the rocky outcrop before her heightened senses instinctively caused her to roar to her fellow soldiers to take cover. Seconds later, the cheap laminate flooring had shaken beneath her prone form as a deafening explosion from an improvised device ripped through the ramshackle crop of adapted buildings; swiftly felling the flimsy structures like a row of toppling masonry dominoes. Bernie had lain trembling upon the floor, raw adrenaline coursing through her veins as she waited for the guns to stop, unable to move from her prone position as the counter fire rattled into life above her head; spitting out retaliatory bullets in an incensed frenzy.

Once the eerie silence had fallen: the sparse band of insurgents swiftly despatched in mid stride, she had dragged herself free from the wreckage–her desk having protected her from the worst of the falling debris from the destroyed roof–swallowed any shred of fear, ignored the agonising twinge from her lower back and set about assessing and attending to the injuries of her nearby friends and colleagues who were buried in the rubble.

Apparently she was to be commended for her bravery; a promotion and special award ceremony no less. A hollow reward, given the price of her horrific ordeal.

Her low voice choked and died in her throat as she recalled in minimal detail how she had managed to save all but one of the soldiers in her command. Freed at last from the suffocating interview suite, her first act upon stumbling outside into the winter air was to fumble for a cigarette and anchor the nicotine lifeline firmly between her lips. It took several attempts to coax a spark out of the quivering lighter before she took a welcome drag: savouring the smouldering tobacconated air as it poured down into her lungs and blunted the fraught edges of the bloody, traumatic images which seemed to be burnt into the corners of her vision. Warm tears scalded her cheeks as she reprimanded herself sternly.

You did everything that you could.

Despite her frantic yet ultimately unsuccessful efforts to help resuscitate the crushed soldier; the memory of young Lance Corporal Molly Johnson’s motionless body lying still in her arms–her bruised young face framed by a lock of escaping red hair–would haunt her for many years to come. A brutal reminder about the cruel realities of her new career which she had come to love; to no longer take anything for granted, to not allow herself to get too attached.

Present: Holby City Hospital

Serena Campbell swung her Saab convertible into her usual parking space and silenced the engine with a reluctant twist of her wrist. Staring tentatively up at the vertiginous glass-fronted building which she had begun to accept as her workplace–almost a home from home of sorts–she felt an uncharacteristic jolt of nerves.

So much for best-laid plans.

Short of deciding not to flee, she hadn’t really thought things through any further. And now, somehow, in a drive which she had barely paid cursory notice to, she had found herself back at the hospital once more.

Time to be brave. Find Bernie. Apologise and then try to explain. Her reflection in the rear view mirror attempted to offer wise counsel from the small part of her tired brain which remained capable of logical thought.

“Easier said than done,” she muttered bleakly, a stray finger wiping away a dark smear from the
edge of her eye. Removing her tearstained makeup had been the least of her priorities from the night before.

*Waterproof mascara, my arse…*

“Given how you’ve royally interfered in her life, lied by omission to her repeatedly and then snogged her face off for good measure- twice, actually- I think she’s more than allowed to not want to ever set eyes on you again…”

*Well, when you put it like that…* the reflection raised its eyebrows and sighed in despair. *Good luck…*

“God, you look bloody awful…” Serena tutted disapprovingly as she nervously flattened her hair which, presumably in her reticence to brush it, had decided to resemble a scared hedgehog and raise a few errant spines amidst the usually neat bob.

“Right,” she huffed, a sigh deep enough to ruffle her short fringe. “Come on then…”

Clambering out of her car, she attempted to stride forward with her usual confidence as she entered the Wyvern entrance but found her path momentarily blocked by a visibly distressed father and two children urgently seeking AAU. Stopping to offer directions, she watched the family disappear at a run in search of their missing relative, apparently involved in an RTC that morning.

*Another life that needs to be pieced back together.*

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**AAU Ward: Consultant’s Office**

“Christ….”

*One, two, three, four, five, six.*

*Turn.*

*One, two, three, four.*

*Turn.*

Marcus Dunn continued his dogged pacing around the ever-decreasing confines of the consultant’s office, half-convinced that the scrubbed cream walls were attempting to edge inward upon his anxious patrol. An agitated hand swept across his forehead for the umpteenth time that morning; cleaving a pathway through short dark hair which was beginning to recede around the temples.

An expensive gold wristwatch was checked for the fourth time in five minutes with an impatient tut.

*One hour forty-five minutes in theatre and counting.*

Dashing to the hospital on the vague hope of being able to find Keeley had been a foolhardy operation; a moment of pure madness which he was surely to pay the price for.

*It’s all going to have to come out now, isn’t it?*

He sighed, reluctantly succumbing to the urge to slump wearily into his wife’s desk chair and begin kneading his temples with cool fingers. For once he was able to feel his pulse pounding in
the side of his neck as his stomach flooded with a cold wave of nerves.

You bloody fool…

Hidden from view of the main ward, he watched helplessly as a slightly balding James Carson (treated somewhat unfairly by ageing) and his two children burst helplessly onto the ward only to be corralled into a nearby bay by an evidently over-stretched Jasmine Burrows; left to run the busy ward on her own whilst the other staff tackled the influx of patients in theatre.

It should have never gone this far.

Holby City ring-road: early hours of the morning

“Keeley, please listen to me. Let’s just keep things calm, sit down and talk things through? It’s four in the morning, can we please just talk face to face without you disappearing? You haven’t slept.”

Marcus Dunn’s worried voice crackled with static on the hands free device.

“Please don’t do this, we need to sort things out.”

“You lied to me,” came a choked sob from the driver of the small hatchback. “Like you always have done.”

“Keeley, I–”

“Saying your marriage was over, that you wanted to talk to me–”

“That’s all that I meant, a chance to catch up over lunch–” Marcus interjected.

“That’s all I’ve ever meant to you, isn’t it?” came a thick snuffle from the other end of the line, “Someone to run to have your ego massaged when life isn’t going your way? You must be the one seen to be morally correct. Marcus can’t be wrong…Marcus must be in complete control at all times…”

Keeley Carson’s right foot stabbed viciously at the accelerator pedal, spurring the reluctant horsepower into life. The speedometer nudged upward and the small car lurched forward, still gaining speed.

Her verbal outpouring was punctuated by hefty thumps to the steering wheel.

“What was I thinking, meeting up with you again? A tiny glimpse of everything I can’t have, no matter how much I try to ignore it? I’m married to James, who has cheated on me so many times that I’ve lost count and yet because I’m stupid enough to forgive him and love him, I’m stuck! I have two wonderful children, who I can’t stand to lose, no matter what a bastard their father is, and some days I manage to convince myself that no matter what, it’s all enough for me. A fitting punishment for what I did…”

The vehicle swerved uneasily.

“A good job, a nice house, a family of my own; no matter how utterly lonely or miserable I am. And then, every now and then, just as I’m reaching some form of acceptance of that situation, the great and glorious Marcus Dunn pops up out of the blue, just to remind me that I’ll never be free–”
“Keeley, have you been drinking?” Marcus’s voice cut cleanly through her rant, echoing slightly in the tinny speakers.

“So fucking what if I have?” she spat furiously, wrenching the wheel haphazardly as she pulled out to overtake a slower car. “Why on earth should it matter to you, Marcus?”

Marcus took a deep breath, his stomach crawling uneasily at the thought of Keeley racing along the grey tarmac of the Holby ring road, disappearing out of his life once more.

“Because, Keeley… despite what I’ve said previously, I care about you.” he admitted quietly, “Please, pull over at least, let me come and find you and we can talk…”

“Shit…” a muffled swear word echoed fuzzily across the poor phone line, as Keeley counter steered tightly as she found herself barrelling towards the central reservation; a manoeuvre which—despite her best intentions—was incapable of escaping the inevitable laws of physics.

A squeal of tyres, thin bands of rubber scrabbling helplessly in their search for friction was followed immediately by a sickening crunch of metal colliding with metal as the small car was propelled into the central reservation. The deafening impact was too swift to even register a scream of surprise from the intoxicated driver as the shattered wreck turned a single cartwheel across the carriageway; haphazardly discharging shards of glass and broken bodywork in its chaotic wake.

A noxious odour of burnt rubber and suffocating petrol fumes hung in a dull miasma around the scene as what remained of the car finally came to rest upon its roof across both lanes of the roadway; the sole occupant of the vehicle hanging limply from her seatbelt like a grotesque ragdoll.

The phone line crackled one last time and cut out.

Present: AAU corridor

Marcus?

Serena swallowed nervously as she abruptly turned on her heel and strode swiftly away along the echoing corridor before the surgeon turned around and recognised her.

What on earth?

“Evidently I’m not the only one wondering what my father is doing here…” a quiet voice interrupted her brooding, making her flinch in surprise.

“I’m sorry?” Serena ran her hand distractedly through her hair as she cast an anxious look over her shoulder at Marcus’s silhouette in the AAU office window.

“Cameron Dunn,” a young curly-haired doctor clad in the distinctive scrubs of the Emergency Department smiled inquisitively back at her as he slid out from one of the adjacent corridors. “Sorry for making you jump,” he tilted his head apologetically, “Not that great at ice-breakers, I know.”

“Right,” Serena nodded vaguely as she made to walk forward, firmly of the opinion that the less interaction she had with any member of Bernie’s family, the better for her chances of avoiding causing further upset.

“Serena Campbell?” the young medic asked hesitantly, stopping her dead in her tracks.
“Well, your powers of social pleasantries may be lacking, but your psychic abilities don’t appear to be too rusty,” she managed a kindly smile as she turned her attention once again to Bernie’s son. “Have we met?”

“Not exactly…” Cameron’s lips twisted as he leant upon the second word, “But it doesn’t take spectacular powers of reasoning to establish who you are. You’re not a doctor, at least, not on the wards that I’ve covered on my rotations, yet you clearly know your way around the hospital and have a staff pass which allows you to access restricted areas. Suggests to me that you’re some form of senior management, clearly familiar with AAU, and given the recent ward audit scheme that’s been running I’d surmise that you’ve been involved with that too. Yet, you’re not wearing an ID badge, so evidently not on shift today, so the reason for your visit must be more personal, and, given the fact that my mother has barely spoken a sentence of late without mentioning her ‘wonderful new friend Serena’ who works in HR; I’m inclined to suggest that you’re here to see her.”

“She has?” Serena began hopefully before pulling herself up swiftly. “You’ll make a good diagnostician with those observational skills,” she smiled, a slight nod of respect granted to Cameron’s deductions. A large lump built quickly in her throat at the memory of Bernie’s hurt eyes when she learnt of Serena’s deception. “But I really feel that I’ve detained you long enough, I must let you get on… large amounts of reports to write…” she continued spouting broken sentences whilst hurriedly ducking her head and stepping forwards.

Cameron took a deep breath, praying that his gut instincts surrounding the mysterious brunette were correct. Tired of the numerous instances of deception within his family, he wanted answers and his best chance of achieving them was disappearing into the distance.

_Time to throw caution to the winds._

“The reason why you’re avoiding my father…. you’re the detective he hired, aren’t you?” the stark question suddenly blurted out was enough to halt Serena mid-stride.

“How on earth did you know about that?” she abandoned any shred of denial, momentarily unnerved by the junior doctor’s apparently omniscient presence.

“I observe,” Cameron stepped forward, the final pieces of the puzzle connecting within his mind. Evidently his hunch had been accurate.

“Dad mentioned hiring a detective to spy on Mum who then disappeared without a trace, or ever charging him for the work completed once he received a photo of her with Alex Dawson. Mum said it was you that introduced her to Sian Kors, who is now dead set on getting an equal settlement in the divorce proceedings, that it was you who took her in when she moved into that grotty hotel, that it was the findings of your report which then secured a large funding amount for the trauma bay on AAU. Why do all of that for someone you’ve known for only a few months unless there was a deeper reason? Guilt, perhaps? Disappearing off radar, not seeking payment for several months’ work? You’d have no reason to hide from my father unless you knew who he was and vice versa…” his voice remained calm despite the weight of the words that he uttered.

“I think we need to talk, preferably somewhere more private.” Serena glanced nervously down the long corridor where Marcus Dunn still restlessly paced the AAU office like a caged lion. She lowered her voice, robbed of her usual self-assurance. “Please understand, Cameron, that I never set out to hurt anyone… that I’ve spent months trying to put right the mistakes that I made…”

“You were just doing your job.” Cameron shrugged, opening the door to a nearby locker room and taking a seat upon a rickety wooden bench alongside Serena.
His gentle smile was uncomfortably reminiscent of his mother’s.

“Even more tricky not to hurt people when personal feelings get in the way. Not that either of my parents ever seem to have got that particular memo.”

His gaze hardened before he tailed off suspiciously lightly. An involuntary twitch verbal twitch; laden with several years of hidden resentment.

Slender fingers balled into a tight fist before relaxing.

“Although, to be fair, I’m sure Mum has told you that we don’t really much go in for long drawn-out discussions about ‘feelings’ in our family…” he accentuated the alien word by lazily miming quotation marks with his slender fingers and quirking the corner of his mouth sarcastically.

“Indeed…” Serena chuckled lightly, fidgeting nervously with her necklace, determined to summon the courage to be entirely truthful with her newfound companion.

“…or much in the way of discussions in general, actually.” He added as an afterthought. “Thank you, though. For being there, especially when things have been so….” Cameron stumbled to find a suitable adjective, “awkward between us all.” The junior medic slightly inclined his head in respect to Serena, “In all seriousness though, I know how much she’s valued your support; no matter what’s happened with Dad.”

*Which makes what I’ve done all the more awful…* Serena thought wryly to herself.

“It took me a while to get my head around it, but I’d prefer that Mum’s happy, not having to lie anymore…”

“Listen, Cameron.” Serena steeled herself, “There’s something I need to tell you. About Bern–, about your Mum and me…” she began hesitantly.

“I–” Serena raised a questioning eyebrow, slightly taken aback by the young doctor. “Go on?”

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**Christmas Eve, 2000: 114 Pinehurst Lane**

“It looks absolutely perfect,”

Marcus jumped apprehensively, deftly moving to conceal the pile of neatly wrapped Christmas presents at the sound of the intruder.

Keeley Jones leant thoughtfully in the doorway, clad in a soft peach off-the-shoulder jumper and artfully faded denim jeans. Locks of freshly towelled blonde hair tumbled loosely over her shoulders in a tousled mane. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she took in the festive scene. Bulging crimson stockings bearing knitted initials ‘C’ and ‘C’ hung from the antique fireplace, evidently abundantly blessed with gifts from a Yuletide visitor, ready to be discovered and dismantled by eager young hands at the crack of dawn. Golden wisps of tinsel adorned the
branches of a smart fir tree; trimmed with a uniform arrangement of silver baubles.

“Well, I tried…” he straightened up with a proud smile at the fruits of his festive labours. “Not bad, I suppose. It’s usually Bernie who does all of this… whenever Cameron finished term for Christmas, she would take him Christmas shopping–a nightmare for them both, but she would always put him in charge of choosing the Christmas tree…” he pursed his lips before rummaging determinedly at the bottom of a rustling carrier bag.

“Ah, got them!” he brandished a large packet of Milky Buttons triumphantly before slotting them into the very top of Cameron’s stocking. “She’d kill me if I forgot them this year…”

“How was the bedtime regime this evening?” he sank into the sofa and motioned for his houseguest to join him. “Both Cam and Charlotte asleep on Christmas Eve before 9pm without the use of tranquilizer darts? Have you considered that you may have strayed into the wrong career field?” he smirked into a brimming glass of a rather fine Saint-Émilion.

“Kids are in bed, and fast asleep.” Keeley reported with a smile as she entered the room and took a seat, “Well, once I’d persuaded Cameron that reading under the covers with a torch and straining his eyes was probably not the best way to avoid developing certain forms of myopia.”

“Always effective…” her companion smiled as he poured her a glass without consultation; an unspoken routine established since their heart-to-heart in November that they would while away the later hours of many an evening in each other’s company, making conversation and drinking their way around Europe. He raised his glass in a small toast.

“Well, thank you,” the softness of Marcus’ fond reply caught them both by surprise. “For staying for Christmas. The kids– I, I– don’t know quite what we would have done without you. Certainly would have been rather bleak…”

“I’m sure you would have managed,” Keeley added in the spirit of fairness, her glass meeting Marcus’s with a soft clink.

“Although, truth be told, I’m very glad you asked me. Let’s just say, Christmas Day at my parents runs to an alarmingly predictable schedule: Auntie Margie arrives, gets drunk and then picks holes in Mum’s cooking, Mum will then go off on a rant and usually end up chucking the remainder of the turkey across the kitchen. Grandad finds new and interesting ways to explore themes generally rooted in racism and bigotry before the pudding course is served, my Dad will then try to steer him off track, which will result in the usual ‘you’re not good enough for my daughter’ display from both him and Nan… and you’re lucky if the four walls are still standing in time for the Queen’s Speech! Festive hostility all round!”

She took a welcome sip from her glass and settled back comfortably into what had been silently designated as her end of the couch. “Let’s just say, the only thing they have got right is warning me to stay away from James. None of them ever liked him, especially after he fell out with Dad last year…”

“Blimey, and I thought this house was bad enough!” Marcus chuckled in acquiescence, holding up a hand as he surrendered the conversational point. “Still, James would pick a fight with his own reflection, given the chance…”

“Yeah… let’s just say last year was particularly trying.” Keeley nodded. She leant forward and whispered conspiratively, “Is it bad to say that I’m rather excited about having a proper Christmas this year, with no shouting, no arguments, no singed turkey?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that…” Marcus muttered lazily as he surveyed the oily residue of the
tannins that clung to the edge of the crystal vessel. “My cooking is hardly anything to write home about…”

“Well, you’ve managed six months without poisoning either of your children… can’t be that terrible?”

“True, although I’m sure Social Services would have something to say about my attempts to create a cottage pie and label it as edible… I don’t really blame Charlotte for trying to re-grout the kitchen floor with it…”

“Well, the occasional culinary disaster aside, I think you’ve managed really well.” Keeley added with a reassuring pat to Marcus’s arm. “Besides, not long now until Bernie’s home and everything can go back to normal, right?”

“Right…” Marcus’s reply sounded far from convinced. “Everything back to normal…” he set down his glass and sighed, gesturing morosely around the empty confines of the family home. “Whatever normal was….”

It was only during their impromptu late night heart-to-hearts that Keeley saw this side of Marcus; the confident surgeon’s mask allowed to fall briefly to one side, loosened by alcohol and momentarily exposing a man floating aimlessly as he scrabbled to retain control upon his crumbling personal life. Scared to take a decisive step forward, but equally keen to doggedly persist in the personal stalemate in which he perpetually found himself. Work was a vital distraction, but not ultimately a solution.

Once the bottle was drained at the end of an evening and Marcus then disappeared upstairs, brooding conscience temporarily lightened, the faltering persona was always pinned firmly back in place by the next morning with a broad smile across the breakfast table.

Denial continued. Denial was safest.

“I–, I need to get something…” Keeley muttered a hurried excuse, climbing quickly to her feet and disappearing into the kitchen.

She swallowed tightly as she poured herself a glass of water, running the icy vessel over her throbbing forehead.

This can’t go on any more.

Despite her clammy exterior, she burned inwardly with a deep-seated guilt, knowing full well the implications of the current maelstrom of emotions that she felt.

Bernie took you in, Bernie protected you, kept you in your job. And then you go and fall for her husband. Fantastic timing Keels, well done.

She couldn’t pin point the exact moment that her regard for Marcus crossed from cordial gratitude to friendly chitchat to confidante to romantic interest, but the past few weeks since her breakup with James had certainly been soothed by Marcus’s understanding presence.

Perhaps it’s because he actually talks to me like a person, someone who cares what I think, who bothers to ask if I’m alright.

She tilted her head quizzically as she diagnosed the situation, unable to avoid the glaring issue any longer.

Still doesn’t excuse the fact that he’s your ex-mentor’s husband. Still very much married, with two
young children and a wife who is risking life and limb on active service.

Little bubbles of air slowly rose to the surface of the liquid, watched idly by restless blue eyes. Little beads of condensation condensed on the outer surface of the vessel and trickled downward in slow teardrops.

Or maybe it’s the fact that I’m actually living in his house, looking after his children, sharing meals with them, helping to organise a family Christmas and generally being his only emotional confidante/marriage counsellor.

Her hand shook as it replaced the glass upon the marble work surface.

Oh God, you’re in far too deep this time.

A panicked sob escaped from between her tightly pursed lips as she braced herself against the counter; head spinning.

“Keeley?” a concerned voice came from the entrance to the room. “What on earth’s the matter?”

Marcus hurried across the room to her, shocked as she visibly flinched at the sound of his voice.

“Nothing…” she took a deep sniff and turned around with a suspiciously bright smile. “I’m fine… honestly...”

“Is it something I said? I didn’t mean to bring up James… honestly, I know it’s hard… first Christmas apart and all that…” stumbled apologies continued to fall nervously from his lips, taken aback by the sight of the usually effervescent Keeley reduced to tears.

“No, it’s nothing like that, I promise…” she smiled weakly, “Not at all…”

Drawing herself up to her full height, she took a deep breath and tried to lie convincingly.

“Well, actually… I’ve been giving my future a little thought. I’m wondering if I’d be better off transferring to another hospital to finish off the end of my F2 training? All this stuff with James… there’s so much unfinished business with us both still being in the same hospital… I’m thinking a move now may make a fresh start easier to come by? Any orthopaedics-specialist training centres that you recommend?” she blurted out hurriedly.

An expression close to complete despair flickered across Marcus’s usually unreadable face.

“You, you want to transfer?” he questioned urgently.

“I think it’s probably for the best…” Keeley added quietly, trying to avoid eye contact.

Two floors above them, Cameron Dunn switched off his torch with a soft click before climbing quietly out of bed and padding across the carpeted floor of his bedroom.

“Of course, I’d– I would offer you my full, professional support in finding you a new placement…” Marcus added, “But why this sudden change of heart? I thought that you were happy here– happy in Holby?” he corrected himself swiftly.

“I am…” Keeley replied softly, aware of the closing distance between the two of them. “But, I think you know why I need to do this…” her voice trembled at the effort of remaining neutral.

Soft footsteps crept quietly downstairs, skilfully avoiding the penultimate step in knowledge of the tell-tale creak which was frequently heard from the old timbers. An intrepid pair of dark eyes,
smarting slightly from a lack of sleep—the avoidance of fatigue fuelled by an excited festive exuberance—peered curiously around the bottom of the carved oak banisters. Cold, bare toes shivered uncomfortably when lightly tickled by the icy fingers of the winter draught which crept between the front door and its frame. Light pooled gently into the darkened hall, weak rays inching outward from the kitchen. A sudden, audible catalyst caused the fledgling miscreant to crouch suddenly, frantically pressing their small frame close to the shadowy camouflage offered by the darkened hallway.

“Don’t go… not yet…” a low murmur from Marcus, “Please stay… just for a little longer…”

The surgeon felt his stomach twist sickeningly with nerves, as his gaze locked with Keeley’s wide eyes, unable to stop the inevitable train of events that he had set tumbling into motion.

A bitter flood of self-loathing engulfed him entirely as his disloyal lips moved forward of their own volition and met with Keeley’s in a searing kiss.

Youthful innocence was abruptly snuffed like a candle flame, embers flickering and dying in shocked disbelief. Guilt crawled beneath pale skin like a rash as small feet—momentarily rooted to the floor in shock—stealthily took flight once more as the juvenile observer exited unseen upstairs to the privacy of his bedroom.

“I’m sorry, I can’t–” Keeley broke away from the clinch with a gasp, her hand ghosting up to her mouth in horror before she fled upstairs.

Marcus sank disbelievingly into a kitchen chair and cradled his head in his hands.

The Yuletide season passed in relative ease, a desperately cheery pretence held by Marcus, Keeley and Cameron in a shared mutual hope that the unspoken treachery would simply melt away.

A forced jollity which grated wearingly upon the nerves. When the children had gone to bed, a suffocating silence crushed any conversation between the two adults.

It didn’t help that Berenice Wolfe smiled softly at them from the family photographs which hung from nearly every wall in the living room.

It was a fortnight later that a weary Marcus returned home from a gruelling shift to find Keeley slumped quietly upon the sofa; a snoozing Charlotte curled up tightly in her bony lap. Cameron was nowhere to be seen.

Her slender face was illuminated in the stark white light from the television as muted scenes skipped disjointedly in front of her disbelieving eyes.

“Cardiff are looking for a junior on their orthopods team. I’ve put in a personal recommendation.” was his stilted offering in place of a greeting. “I’ve spoken to–”

“Marcus—” Keeley whispered tautly, interrupting him as she gestured at the screen. “It’s Bernie’s regiment, they’ve been attacked. The whole camp destroyed…”

The senior surgeon froze as he took in the bloody images which were being streamed on the news bulletin.

“I think she’s being flown home; her commanding officer wants to speak to you.” Keeley added gently, “He called when you were out…”

Marcus continued to stare disbelievingly at the screen.
“Marcus? Please say something...”

“I’ve spoken to my colleagues; the post starts in March.” Marcus finished flatly as he turned on his heel and swept upstairs.

He barely made it to the bathroom before expelling an acidic puddle of vomit and self-disgust.

Sitting shakily upon the terracotta flagstones, he braced himself against the bath.

*Bernie could have been killed, and you were sneaking around behind her back, kissing Keeley of all people.*

*Bernie’s ex-student.*

*You weren’t there when you needed to be, you were too busy wallowing in your own self-pity to try to keep things on track with your own family.*

*You could have torn everything apart.*

*You could have lost everything.*

Removing Keeley Jones from his life, throwing himself wholeheartedly into supporting his wife and family and working to patch up the cracks in his marriage seemed to be the only course of action which began to assuage the burning sense of guilt that he felt.

*You have to put this right.*

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**April 2004**

A cream embossed invitation to the wedding of Keeley Jones and James Carson, decorated tastefully with a lilac bow and soft pink watercolour flowers, descends gracefully onto the doormat of 114 Pinehurst Lane.

Marcus swiftly despatches of the incriminating article without Bernie’s knowledge.

He wonders whether it is pure coincidence that she mentions Keeley’s name merely three days later; idly speculating about whatever happened to her young protégé.

His conscience gives him a swift kick in the ribs.

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**July 2006**

An invitation to the christening of Matilda Lily Carson arrives. Thankfully, Marcus is due to present at a conference in New York and Bernie is otherwise engaged with a military commitment.

Vague promises of ‘we must meet up soon’ are scribbled hastily upon the RSVP; weak assurances which neither party will honour over time.
February 2009

An email, sent to his professional account at work from a journal editor which sought advice upon a specific technique mentioned in a study soon to be published by K. Carson et. al, sends Marcus scurrying for a glass of wine upon his return home.

June 2010

A moment of weakness after a particularly blazing row over parental responsibilities with Bernie following an evening when Cameron was escorted home by the police for being drunk and disorderly in the week of his end of year medical exams.

Marcus sends a generalised email, commending Keeley upon the success of the recent trials published by her team in Cardiff and wishes her all the best.

He never receives a reply.

November 2012

A fleeting face to face encounter at a conference in London. Marcus slips into the back of the darkened auditorium where, unbeknownst to him, Keeley Carson is presenting a paper.

Projecting her voice to the back row of the large audience in a bid to conquer the anxiety of addressing such an esteemed panel of experts, Keeley lifts her head a little higher, momentarily stumbling over her words as she catches sight of a familiar figure skulking at the back of the room. Her eyes snap away as if burned and do not venture back in his direction again.

Shortly afterwards, Marcus feigns a migraine and escapes before the evening reception.

He dedicates his weekend to helping Cameron prepare for his next hospital placement.

February 2016

A garbled phonecall, a news notification popping up on the screen of his smartphone.

The same message; a more modern means of communication.

Marcus is transported back fifteen years as he is informed that his wife has been caught up in an explosion from an improvised device. She hasn’t been as lucky this time and is being transported back to England with an unstable C5-C6 spinal fracture.

The drive to Holby City passes in a blur.

Bernie then tells him that she’s been offered another ten years in the RAMC. A full commission. They talk, try to make things work and succeed; for a while at least.
An uneasy truce is negotiated.

Until several months later when he sees the name ‘Alex’ flashing up on the screen of Bernie’s phone; the device always carefully slipped out of sight the moment he enters a room.

Paranoia itches away, a mental prickling which he cannot reach nor satisfy. How could Bernie betray him, the children, after everything they had worked for? How could she lie, sustain an affair when he had walked away so many years before, bitterly regretting his own lapse of judgement every day?

Eventually, Marcus contacts Serena Campbell; a private detective.

Present: AAU Theatre 1

“Right, I think that’s us done here. Doctor Digby, would you like to close?” Bernie stepped aside to allow Morven better access to the patient.

Stepping out of the theatre, Bernie followed her usual methodical routine; scrubbing neatly at her hands and forearms, appreciating the flow of water over her skin.

Slowly, her macro-focus began to lift; swirling questions from Marcus’s arrival returning to her mind once more.

Steeled herself, she strode determinedly towards the ward.

“Keeley’s safe.” The first words out of her mouth as she entered her office, pulling the door closed behind her and lowering the metallic blinds in a bid to shield their conversation from prying eyes and ears.

“Now then,” she scythed abruptly through Marcus’s relief as he made to speak. “Celebrations over; I have a few questions for you, Marcus.”

“What the hell are you really doing here?” she asked through gritted teeth.

She glared at her estranged husband with all of the strength she could muster; a look which had sent many a raw recruit scuttling for cover in its time.

“And, okay, whilst this may not be strictly a ‘workplace conversation’ topic; Serena Campbell. What on earth gave you the right to tell her to spy on me? To get close to me? To—” she broke off quickly, unable to voice her last question, swatting the air with frustration at the tears she found threatening to escape.

“What’s going on, Marcus?”
Chapter End Notes

Many thanks for reading and having the patience to follow this story- I'm thinking there will be a few more chapters left to come!
Chapter Summary

Marcus confesses all to Bernie, leaving her with more questions than answers. Cameron and Serena continue to talk and more is revealed about her past as a detective. As Bernie reaches the end of her tether, will the intervention of an impartial observer force the two women to talk to each other about the implications of Serena's deception?

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to everyone who is still reading, leaving kudos or commenting on this fic- it really means a lot to me to read what you think. I can only apologise for the long gaps between uploads- partially due to a rather busy personal life and a nagging sense of perfectionism which won't let me upload until I'm completely happy with how it all reads!

The storyline in this chapter picks up directly from the last chapter.

Present: Wednesday morning, AAU Locker Room

“Wow…” Serena Campbell exhaled as she attempted to analyse the new information that Cameron had just revealed to her. “Marcus and Keeley? Well that certainly puts things into a new perspective…”

Hypocrite! Her senses screamed, before pulling her up sharply.

“You and Mum?” Cameron countered with a slight smirk. He had taken Serena’s stumbled confession of events surprisingly well.

“Well, um, nothing’s really happened properly. I mean—”, Serena blushed, fumbling awkwardly for words. “Especially now that she knows that I’ve basically lied to her face for the past few months.”

She grew quieter. “Even so, I think I at least owe her an explanation.”

“Good luck with that…” Cameron added wistfully, “As I said, we don’t really do much in the line of heart-to-hearts… more a collective agreement to never discuss anything…”

“How’s Charlotte taking things?” Serena probed gently. From what she had gleaned from her quiet evenings with Bernie, the army medic’s daughter had all but cut contact with her mother. Marcus’s influence undoubtedly carrying more effect upon her than her brother.

Cameron sighed. “Not well.” He proceeded to tell Serena about how his younger sister had quietly dropped out of university and how neither of their parents had yet found out.
“Blimey…” Serena shook her head. “What’s she going to do?”

“Not sure. I think at present she’s just trying to find a way to tell Dad before he goes ballistic…” Cameron shrugged.

A small idea was formulating at the back of Serena’s mind. She made a brief mental note to drop an old acquaintance an email.

“They both want us to do well…” she was aware of Cameron continuing, “Hence medical school on my part, I suppose. But neither of them are that great at listening. I still don’t know if I’m doing the right thing, even now…”

“Parents are there to be ignored sometimes.” Serena smiled encouragingly. “They mean well, undoubtedly, but sometimes you’ve just got to take a bit of a leap of faith. Go with your instinct; try things out, get things spectacularly wrong… but then learn from them and move on. It’s the only way sometimes…”

“Hence the detective work?” Cameron questioned interestedly.

“Hence the detective work. Well, eventually anyway, I suppose…” Serena tilted her head. “I had to become part of the centre of a national medical scandal first before I found my way. Puts things into perspective a little I suppose… to lose everything and have to start again from scratch.”

Her phone bleeped in her pocket, announcing the arrival of an email.

11:30PM, Friday, 6 July 2001

If Serena Campbell had been told that her sophisticated evening out would have culminated in her sprinting through the darkened streets of a leafy South London suburb in the company of a private detective, she would have snorted in disbelief. Even more so if she had been told that she would have a camera which contained incriminating evidence clutched tightly in one hand and her discarded high heels swinging dementedly from the other before bodily hurling herself into a discretely parked silver Vauxhall estate, exhausted legs still trembling with adrenaline.

Reckless adventures such as this were hardly the sort of spontaneous train of events that were supposed to happen to recently-disgraced, messily-divorced vascular surgeons who had temporarily (albeit grudgingly) moved back in with their mother at the age of thirty-five.

Chuckling to herself as she slumped back exhaustedly upon her bed, Serena Campbell finally coaxed her smile out of its temporary hibernation; a tentative gesture at first, which revelled in its newfound freedom and promptly stretched out across her face in a wide grin.

She felt more alive than she had in months.

Five hours earlier:

“Oh, perfect.” Serena tutted exasperatedly to herself as she checked her mobile phone.

A hurried text had arrived confirming the non-attendance of her first date since her divorce. Richard Barrett, a barrister and a friend-of-a-friend of Sian’s (whom Serena vaguely remembered meeting at a distinctly alcohol-soaked New Year’s Eve party about six years previously), had apparently discovered some ‘urgent business’ that couldn’t wait for the duration of an informal after-work drink.
“That’s just perfect…” she plucked slightly self-consciously at her outfit; a carefully selected knee-length navy dress with a swooping neckline which seemed to strike the correct balance between professionalism and suggestiveness. Seated at the solitary table in the window of the luxurious Embankment bar, she gazed out at the busy hubbub of city dwellers on their way home; a myriad of bustling individuals framed in the golden glow of the setting sun, revelling in the vibrant urban energy of their surroundings. Background music pulsed heavily, lending an extra dimension to the scene which she covertly surveyed.

London had used to feel like her home. Now, she was reduced to mere tourist, drifting aimlessly, taking on the occasional short-term proofreading or marking contracts whilst attempting to find a worthy distraction to fill the gaping void that the death of her father had ripped in her life.

She couldn’t go back to medicine, her name had been irreparably dragged through the mud in the fallout from the Wattis scandal, despite being officially cleared of any claims of negligence. Bereft of the two anchoring forces in her life, robbed of any constant figurehead, Serena found herself uncertain about her trajectory for the first time in decades.

Abandoning her lonely post, she rose to her feet and attempted to depart through the thronging crowd with as much dignity as one who had evidently just been stood up could manage.

“How is it fair that I’ve been through so much and yet he’s as unscathed as when I last clapped eyes on him?”

The eight months of separation had done little to improve Edward’s appearance; a familiar floral shirt which Serena had always secretly loathed was pulled a little more tautly across a faint paunch. Iron filings of stubble graced his jawline; either lucky escapees from that morning’s shave or a vague attempt at creating some designer facial hair. The vindictive part of Serena’s personality sincerely hoped it was the latter.

“You look wonderful,” were the first words of out his mouth. “Care to join me? You don’t look as if you’ve anywhere better to be than propping up a bar with your ex-husband?” a slight smirk as he took a swig from his tumbler, remnants of partially melted ice cubes clinking gently against the glass as he motioned confidently to the bartender at the sight of Serena’s crestfallen expression. He still knew exactly which barbed words to choose from his vocabulary to puncture her iron-clad façade: how to taunt her, toy with her and eventually wound her without breaking a sweat.

“No thanks.” Serena muttered distractedly, “Got to catch my train…busy day tomorrow and all that…”

“Shiraz, right? Always was your favourite…” Edward ignored her protestations and slid a brimming glass of temptation towards her along the sticky wood of the bar. “Never could persuade you to appreciate the finer merits of vintage Cabernet Sauvignon, could I?”

Serena made a non-commital noise at the back of her throat.

“Don’t rush off on my account,” Edward added, “I’d have thought you’d appreciate a little inside information on the Jefferies appointment at King’s– that is why you’re here after all, isn’t it? Top
surgeon looking for a new job? I hear NHS redundancy money isn’t too handsome, even on top of a healthy marriage settlement?” he let the words dance lightly from his mouth; daring her to walk away, knowing full well her piqued curiosity would have her feet rooted to the floor in anticipation.

“Oh, go on…” Serena sighed wearily as she settled uneasily upon a rickety barstool which immediately gave a vertiginous wobble and resulted in her clutching frantically at the bar for support.

Edward caught her eye and smirked.

As much as Serena was loathed to admit it, it was nice to have a conversation with someone other than her mother.

“Thought you were supposed to be giving up the booze? Or is that just another of your empty promises that you threw out to keep me at your side?” she interrupted Edward after several minutes, glancing suspiciously at the vessel which he was cradling somewhat protectively.

Edward glanced down proudly at his tumbler, “Orange juice. Not had a drop in three weeks. I’m a reformed character, ‘Rena.” He added with a knowing wink.

Serena visibly flinched upon hearing her father’s pet name for her. “Don’t call me that…” she muttered quietly.

“However, a little social drink with work colleagues post-shift,” Edward cut cleanly across her and gestured across the room at a couple of bespectacled men in smart charcoal grey suits who nodded vaguely in their direction by means of reply, “Doesn’t necessarily mean booze. St. Gregory’s staff are actively encouraged to ‘maintain a healthy lifestyle’ in return for the rather lucrative benefits of working for a private clinic.”

“St. Gregory’s?” Serena’s right eyebrow scaled new heights of incredulity. “How on earth did you find the references for that, after everything that happened? You walked away blameless?” her voice rose incandescently as resentment boiled angrily in her veins.

“Well, it’s not a bad lot, I’d agree with you there. The Wattis family eventually settled with the hospital out of court on the quiet.” Edward set down his glass calmly, evidently basking in the cold fury that was emanating from his estranged wife. “The final arrangement didn’t make the papers. Insufficient evidence, apparently combined with some rather risqué lifestyle choices on the patient’s behalf which the family weren’t overly keen upon making it to the public domain… well, it was enough to ‘muddy the waters’ of the inquiry, shall we say?”

“So it was all a cover up then? A lot of noise, but no solid convictions? Unbelievable….” Serena spat, slowly shaking her head in disbelief; a seething mass of bitterness overflowing and destroying the barriers of her self-restraint. “You destroyed a whole family, ripped them apart at the seams, to say nothing of the fact that you were quite happy to let the press drag my name and my department through the mud whilst you buggered off on ‘extended leave’.

The ex-surgeon took a deep steadying breath, identical pink spots of incandescent rage glowing blotchily upon her cheeks.

“You should be behind bars…” she hissed in disgust.

“You see Serena, this has always been your problem,” Edward gestured towards her with a casual flick of his hand and an ill-advised chuckle, “Always allowing feelings to get in the way of professional decisions, taking things way too personally…”
“Oh, don’t you dare…” Serena hissed, hurt gleaming in her eyes as Edward’s barbs finally snagged beneath her skin. “The only mistake I ever made was in trusting you, Edward.” She leant forward to snatch up her bag from the bar and sniffed suspiciously at his abandoned drink.

“Ah.” She stole a thoughtful sip from the glass. “Thought as much. Didn’t know they grew oranges with vodka in them these days. Amazing, the things they come up with, eh? Like imaginary jobs in exclusive private clinics. Why don’t you invite your supposed new colleagues to join us, or are they as invisible as your sense of guilt?”

The suited men continued their bland discussion without a single glance in their direction.

Serena’s voice dripped with sarcasm as she turned to Edward once more.

“Liars however? They never go out of fashion. Always there to let you down, time and time again. I should have known better.” She added quietly before pursing her lips, slamming the glass down unforgivingly and marching swiftly out of the bar.

“Serena, wait!”

An insistent hand tugged upon the crook of her elbow as she stepped out into the balmy night air.

“Ok, look, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for lying, for drinking, for being just generally hopeless.” Edward gestured helplessly, “I just saw you walking towards me, looking so wonderful, so perfect that I was a tad jealous.” He shrugged defencelessly, “To see you doing so well, looking so lovely, when my life has been far from a bed of roses after the divorce… I may have been a little economical with the truth. At least let’s finish our drinks and have a proper catch up?”

Serena turned around slowly. “Do you even have any comprehension of what I have been through in the past year Edward? All because of you. I lost my job; the one thing I had left in my life that you hadn’t systematically set about ruining. It was the one thing I had left that I was proud of, that I had worked so hard for, but you couldn’t even let me have that, could you? I left medicine, the only field that I had ever wanted to work in, because my name had been dragged through the mud. I went back to Harvard, hoping to pick things up and start again, but then—” she broke off, angrily brushing away tears, determined to not waste any more upon her ex-spouse, “my father died, and I wasn’t there to say goodbye.”

She took a step towards Edward, her voice quiet yet firm. “So no, I don’t think you can even come close to understanding what I’ve been through, Edward. Because you haven’t changed at all, you’re still incapable of thinking about anything other than your own selfish interests.”

“Give us another chance?” Edward smiled weakly, in what he believed to be a winning attempt, “For old time’s sake?”

“No, Edward.” Serena wrenched her arm free with a decisive glare. “No more ‘second chances’; no more lies. We’re divorced for a very good reason.”

“Serena—” Edward’s protestation was cut short by a muscular arm in a black leather jacket cutting swiftly between them.

“I think that’s a polite way of asking you to back off, mate.” A burly-looking man with a stubbled jawline stood his ground determinedly. He reached quickly into his pocket and briefly flashed what appeared to be an official-looking warrant card.

“And I would suggest that you do as she asks, pronto. Before I’m forced to act in my professional capacity.”
“I–” Edward’s mouth snapped shut, a surviving modicum of common sense restricting him from further comment. “Sorry, no offense meant…” He backed away slowly and returned to his solitary post at the bar.

“I can cope by myself, you know.” Serena snapped huffily at her rescuer as they began to walk slowly along the riverside. “I was married to the odious man for twelve years. I do know how to handle him.”

“Right, well…” the unidentified man shuffled awkwardly.

“But, that’s not to say that it wasn’t a welcome distraction.” Serena added swiftly, smiling grudgingly as she extended a hand in greeting. “Serena. Serena Campbell. I’m guessing I have a member of the constabulary to thank for seeing off my ex-husband?”

“Sort of… once upon a time.” Her extended hand was clasped briefly in greeting by a bearlike paw. “I’m more in the private investigation line nowadays. Although, pulling rank with people like him,” he gestured over his shoulder, “always seems to do the trick…”

“And there was I thinking that your sort only existed between the pages of a book?” Serena heard the flirtatious edge to her voice and pulled herself up sharply.

_Get a grip, Campbell._

Thankfully, her new companion chuckled. “Something like that. It’s nowhere near as exciting as a novel might make it seem. Way more hanging around outside grotty addresses hoping to catch a photograph… definitely less in the way of champagne or helicopter chases. Although this,” he turned and gestured at the luxurious venue; the illuminated windows casting rippling pools of light upon the water. “Makes a nice exception.”

“So, why do it then?” Serena asked. “If you don’t mind me being curious. It’s not the glamour, so possibly the money?”

“What do you think?” her new acquaintance tilted his head interestedly.

“Well,” she pondered, stopping to lean against iron railings and gazing down into the swirling waters of the Thames. “If it were me, I’d think it would be the satisfaction of a job well done. Helping someone find justice, shining a light into all of the lies… finding the truth… however uncomfortable that may be. Helping people find answers, I suppose ultimately…” she trailed off thoughtfully.

Serena Campbell was not one to believe in fate or destiny. However, memories of her speculative conversation with her father chose that moment to float through her mind.

_Private detective…_ he had been the only one not to laugh scornfully at such an apparently absurd idea for a new career. _Taking the sensible route and returning to Harvard didn’t exactly go to plan either, did it?_

“Got it in one…” came the quietly impressed answer from her right.

“I’m sorry,” Serena broke out of her daydream, smiling politely. “I don’t even know your name?”

“It’s Robert Medcalf, but call me Robbie.” The tall man shrugged, “most people seem to.”

“So what brings you to this particular part of London, Robbie? Tailing a suspect?” Serena teased playfully, before dropping her voice to secretive stage-whisper. “Or would that be telling?”
“Serial adulterer by all accounts,” Robbie whispered back conspiratorially with an amused glint in his eye, “Barrister… nasty piece of work. His wife reckons he’s sleeping with half of the professional women in London behind her back… supposed to be at the bar this evening, but no show so far…”

“Wouldn’t be called Richard Barrett, would he?” Serena questioned lightly, making a mental note and then circling it in red to drop Sian a bluntly-worded email to instruct her to better research her potential matchmaking targets.

“How the–?” Robbie’s jaw dropped in astonishment.

“Just a hunch.” Serena’s lip quirked, satisfied at being proven right. She had never been so grateful to be stood up in her life.

“Look, this might sound a little forward,” she cleared her throat nervously, and preparing to take the plunge.

_This is utter lunacy, but go on Campbell. What’s to be lost in asking? What’s a little recklessness when nothing else is going to plan anyway?_

It was with much persistent negotiating that several hours later, Serena found herself poised with a camera outside an expansive South London residence, under a strict remit not to stray outside of her limit set of responsibilities.

“Is that strictly legal?” she frowned as Robbie planted what looked suspiciously like a bugging device in the communications box which was bolted to the outer wall of the property.

“Sorry… terrible ear-wax… must get it seen to…” he muttered quietly, massaging his outer ear with a raised eyebrow which discouraged further questioning from his new accomplice.

“Thought not,” Serena rolled her eyes amusedly.

What the hell have you got yourself into?

Her anxieties were soon quelled as Robbie swiftly motioned for them to both crouch down out of sight as a black cab drew up outside the house and a tall, slightly greying man with a somewhat rakish charm exited with a slender young brunette with huge doe eyes clinging tightly to his outstretched arm.

“Keep the change…” a charming smile accompanied an unctuous greeting to the driver who happily accepted the exorbitant tip before trundling off into the night.

“Got you, you bastard…” Serena muttered triumphantly to herself as she trained the camera upon the couple and focused the lens.

A blinding flash illuminated the neatly manicured garden as Richard Barrett’s traitorous lips met with the young woman’s, possessive hands snaking tightly around her slender waist.

“What the–?” perturbed heads snapped around in confusion.

“Never leave the flash on… not until you know you’ve got a decent backup photo, anyway!” Robbie hissed, “Come on, run!” he grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her away at speed.

“You didn’t say… oh for goodness sake….” Serena snarled breathlessly, pausing momentarily to
wrench off her shoes and snatch them up impatiently, annoyed by her novice mistake.

Rounding the corner at the double, the freshly acquainted colleagues jumped into the awaiting car and sped away.

“Well…” Serena chose to break the silence after several minutes of tense driving. “It could have been worse…” she added nonchalantly, her heart still thudding in her chest from the thrill of the chase, her body alive with a coursing vitality which she hadn’t felt in months. The only sort of endorphin hit that had managed to hold a candle to the experience of literally holding a life within her hands.

A new rush.

“Well, not much worse… short of me tripping him up or something, that was a bit of a disaster! Oh Lord, I’m sorry!” apologies flowed from her mouth in an anxious stream as her adrenaline-soaked brain attempted to coordinate effectively with her body.

She didn’t expect Robbie to dissolve into a cackle of mirth.

“Not too bad for a first attempt, I’ll give you that,” he smiled as the car barrelled along a deserted carriageway.

“Same time next week then?” Serena questioned, half-jokingly.

“I’d like that,” came the friendly reply from her right.

Present: Consultant’s Office, AAU.

As Serena and Cameron continued to talk, a similar quest for answers was currently taking place in the consultant’s office on AAU as a determined Berenice Wolfe continued the cross-examination of her husband.

"And then, not content with humiliating me, you then hire a detective to spy on me for the last three months and then what? Decide to test you little theory further by having her work at the hospital, become my friend, by telling her to stand by me through all of this? By having her-" she cut off, the painful memory of her last encounter with Serena.

"Serena Campbell?" Marcus blinked, licking his lips nervously before throwing Bernie a strange look; visibly wilting beneath his wife’s blunt interrogation.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me..." Bernie snarled impatiently, her hand crashing down upon the desk in frustration as she mistook her husband’s apprehension for denial. “Look, I have no time for your little games today, Marcus, however you choose to undermine me, it won’t work. I won’t accept it.”

Her voice rose before she swiftly collected herself; conscious of the wagging ears and loose tongues the other side of the door which would no doubt drink in every sordid detail should she resort to unleashing the unbridled fury which burnt within her.

The ex-Major leant forward, a commanding presence once more as she clearly enunciated her request in a low growl. “So, save me the bullshit. Don’t you dare lie to me. Serena Campbell, the private detective that you hired to spy on my every move for the last three months? Remember her now? Ring any bells, Marcus?” she spat bitterly.

“And, as if that wasn’t enough, you then tried to turn my children against me… Before deciding to
push your sick little game even further by then having Serena actually continue to work at the hospital: telling her to become my friend, asking her to stand by me through all of the divorce proceedings: worming her way into my life, gaining my trust before eventually stabbing me in the back! Having her come onto me? Really?! I know you were hurt, I know that I’m far from proud of what I did, but that’s below the belt; even for you Marcus...” she hissed, pain glinting in her eyes.

"Wait, Serena left Holby weeks ago, I thought?” Marcus began slowly, nervously holding his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender as he attempted to dissect the new information. “I only ever used her services for three weeks. Just to find out once and for all what was going on. Not, as you might think, to make some bizarre power-play out of the whole situation. I never told her to do… well… that.”

He frowned in confusion. “As it happens, she was all for me trying to sort things out with you... kept saying that we both owed it to each other to have a discussion. She never even charged me for the work… disappeared without a trace. I received a brief message to inform me that my account was settled in full. When I tried to contact her again, the website had been taken down, my emails went un-replied, any phone calls diverted. She had completely vanished into thin air.”

“What?” Bernie quirked her head, thrown by the latest development.

“What was Serena up to?

“Marcus?”

Expecting a typically belligerent reply in keeping with the rest of his somewhat bullish behaviour of the morning, Bernie was perplexed to watch her husband’s confident bluster slowly deflate beneath the insistent weight of her questioning.

“What?” she pressed for further information.

The senior surgeon was uncharacteristically withdrawn as he slumped back wearily in the desk chair.

He looked strangely brittle. Fragile almost.

“I’m sorry…” was the eventual quiet mumble which slipped distractedly from between his lips.

Nervous fingers fidgeted with a frayed thread in the cuff of his navy suit jacket.

“I–” he broke off once more, his eyes skittering anxiously behind her shoulder.

Bernie followed his haunted gaze with curiosity as the gurney bearing a prone Keeley Carson–barely visible through the shuttered blinds– rattled ominously past the doorway.

Her young family immediately engulfed the small bay; privacy curtains swiftly drawn, masking her from view once more behind a shield of blue polyester.

“You somehow knew that Keeley was going be here... but why bulldoze your way onto my ward, in a hospital which you don’t even work at to see a colleague that you hadn’t set eyes on in years, and then try to muscle in on her treatment?” Bernie continued to ponder aloud, uneasy realisation rapidly dawning in her eyes.

“Oh…” she briefly buried her face behind a slender hand and slowly exhaled as the final pieces slotted into place. “And you have the absolute gall to lecture me on how I destroyed our marriage?” Bernie began incredulously as she processed the ramifications of her discovery, “How
could I have been so stupid?"

Marcus seemed to cower back in his chair.

“Unbelievable…” Bernie shook her head in angry disbelief. “What is this divorce really all about then, Marcus? A convenient means of putting fifteen years of personal guilt to bed at last? Making yourself feel better because you can claim a twisted version of the moral high ground because I just happened to have an affair as well? Do you expect some sort of martyr’s award for sticking around?”

Marcus continued to stare glassily back at her. It was as if Bernie had reached forward and pulled upon that frayed thread and subsequently unravelled his whole being.

The protection of the confident persona disintegrated.

“I think I loved her…” came the eventual hoarse reply. “I think I still do…” Marcus seemed almost surprised by his own admission. “I still do…” he murmured again to himself, almost disbelievingly.

Three words which broke the verbal damn; a confessional fountain of unrequited love. Long-held secrets finally freed and given voice. Tales of a stolen kiss; the realisation of several months of unrequited passion swiftly killed off before its poisonous roots could snake further beneath the shaky foundations of his marriage.

Sketchy accounts of regret, of cowardice, of guilt. Recounts of chance meetings across the years; an emotional itch which never seemed to quite fade away.

Reflections upon the shame of standing with his children, waiting to greet his brave wife home from her first experience of a warzone. The relief of seeing her walk unaided towards them across the tarmac in her camouflage fatigues; battered, bruised but ultimately alive. Feeling the warmth of her exhausted body slumped wearily against his as he swept her into a tight embrace, knowing full well that his momentary lapse of judgement could have shattered everything that they had built together. A painful thought which had only tightened his frightened grip upon everything he loved that he had begun to see sliding away from him.

“I suppose the easiest thing to do, the right thing to do, would have been to just be honest.” Marcus allowed a small bitter smile to escape, “but when you’re trapped in that situation, knowing what you did, hating what you still feel… knowing how much pain you could cause to people that you care about…knowing that you could lose everything… you’d do anything you could to hide from it. It’s so much easier to just pretend that everything is fine… and you hope above all that one day that with enough work, with enough effort that you will eventually start to believe that it is.”

Bernie sank slowly into a chair as her husband continued to speak. Above all, despite her initial anger and resistance, his words resonated uncomfortably strongly with her.

“Sometimes guilt is as strong a motivation as love.” Bernie muttered quietly, clenching her hands into fists so that the ends of her short fingernails embedded themselves in her palms, leaving tiny little half-moon crescents embedded in the flesh. She remembering the ordeal of carrying the weight of her complicated arrangement with Alex upon her shoulders with exhausting clarity. She knew first-hand of attempts to blindly make things work, to do the ‘right thing’… whatever that was.

“She came to Holby yesterday,” Marcus finished his account numbly, “Emailed me out of the blue… suggested meeting up for lunch. I don’t know why. We talked; talked as if it had been
fifteen minutes, not fifteen years since we had last spoken properly. It was so easy. But, I never
forgave myself, for what happened, what we so nearly destroyed... I told her to go home, to go
back to her family... The next thing I know, she rings me at about four o'clock this morning from
her car, ranting down the phone at me. Then–"

He broke off suddenly, taking in a steadying gulp of air with an audible hiss.

A shaking hand rose to his mouth.

“I heard the crash. Sounded like an explosion going off. And then... nothing. Just static...”

“I thought she was dead.... And it was all my fault, that she was driving whilst she was upset...”

A heavy silence hung between the two occupants of the office.

“But why all of this?” Bernie eventually broke the hush. “The detective work, the vicious divorce
demands... trying to turn the children against me... what was it that I did that was really any
different to you, Marcus? Why am I to blame for everything?”

“I suppose I just felt... angry.” Marcus replied slowly. “To suspect that we had both been put in
the same situation... to have fallen for someone else...” He pursed his lips, “I had to know for
sure. To know if we made the same choice or not...”

A lengthy pause followed as he attempted to formulate an articulate response.

“But the difference was that no matter how much it hurt, I walked away from Keeley... I never
slept with her... I never tried to forge a relationship with her... I just couldn’t. I chose my family
over her... but when you were put in the same position... you didn’t. It felt as if everything we
had worked towards to get our relationship back on track had been a lie, that we had spent the past
fifteen years living in denial...”

“No, that’s just not fair!” Bernie replied, visibly stung. “That was never the choice...”

“Bernie... none of that matters anymore...” Marcus sighed resignedly. He looked back at her
unexpectedly softly, a faint echo of love in his gaze. “I’m sorry, for everything...” he added
gently, “For what a bloody mess this has all become...”

Bernie was unable to find the words to reply. Emotionally sapped, she settled instead for an abrupt
nod of the head.

“Why all of this, why now Marcus? Three months of hounding me for everything I own only to
do a complete U-turn? It makes no sense.”

Bernie rose to her feet and made to turn upon her heel and walk away. A persistent hand caught
at her elbow.

"Because, no matter what a mess this is, we both deserve to be happy.” Marcus replied softly. “It’s
time to stop torturing ourselves in the name of trying to carry on everything as normal, always
trying to cover up our tracks. We both made mistakes. If only we'd both been brave enough to
realise, that perhaps it’s sometimes better just to..."

“Just to what?” Bernie growled, not quite able to forgive Marcus’s hypocrisy as readily as he
appeared to forget his own transgressions.
“To let go. To admit that sometimes allowing each other to be free is the best way forward.”

He reached for her hand and held it gently. Bernie fought the urge to snatch her arm away.

“I’m so sorry Bernie; sorry for everything.”

“Please stop saying sorry…” Bernie muttered quickly, frantically wrenching her hand out of his grasp, suddenly unable to stand listening to yet another stumbled apology.

“Bernie—”

“No. I can’t do this today, I-I just can’t.” Bernie threw her hands up in defence. She had laid herself bare for too long. The rare act of vulnerability, of allowing herself to examine a teeming mass of new, tangled personal information was simply too much to process. One demand too far from a reserved mind which was still reeling from the revelations of the past twenty-four hours.

“I want you gone from here by the time I get back.” She demanded flatly, inwardly cursing the crack that she heard in her voice. Now was not the time to show weakness.

“Bernie—”

Marcus’s protestations were greeted by a slammed door.

“Ah, Ms. Wolfe…” a somewhat pressured-looking Fletch approached with a clipboard as soon as she left the office, “I don’t suppose that?” he tailed off as the blonde consultant stormed past him, deftly swiping her security pass and wrenching the metal plated door open before disappearing into the corridors.

“Apparently not…” he sighed and raised his eyebrows in mild frustration.

Bernie’s long legs kept up a ferocious pace as she strode down the corridor, weaving impatiently between the milling patients and staff before taking the stairs two at a time. At least if she focused her energies upon movement, she could abate the tears which threatened to arrive.

She couldn’t hold on for much longer, she had to get away…

A loud, urgent knock upon a familiar door was immediately followed by a calm “Enter.”

“Ah, Ms. Wolfe. What can I do for you?” Henrik Hanssen looked concernedly at his leading trauma specialist who appeared to be uncharacteristically flustered as she stood before his desk.

“I want a transfer,” were the first words which came from her mouth. “Anywhere, I don’t care.”

“I see. And the reasoning behind such a hasty request?” a questioning glance over the top of his spectacles.

“I see. And the reasoning behind such a hasty request?” a questioning glance over the top of his spectacles.

“Does there have to be one?” came the clipped response.

“Not strictly. But, if there is anything that we can do, as a hospital, or even on a more personal level to help…” Henrik chose to let his offer hang in the air between them, “…I believe that would be a more satisfactory course of action…”

His suggestion was greeted with silence.

“Very well. Perhaps we could organise a meeting to discuss this further. Shall we say—” his eyes flicked briefly to the calendar which sat upon his minimalist desk, “Friday morning?”
“Thank you.” Bernie nodded curtly.

Frowning slightly as he deduced a likely reason for Bernie Wolfe’s request, Hanssen decided to test his hypothesis. The memories of his rooftop conversation with Serena Campbell and her somewhat cryptic confessional still rang fresh in his mind.

“Whilst I shall do everything that I can to accommodate your wishes, I cannot deny that it would be a shame to lose you from our staff, Ms. Wolfe. You bring an excellence that would be hard to replace.”

He paused, attempting to gauge her reaction.

“Ms. Campbell’s report highlighted the crucial role that our trauma facilities play at Holby, and made a convincing case for continued investment in our services. I had hoped to be able to approach you to discuss this at some point in the near future once the report is published in full…”

Bernie’s face had visibly crumpled at the mention of Serena’s name.

“I’m sure that my successor would be more than up to the job…” she replied, forcing a weak smile onto her lips.

“Very well,” Hanssen replied gently, “Until Friday then, Ms. Wolfe.” He rose to his feet to see her out of the room.

“My door is always open, Ms. Wolfe. Should you require anything.”

“I—, thank you…” Bernie mumbled distractedly before disappearing into the corridor.

Hanssen watched her walk away, satisfied that his intuitions had been proven correct before reaching into his suit pocket and composing a short email to Serena Campbell, reminding her of the impending report handover meeting which she had scheduled with his secretary several weeks ago.

A meeting which he had somehow (albeit highly conveniently) forgotten was planned for Friday morning.

“How very remise of me…” he smiled to himself as he safely stowed his phone in his pocket and returned to the document that he was editing.

It was in his general experience that sometimes fate had to be given a little helping push in the right direction.
Chapter End Notes

Ah, that Hanssen is a sneaky one, isn't he?

Now I can definitely promise a lot of Berena in the next chapter! Apologies to those who have commented wanting to see them back together sooner rather than later- I completely understand, but due to the relatively complex plot/flashback storyline, I felt it better to write their reconciliation as a separate chapter rather than this upload turning into a very long read! I will do my best to get it written up in full as soon as I possibly can!
Chapter Summary

A scheduling clash from a scheming Henrik Hanssen attempts to bring Bernie and Serena together in a final attempt to reunite them before Serena departs from the hospital at the end of her contract.

As Bernie prepares for the meeting, she reflects upon how she met Alex Dawson and how her life turned irreparably upside down.

Can Bernie and Serena put aside their fears and negotiate a way forward together, or will Bernie choose to accept a transfer to Europe?

Chapter Notes

*Waves*

Thank you so much for all of your lovely comments and kudos on the last few chapters- those email notifications really brighten my day! *awards rainbow cookies as a thank you*

This chapter has another flashback to Bernie's military past in Afghanistan, so apologies in advance if my somewhat limited research into British military aircraft (who knew this time last year I'd be googling Chinook helicopters and SA80 standard issue assault rifles... the things you do as a Berena fan!) or medical procedures is inaccurate in anyway, I've done my best to research as best as I can!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday morning: Holby City

Holby City Hospital

The silent grip of night began to slowly life from the glass-fronted building; life and movement slowly beginning to filter through the empty spaces once again.

A battered and bruised Keeley Carson slept fitfully upon the High Dependency Unit, a plethora of multi-coloured wires and monitors snaking protectively around her prone form; monitoring for the slightest change in her condition. A reluctant Marcus Dunn had left her bedside only a few hours previously; a fleeting visit following the end of a busy shift at St. James’s.

The metallic rattle of trolleys in deserted corridors, the wailing siren of an approaching ambulance, a growing buzz of chatter from the slow trickle of staff arriving to commence the early-morning handover; all part of the soundtrack of the hospital building rising from its nightly slumber.

An early-riser by nature, a navy-suited Henrik Hanssen padded softly up the stairs to his office; taking time to follow his established arrival routine of laying out a black leather-bound diary and
three immaculately sharpened pencils upon the spotless desk.

He then set about brewing the perfect cafeteria of coffee, pouring the opaque liquid into a strategically positioned navy blue china cup with scientific accuracy before adding a minimal splash of milk to create a creamy eddying swirl within the epicentre of the concoction.

An approving nod accompanied his first sip as he poured contemplatively over his scheduled appointments for the morning.

9:30-10:00 Berenice Wolfe re. transfer appointment
9:35-10:35 Serena Campbell re. audit handover appointment

17 Marshdale Lane

Serena Campbell negotiated the haphazardly stacked piles of cardboard boxes within the open-plan flat, plucking scattered files from their temporary homes in readiness for the handover appointment which had been all but forgotten until Hanssen’s politely-worded reminder. Her last official engagement at the hospital.

She hadn’t been able to bring herself to unpack since her lonely return to the flat.

Following her conversation with Cameron, they had stepped into the corridor only to see a tear-stained Bernie storm past without so much as a glimmer of recognition upon her face.

Checking her emails with a gentle smile, she sent a quick reply to the message from the French email account which sat expectantly at the top of her inbox. It was always good to hear from Elinor; the arts deputy editorial post at Le Monde seemed to satisfy her natural inquisitiveness and thirst for journalistic endeavours. The pair had maintained a fond but sporadic level of contact since the young woman had graduated and moved out of the room which she had rented in Serena’s London residence which Serena had let out following her divorce, but had always kept each other updated with important developments.

A swiftly worded text message to Cameron Dunn confirmed the formal invitation for Charlotte to consider.

Even if she couldn’t make amends with Bernie, she was going to do all that she could to minimise the damage to her family from the interference in her life that she had caused.

114 Pinehurst Lane

Cameron and Charlotte Dunn’s bleary discussion over an early morning breakfast was interrupted by an impatient bleep.

Cameron read the message and let out an impressed sigh.

“I think she may have just saved your bacon…” he smiled at his younger sibling as he proffered the screen in her direction and slide the phone across the table top for her consideration.

“Paris?!” was the gobsmacked reply from Charlotte as a half-eaten morsel of toast fell from her hand in shock and landed upon the willow patterned plate in a small shower of crumbs.
“A training placement in Paris?!”

The Queen’s Park Hotel

Finally deciding upon a pair of slender-cut black trousers and a cream blouse for her impending appointment with Hanssen, Bernie Wolfe looked herself up and down in the stained hotel mirror with a disinterested shrug of approval.

She had never cared much for civvies.

A uniform was a removable identity of sorts, a cotton stitched set of rules; a reminder of personal boundaries, of the obligations of the job to be done. Whether it was the familiar khaki fatigues of the army or the striking royal blue trauma scrubs of the hospital, Bernie appreciated the visual aesthetic of uniform, valued how it allowed her to fully immerse herself within the role on hand.

Major Wolfe.

In the army, she had relied upon the kit at first; embraced it as a means to project a level of self-assurance which she had certainly not possessed upon her initial arrival in a warzone. Shocked to the core at the constant stream of bloody carnage, it had been her chosen way of adapting to survive within her new environment. Waking up each day in an unforgiving military bed and donning the uniform allowed herself to issue a firm reminder of her place and purpose. To focus upon saving lives, whatever the cost.

As an army medic, she knew full well that as her fellow comrades fell swiftly to the floor and took cover from the danger, it was her role to run straight towards it. To rescue or repair those who hadn’t been as lucky. The role required an undefeatable self-confidence in one’s own skills, a resilient mentality which bore an exceptional level of tolerance for the sheer volume of human suffering and gore… ultimately a complete acceptance of one’s own mortality. Running headlong into a combat zone time and time again left little time for qualms surrounding the finality of death.

If anything, she had adapted too well. The more she immersed herself in the role: the further away, the more lost and disorientated she felt each time she shed the utilitarian khaki cotton cocoon and metamorphosed into Bernie again; each transformation a little more painful than the last as she attempted to pick up the threads of her increasingly complicated life once more.

The army had been life, purpose… escape.

Until Alex Dawson had irreparably shattered the divide between her two worlds.


The noisy thrum of the Chinook’s dual rotor blades cleaved through the silence of the jagged peaks like an angry swarm of hornets as the military craft glided downward, attempting to land in a narrow pass amidst the snow-capped heights.

“Ready to disembark, I repeat; we are ready to disembark.” Major Berenice Wolfe’s commanding tones crackled in the ear of each assembled soldier as she motioned calmly to her team of hastily assembled medics, a stream of information about the latest casualty of war sporadically disseminated to them by means of a static-ridden headset.

A small, lightly armoured transport convoy had been hit by an ambush. Two confirmed dead, one seriously injured. Unable to treat the fallen soldier on the ground, the unit had called for
emergency back-up. Whilst Bernie’s duties had mostly required her to be hospital-bound, her specialization in the management of liver trauma had seen her requested to join the response crew as a matter of urgency.

A duo of grimly determined nods awaited the order to advance.

“Possible ambush situation- we can’t tell if all of the insurgents have been despatched. Covering fire will be provided from ground troops in the convoy. The casualty has suffered extensive blast injuries to the abdomen; suspected internal bleeding and liver trauma. Let’s aim to assess the injuries and keep him stable until we can get him transferred to field hospital. Try to repair what we can and keep the BP from falling.”

Bernie glanced around at the pair of soldiers, a keen mass of effervescent enthusiasm and raw nervous energy. Positively champing at the bit to do their job.

An old hand, she knew from bitter experience that it would be nothing short of naïve to expect them all to walk away unscathed from the potentially lethal situation.

Better to assume the worst and be pleasantly relieved at the outcome.

“Keep watching, keep listening. First sign of trouble, the first command to take cover, you take cover. Understood?”

“Yes Ma’am.” An immediate response from medics Dawson and O’Neil as they gathered the necessary medical equipment and prepared to exit the helicopter.

Tall, with closely cut pale blonde hair and a quietly attentive manner, James O’Neil was a trusted pair of hands, shaping up to be a skilled young medical technician beneath Bernie’s close supervision. Her eyes fell briefly upon the striking young brunette who sat pensively next to him. Less was known to her about Alex Dawson: they had met in passing before and Bernie had immediately appreciated the young woman’s honest candour, her reputation for remaining calm beneath the demands of the stressful theatre environment.

A good pairing indeed to have by her side.

An eerie calm descended momentarily as the craft touched down and the side hatches opened.

A chilly gust of air ruffled the escaping tendrils of Bernie’s hair which peeked out from beneath her helmet as the heavy silence of the mountain pass was promptly shattered by the death-rattle of a machine gun eagerly spewing out bullets.

A cloying stench of diesel fumes and acrid smoke billowing from an overturned smouldering vehicle violently assaulted her reeling senses. A burnt-out mechanical corpse.

Her head whipped around to locate the chorus of indistinguishable shouts from comrades frantically attempting to attract her attention; cries which suddenly sounded distant, echoing with an underwater resonance as her disorientated brain attempted to take stock of the rapidly changing situation.

A nervous flutter of anxiety was shut down with a stern inner reprimand as her fingers closed decisively around the cool metal trigger of her assault rifle.

Focus on the job, Wolfe.

Ducking beneath the range of the idling rotors, she began sprinting across the rocky terrain toward the prone victim who was lying in a sanguineous pool of his own blood. A solitary field medic—
whose limited skills were clearly overwhelmed by the severity of the injuries—was crouched closely at his side.

Senses bristling with anticipation, Bernie heard the tell-tale whistle of a descending mortar moments before it hit.

“Take cover!” a frantic scream as she inwardly prayed that her less experienced colleagues’ reactions were as swift as hers.

A hefty explosion detonated several feet to the left of them; a choking dust cloud of rubble rising in a heavy smokescreen.

The small band flung themselves to the ground, immediately crawling behind a low rocky outcrop as a volley of retaliatory fighting began in earnest; a concealed band of undetected gunmen hidden within the numerous crevices of the pass who were seemingly determined to exact as much chaos as their limited resources would allow.

A breathless Bernie scrabbled for her headset, frantically relaying their situation to a higher command.

“We are under fire, repeat, under fire. Request urgent backup.”

A fizz of static confirmed her request.

“The casualty Ma’am, Private Baines…” Alex Dawson’s’ insistent voice came from her right.

“We need to get to him, we can’t just leave him…”

Bernie took a deep steadying breath as she trained her gun’s sights upon the craggy hillside.

“Not yet, Dawson. It would be suicide to advance. Allow backup to proceed, attempt to secure our position, then we will attempt to reach Baines.”

“With respect Ma’am,” a noticeable quaver was present in Dawson’s voice as she addressed Bernie, “His injuries are so severe, we need to get to him now, to give him any hope of survival.”

“Dawson, I repeat, do not advance.” Bernie gritted her teeth in concentration and unleashed several rounds of ammunition towards the attacking forces.

“But Ma’am, he’s got a little baby girl at home, I know that–”

“Dawson! Enough! That is an order.” Bernie snapped tautly.

The slender brunette medic opted not to reply; instead opting to purse her lips sullenly.

Several minutes passed before she took advantage of a momentary lull in the fire to defy her superior’s better judgement by unexpectedly scrambling to her feet and sprinting across the final stretch of ground towards the prone Baines.

“Oh for–” Bernie growled in disbelief she motioned to O’Neil to prepare to follow their impetuous colleague. “Dawson!”

A hasty sprint across the pass to join her disobedient co-worker.

“Major Berenice Wolfe, RAMC.” was all that she offered as a brusque introduction before she knelt and motioned for her subordinates to crouch beside her and continue treatment.

Resources spent, the fighting eventually fell silent once more as the rebels fell one by one.
An anxious scrabble to limit blood loss followed; Bernie’s experienced hands reaching into the gaping cavity in the abdomen and rapidly locating the source of the tear.

“Clamps; now. Let’s get this held in place and stabilise him before attempting to suture at the hospital.”

“Suture that?” an incredulous voice came from her side. “It can’t be done, surely?” Alex Dawson shook her head in disbelief.

“Do you have any better ideas at present, Dawson? Any more orders that you feel like disobeying?” Bernie hissed impatiently as O’Neil set about clamping the tear. She fixed her insubordinate young colleague with a hard stare, “Or would you prefer to watch the patient bleed out and your misguided heroics to have been for nothing?”

“Well, I–” An unperturbed Dawson was interrupted from further argument by a loud curse from her commanding officer.

“Shit.”

Bernie swore as a fresh gush of blood enveloped her white surgical gloves.

“There must be another tear. Right; Plan B. Let’s get him to the helicopter, we’re going to have to act fast with this one.”

The team of medics carefully stretchered the young soldier to the awaiting Chinook.

Several hours of intense surgery later, Berenice Wolfe stepped out of theatre to find an anxiously waiting Alex Dawson.

“How is he? Mickey… Private Baines?” an urgent question as soon as she set foot into the corridor.

“Alive.” Bernie added curtly as she made to step past Alex. “Should be flying home by the morning.”

“Look,” Alex stretched out an arm to prevent her from walking away, “I’m sorry, for what happened earlier. I shouldn’t have done that; it was out of order.”

“No, Captain.” Bernie emphasised Alex’s lesser rank as she glared coldly at the barricading arm which obstructed her path. “You shouldn’t. By rights, I should have you up on a charge for disregarding orders.”

“It’s just that….” Alex cleared her throat, determined not to wilt beneath the intensity of Bernie’s stare. “I’ve known him since we were young… his sister and I… we are; I mean were…” she tailed off helplessly, labouring under the use of the past tense. “Close.” She added weakly.

“Right. And that’s worth endangering your life and those of your comrades?” Bernie questioned exasperatedly as they strode down the corridor of the field hospital.

“You just can’t think like that in the field.” She continued brusquely as she pushed open the door and took a welcome breath of fresh air after what had seemed like an eternity in the oppressive stale air of the operating theatre. “You’ve got to think with your head, no matter what…. You have a greater sense of responsibility… to yourself, your comrades… You’re no good to them as a
medic if you’re dead set on getting yourself shot—”

“And what? Have Mickey bleed out and leave his wife and young baby behind? To have Amy lose her little brother when I know that I could have helped?” Alex questioned incredulously. “What sort of loyalty is that?”

“That’s not the case, Dawson…” Bernie’s voice fell to a warning growl.

“Do you have a family?” Alex’s blunt question hit Bernie unexpectedly hard.

“I, I—” She visibly floundered at the thought of the messy situation which she had fought so keenly to keep at arm’s length whilst she was away on her final tour. A crumbling marriage, two children with deep-seated resentment towards her continual absence throughout their growing up. The long-distance had been both a blessing and a curse; a chance to cling on, to ignore the cracks which were so clearly beginning to show. Short of being offered another commission, she was soon going to have to turn her attention to resolving the deeper issues which awaited her upon her return.

“I suppose so…” was the eventual quiet reply which took even her by surprise.

“What sort of answer even is that?” Alex shook her head disbelievingly. “What are you Major; so battle-hardened, so cynical that you can’t even feel an ounce of compassion anymore?”

“Enough!” Bernie hissed, enraged. Stepping closer to Alex, she seemed to grow in height, a cold fury emanating from every pore. “I don’t know what you think gives you the right to say any of that… you know bugger all about my life, about my family situation… one more word from you Dawson, and I swear I’ll—”

“Swear you’ll what?” Alex squared up to her, “Put me on a charge for having a backbone? For reminding you that, despite the horrific circumstances, we treat people here, not just a list of injuries? People with families, with loved ones watching the news with baited breath each night, desperately praying not to hear their loved one’s names but at the same time wanting nothing more than to know that they are safe? Alright, so I may have disobeyed orders, but I was damned if I was going to sit there and watch an old friend die simply because I had been forbidden from going to him. I just can’t comprehend the thinking behind that.”

Bernie went to speak, but any form of words had long since left her. Fumbling awkwardly in her pockets, she finally extracted a cigarette and anchored it between her lips.

“So much for trying to quit.

“Well… that’s what being surrounded by blood, guts and death for the past sixteen years does to a person, Dawson.” She muttered bleakly as trembling hands attempted unsuccessfully to coax a light out of a silver-plated lighter. “Let’s just say it leaves you with a rather warped perspective on things…”

A silence fell between the two women, punctuated by tuts of frustration from Bernie at her fruitless attempts to produce a spark from a reluctant flint.

“Here,” a pair of cool hands reached out without invitation and wrapped gently around hers, steadying and calming as a small orange flame finally curled into life. Bernie swallowed tightly at the unexpected warmth which pooled in her chest as the Captain’s hands lingered upon hers slightly longer than necessary.

“Thank you.” She managed a small tight-lipped smile of gratitude as she exhaled a long stream of smoke into the night air.
A few weeks later, it was on the same spot that the final shred of resolve within Alex Dawson finally snapped and she leant forward to capture her Major’s lips in a fleeting kiss.

“Please…” a breathy request from Bernie as she pulled back rapidly to look at Alex, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and desire.

Her stomach flooded with a spike of guilt and a burgeoning attraction which had been seemingly futile to ignore.

Please stop?

Please don’t stop?

Please, tell me what to do.

Her bewildered senses could no longer tell, and yet amidst the confusion, she found herself leaning forward once more, eager lips completely lost in the intoxicating pull of Alex Dawson’s mouth.

This is madness, was the only certainty that she could cling onto.

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The Queen’s Park Hotel, Present.

Pulling a hairbrush through her soft blonde curls in a couple of haphazard strokes, Bernie’s thoughts couldn’t help but wander to Serena once more.

She was– had been– she corrected herself firmly, a true friend first and foremost, something which Bernie had seldom experienced. An understanding, sympathetic voice on her side, someone with whom countless evenings of understanding listening, home-cooked dinners, legal advice, laughter and tears had been washed down with a loving closeness, a protective loyalty which had slowly blossomed into trust.

Leaning forward and kissing Serena that evening had been the realisation of the hope of something, a reckless yet completely exhilarating action; knowing that as her lips touched Serena’s that she no longer felt the abject terror, the excruciating dual between personal shame and desire that she had long since fought during her secretive relationship with Alex. No, this had been something new… a feeling of confidence, of acceptance of finally knowing who Bernie was, and exactly what she wanted; who she wanted.

And then, with Serena’s shock confession, her newfound confidence had all but fallen apart at the seams.

She frowned as she picked up her bag and clipped her work ID to the waistband of her trousers.

Marcus’s revelation about Serena’s unexpected behaviour had only served to complicate matters.

If she was only meant to be here for a fortnight, why did she stay? Why didn’t she charge Marcus for the work?

Why did she keep up the pretence?
9:35 AM, CEO’s Office, Holby City Hospital

“Enter.” Henrik Hanssen looked up momentarily at the punctual knock on the door. Bernie twisted in confusion at the unexpected intrusion, nearly dropping the teetering pile of sleek prospectuses from her lap.

Hanssen had certainly been proficient in finding a variety of European hospitals who were short of trauma specialists. She would have enough reading material for several days before she could accurately disseminate the specific qualities of each posting.

“Morning Henrik…” a confident greeting stalled in the mouth of the smartly-dressed brunette who poked her head around the door.

“Is this some sort of joke?” came the immediate cold snarl from Berenice Wolfe as Serena Campbell stepped into the room, a verbal rebuff which was enough to halt the other woman in her tracks as she fought to make sense of what her disbelieving eyes were telling her.

A pair of accusatory glances were thrown at Henrik Hanssen who chose that precise moment to studiously consider the intricacies of the fingernails on his left hand.

“Bernie…” Serena’s panic-stricken gaze swiftly betrayed the fact that the chance meeting was nothing to do with her. The blonde medic swiftly returned her attention to the open brochure which was propped in her lap.

“I–” She collected herself swiftly. “I-I mean, good morning, Ms. Wolfe. I apologise Henrik, evidently it’s not a good time…”

Fixing the scheming CEO with her best glittering corporate grimace, Serena made to turn up her heel and leave, mentally resolving to plot a truly painful and prolonged means of death for her interfering old friend at a later date and time.

“Please stay, Ms. Campbell. My mistake.” The tall Swede fixed her with a pointed look and gestured towards an empty chair in front of the desk in an invitation which left her no option but to accept.

Looking as if she would very much rather volunteer herself to cross an unmarked minefield, Serena edged tentatively towards her glowering colleague and gingerly perched upon the edge of the ergonomic chair next to her.

Bernie’s caustic stare could have burnt holes in the paper that she was supposedly immersed in.

“As we’re all here together though, it would perhaps be pertinent to discuss the implications of Ms. Campbell’s report with regards to the reassignment of responsibilities for AAU, should Ms. Wolfe decide to proceed with the option to transfer further afield…”

“What?” A dazed Serena turned to Bernie who remained steadfastly silent as she scowled into the distance.

“As I was saying…” Hanssen cleared his throat and raised his eyebrow at Serena’s interjection before opening a slender blue folder, “Should Ms. Wolfe accept, the recruitment process for a new head of AAU would have to–” he cut off abruptly at an impatient bleep from his pager.

“Apologies, I’m afraid I’m wanted on Keller Ward with immediate effect. Urgent case, I’m afraid.
Please excuse me, we will reconvene our discussions as soon as I am able to return.” He rose to his feet and swept out of the room without a backward glance.

“You’re looking for a transfer?” Serena raised an eyebrow at the imposing artist’s impression of the towering new Kiev Hospital Trauma Unit that Bernie was clutching onto tightly; a glossy paper shield whose edges were crumpled by grasping fingers as her dark eyes raked rapidly across the words, not taking in a single letter.

“Why, does it concern you in any way?” Bernie regretted the bitter note in her voice as soon as she saw the involuntary flinch on Serena’s face.

“No, no… not at all. Professional development and all that… change of scene…quite understand…” Serena felt a broken stream of half-hearted reassurances fall from her faltering lips.

“Quite. Free country and all that…” A tight-lipped Bernie returned her attention to the page, her knuckles almost white in the death grip in which she held the long-suffering paper.

“No. Well, actually,” Serena steeled herself for conflict and raised her gaze to meet Bernie’s eyes directly.

One final try.

“Whilst your decision may not concern me as such, I do struggle to see why you would voluntarily sacrifice everything that you had worked for here… the trauma bay, the opportunities for student training… everything that you’ve strived to build into the AAU ward… to say nothing of trying to rebuild your relationship with your children… to leave Charlotte and Cameron again without so much as a…”

“Enough!” snapped Bernie, a dangerous tremor appearing in her voice as the paper finally disintegrated with a sharp rip. “You don’t get to lecture me on my responsibilities as a mother, Serena.”

A jagged line cleanly dissected the detailed diagram.

"Don’t you think you’ve done enough?” she added dejectedly, tossing the ruined prospectus aside onto the immaculate desk. “Don’t you think my life is enough of a mess already?”

“At least let me explain–"

“The last time I saw you Serena, you told me that Marcus, my husband, had paid you to spy on me. To gain evidence… filter your way into my life, piece by piece. Even–” she broke off abruptly, sighing so hard that the soft breeze ruffled her messy fringe.

“Marcus was having an affair, with Keeley. Or not, as the case may be argued…” Bernie suddenly announced to the empty space without apparent reason. It was as if speaking the words out loud would aid in finding the answer to the perplexing puzzle that she found herself trapped within.

“He wants things to be amicable…. just walk away from all of the blame he piled on me…” her voice hardened. “Perhaps we were both just too blind, too stubborn to let things go… to work things out… instead we just let things slowly tear us apart…”

“Bernie…” Serena’s careful interruption went unheard amidst the uncertain ranting.

“Ah well.” Bernie shrugged detachedly. “Not much I can do about that now. It’s all over, either way.”
“At least I wasn’t the only liar; I suppose…” she looked pointedly at Serena who didn’t move to contradict her.

“I’m sorry…”

The next few minutes were punctuated only by the impatient ticking of the large clock which hung from the wall, a heavy silence sitting between the two women as they contemplated their next move.

“I just don’t understand… why did you stay?”

A stark question from Bernie which hung pointedly in the air between them. “All of this time, when you were only supposed to be here a matter of days… why? Why didn’t you charge Marcus for anything?”

“I…” Serena attempted to find words as a stinging ball of tears attempted to slowly throttle her.

“You know, I trusted you… Serena. I kissed you because I wanted to…. Because I had slowly allowed myself to fall for the lies… fall for the dreams…. None of it was real, was it?” Bernie shook her head sadly. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” she continued slowly, “seeing all of those photos laid out on that table; knowing that you had slowly but surely been collecting data, documenting my life for all that time before finally making yourself known… I didn’t know what to do.”

Bernie sniffed, a pained expression crossing her face.

“And in that moment,” she added slowly, her voice trembling as she turned a pair of open, defenceless eyes upon Serena.

All remaining bullish bravado fell away.

“It was as if suddenly you didn’t exist, that all of my wonderful memories of my best friend, the beautiful woman who I had kissed only the night before were replaced by that of a nameless, faceless stranger. A ghost. A void. A blank set of personalised statistics and invented stories; all designed with the sole purpose of helping you to get closer to me… I don’t even know if Serena Campbell is your real name or not!” she added with a dry bark of humourless mirth.

“It is.” Serena added gently, “And all of this,” she winced slightly as she leant forward and rummaged in her handbag before placing a small selection of yellowing newspaper cuttings in front of Bernie.

Screaming headlines accompanying a series of portraits which depicted a younger yet still imminently recognisable Serena with shoulder-length dark hair, clad in a rather severe herringbone suit jacket and skirt and sporting a clearly harassed expression as she attempted to exit quietly from the rear entrance of St. Bart’s Hospital. A pale hand was thrown up in front of dazzled eyes in a futile bid to stave off the hungry attention of the popping flashbulbs which bayed incessantly for her professional blood.

Sacrificed like a young lamb to media slaughter by the managerial powers of the hospital enquiry board.

“All of this is true…”
The dark ink of the raging tabloid headlines which had prophesised the end of Serena’s career were beginning to fade to a murky brown.

“Ta-dah,” she finished bleakly as she grimaced at the familiar sight of the character-assassination. It never became easier to read, even though she knew every pixel, every minuscule smudge of faded ink intimately.

Indelible stains upon her reputation.

She could still recite the entire set of damning paragraphs off by heart.

“Why on earth do you keep these in your bag...” Bernie eventually murmured in shock as she gazed at the anguished expression on the hounded young consultant’s face; shock, fear and terror branded mercilessly into the grainy picture.

“They travel everywhere with me. To remind me, I suppose.” Serena smiled sadly, “To never make the same mistake again. Damaged goods, and all that...”

She cast a searching look at Bernie, her voice faltering. “But I promise, Bernie, everything that I told you: about Edward, about Bart’s, everything else was true. After meeting Marcus, I had dutifully mapped out a whole backstory for ‘Frankie Renard’, the inquisitive yet well-meaning HR executive officer who would be my undercover role at the hospital, yet, I just couldn’t quite bring myself to bring her to life. After watching you, talking to you, getting to know you... I realised very quickly that for once, I didn’t need to pretend, I didn’t need to be anyone other than myself.”

Bernie’s face remained unreadable.

“I tried so many times to tell myself to walk away, not to hurt you... but I was selfish I suppose. Couldn’t quite bring myself to let go. Always finding an excuse, a justification for staying on just that little bit longer.”

A nervous intake of breath at Bernie’s blank expression. Not a single underlying emotion betrayed by the static mask.

“I suppose it had always been easy for me before, to not get involved. Infidelity was always a very black and white, clear cut experience for me, given what happened with Edward. I was so angry, so lost... One way or another, he had cost me everything: my job, my dignity, my reputation... even the chance to say goodbye to my father.”

Her voice tailed off thoughtfully.

“I suppose it was almost an attempt at gaining acceptance of things, becoming a detective. Helping others to find the answers to their questions in a bid to distract from my own spiralling catalogue of ‘what ifs’.”

Serena smiled tightly as her hand shuffled awkwardly, unsure whether to reach out towards Bernie or not.

“But when I tried to walk away, I couldn’t leave you to face things on your own... I just couldn’t...knowing what I did...”
Upon second consideration, she tentatively made to withdraw her hand until the spell broke upon the other woman’s face and Bernie slowly took it upon herself to make the momentous extend her arm and interlink her cool, slender fingers with Serena’s.

“Sometimes, often I find… there are actually far more questions than answers in life…” she mumbled, gently squeezing Serena’s hand, her nervous fingers flickering around the other woman’s in a shy, fluttering dance. “Too many ‘what-if’s’, ‘could have been's’…”

“I know…” Serena whispered almost inaudibly, the unspoken tension between the two women almost palpable.

“I don’t want us… whatever this is, to be a ‘what-if’ or a 'could have been', I at least want to try… to make …” Bernie began softly, almost awkwardly. “You hurt me, Serena… but I want to at least try… try again…”

“I could make us dinner? Start afresh?” Serena offered tentatively, clinging onto the tiny shred of hope like a drowning woman. “There’s a rather fine Shiraz left which I believe we haven’t sampled yet… surprisingly!” she attempted a jovial smile in her usual confident manner, yet her lips trembled weakly beneath the weight of sustaining such a light-hearted comment.

She knew how much was at stake.

Bernie took a deep breath: steeling herself to be brave, trying to find what it took to take such a leap of faith, fighting the self-preservational instinct to flee.

“Alright…” she nodded at last. “Alright…” The second acceptance felt more solid than the first. “Dinner it is…”

“Okay…” Serena whispered quietly, an emboldened hand rising to brush a stray lock of hair away from Bernie’s jawline. “Well, it’s more than okay actually…” her nervous babbling tailed away.

“Good…” Bernie permitted a small relieved smile to break across her face at the electric jolt of anticipation which crackled down her spine at Serena’s gentle touch. Her heart melted to see the same nervous excitement reflected in the other woman’s sparkling eyes.

“I–, sorry… sorry…” Serena’s breath hitched slightly with the faintest hint of a sob as she quickly looked downward, almost slightly embarrassed with herself for her uncontrolled display of emotion. “It’s just I’ve missed you so much…I thought I’d ruined everything…”

“I know…” Bernie added simply as she closed her hand over Serena’s in reassurance and leant forward, drawing their lips together in a soft yearning kiss.

For a woman who had struggled her whole life to find acceptance and understanding of herself, kissing Serena Campbell for the third time was like returning home; a recognisable yet exciting voyage across familiar territory as her exploring hands found their own way across Serena’s jawline, before gently caressing the back of the other woman’s neck and anchoring her close. A faint hum of pleasure, exact source unknown given their close proximity, tingled pleasantly upon her lips as she felt Serena relax immediately into the contact, her long fingertips raking their way through the cropped hairs at the nape of Serena’s neck and inciting currents of exquisite sensation beneath their investigative touch.

Please don’t go. Not now that I’ve found you.

A wordless request which found an instant response in an emboldened Serena moving to settle carefully in Bernie’s lap, hungrily deepening the kiss with a soft whimper of desire which slightly
surprised them both.

The other long-since-discarded glossy brochures of Europe’s finest trauma facilities fell to the floor with a slippery crash as the two women continued to gently kiss and explore, blissfully unaware of anything else around them.

The appropriate time would come for discussion, for untangling the final knotted threads, but for now it was as if nobody else existed beyond the brick and glass confines of the executive space; nothing else mattered.

The pine door edged open a fraction of an inch before being swiftly closed once more.

Satisfied that his intuitive gamble had indeed come to fruition, Henrik Hanssen quietly sidled away from his office in pursuit of coffee; mentally resolving to reschedule the handover meeting for another occasion.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to you all once again for reading- this work has been a bit of a labour of love for me as I've never written such a long or complex plot line before! I'd say there's approximately two chapters left to come now, as we're nearly reaching the end point of our story!
Brave

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Serena plan on spending the evening together after their reconciliation but their date is soon interrupted when their surgical skills are called upon in an emergency situation.

As both women reflect, will they find the courage to accept what they both want and move forward?

Chapter Notes

*waves*

Finally, I managed to get this chapter update sorted! Thank you to everyone who is still patiently following this fic *awards cookies and virtual Shiraz*, I do apologise for the slow updates of late but life, work and my impending PhD review have taken priority until this week.

A quick warning in terms of chapter content: there is some description of surgery (accurate only to the best of my limited knowledge) and the M rating certainly comes into play in the final section of the chapter once Serena and Bernie arrive home... if it's not your thing, by all means feel free to skip the last section, if not, please continue!

As ever, comments and kudos mean the world to me, so please do let me know what you think if you have the time!

Primavera Italian Restaurant, Holby. Saturday, 10:30PM

Berenice Wolfe’s dark eyes glistened like onyx, sparkling brilliantly with the thrill of the adrenaline seeping through her veins as she leant back against the cold brickwork of the separating the little restaurant from a small alleyway.

Paramedics and rapidly dispersing diners littered the little square like a swarm of perplexed ants.

A small, proud smile grew upon her face as she glanced wordlessly at the brunette to her right before allowing a wispy stream of smoke to escape from between her slightly parted lips and drift up into the night air in a lazy spiral.

The flickering blue lights of the nearby ambulance danced in the bleached strands of her tousled blonde hair, glowing ethereally around her head like a sapphire crown.

Slender fingers raised the cigarette which had finally been released from the crumpled packet in Bernie’s coat pocket to her lips. The long-coveted reward glowing amber as she took another welcome drag.
This situation was her drug of choice; knowing that tonight, amidst the turmoil, her surgical prowess had indisputably saved a life.

*This is exactly what I live for.*

Fresh crimson droplets splattered the white canvas of a ruined Oxford shirt in a macabre version of a Jackson Pollock artwork.

Her companion for the evening’s dress hadn’t fared much better. Bernie smirked as their eyes collided.

Serena Campbell’s breathless glowing expression all but mirrored her own.

“Tell me you haven’t missed that?” she exhaled, looking sideways from beneath her messy blonde fringe, almost daring her fellow diner to contradict her.

Heart thudding, an emboldened Serena, more alive from the heroics of the past hour than she had felt in years, opted to bypass any feeble attempt at capturing how she felt in mere words by stepping forward and claiming Bernie’s nicotine-tainted mouth in a hungry kiss which was eagerly reciprocated.

“Home… now…” she eventually growled breathlessly into Bernie’s ear, tugging insistently upon her wrist.

The cigarette fell to the floor in a forgotten shower of pungent sparks before being swiftly trampled underfoot.

“Lead the way…” Bernie murmured appreciatively.

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**Four hours earlier:**

**17 Marshdale Lane**

Serena Campbell bustled in the same nervous laps around the tiled floor of her kitchen that she had repeated for the best part of an hour whilst triple-checking the final preparations for the evening meal. She plucked apprehensively at the navy dress which she had carefully chosen for the occasion; removing imaginary stray threads from the impeccably fitted garment.

Bernie was coming for dinner. Everything had to be perfect.

She felt an unprecedented sense of pressure to deliver an exceptional meal, despite the countless suppers and cozy evenings Bernie had previously spent at the flat over past few months.

It felt different.

It *was* different.

Did this class as a date?

She smiled subconsciously as she remembered the previous afternoon which had passed in a series of exploratory kisses and caresses, eventually breaking apart for fear of discovery in the executive suite which Hanssen had mysteriously vanished from for the best part of the day.

Bernie had, above all plausible hope, forgiven her.
And now she was coming for dinner.

Appearing without the familiar protective garb of a disguise, without a pre-negotiated role to play was an exceedingly revealing, raw experience. Finally daring to let the mask slip, letting another person close (let alone someone as special as Bernie Wolfe), close enough to see the numerous flaws and imperfections which, in her opinion, constituted Serena Campbell.

Glancing at the recipe for the sauce which stated ‘small glass of red wine (optional), Serena snorted derisively before deciding that ‘large glass of red wine (crucial)’ was the only suitable ingredient to attempt to pacify her escalating nerves.

Would Bernie even like ‘just Serena?’ now that she knew who she really was? In the cold light of day, was Serena really what she wanted?

There had been several flings and fancies in the years since her divorce, but each had been harmlessly extinguished when the appropriate time came to cut loose; potential suitors carefully vetted and eventually discarded with a typically devastating Campbellian charm.

Professional and personal lives rarely mixed well in her experience.

11 October 2008

Fitful slumber was gently broken as the spindly fingers of the autumnal dawn began to inch across the scattered maroon covers.

A tousled brunette head stirred lazily upon the pillow as a pair of arms rose from beneath the sheets and stretched with an almost feline appreciation of comfort.

A cocktail of all too familiar scents rose slowly from the warm linen as the other body in the bed shifted slightly.

Spice? Sandalwood?
Aftershave.

Oh shit.

Serena Campbell lay with her eyes scrunched tightly closed as she listened to the familiar hiss and rumble of the bass snores which emanated from her immediate right.

Opening her eyes would mean having to acknowledge the catastrophic mistake which she had evidently permitted to happen the previous evening.

The cosy cocoon of crisp sheets nestled against her naked flesh turned to a straitjacket an instant of realisation.

Hazy recollections of concerned fingers gingerly tracing the web of fresh, raw scars which littered her back and shoulders. A flood of hasty excuses so flimsy she winced in recollection of her feeble denial. Gentle offers of help which she had brushed away angrily with grim determination.

Her mother; her problem.

Time to go.
Dressing quietly, she turned in the bedroom doorway to bid the slumbering detective goodbye with a final fond glance before tiptoeing through the messy flat kitchen which was still pungent with the aroma of the previous night’s biryani.

She didn’t know why she had sought out Robbie. It had been several years since they had amicably parted ways. Too similar yet too different. Different priorities which had failed to align.

This definitely wasn’t what she wanted.

And yet, in a moment of weakness she had found herself upon his doorstep. A welcome distraction, a familiar port of call which wasn’t the bottom of a glass.

Someone to listen. Someone who cared. Someone who didn’t ask too many questions.

_Until he did._

She wrapped a scarlet woollen coat which now hung loosely upon her shoulders as tightly around herself as she could manage, as if to attempt to hold herself together at the seams.

Pulling the door closed with a soft click, Serena crept away in a rustle of ochre leaves.

Even at this early hour, the background hum of the London traffic was already beginning to filter into the background of the quiet street. The towering, cold white-faced Georgian townhouses with gleaming black doors seeming to stare blankly back at Serena; their still-slumbering occupants hidden from view behind a patchwork quilt of drawn curtains.

It was only when she was a safe distance from the house that she reluctantly allowed a cascade of warm tears to trail slowly down her frozen cheeks before she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

Looking down, she swiftly declined the call before taking a decisive intake of breath, lengthening her stride and opting to continue the long walk home on foot.

_It could have been so different._

Above all, Robbie was a decent man, and she couldn’t involve him any further in this. Or any of her friends for that matter. It simply wasn’t fair.

An hour later, she walked through the front garden as the familiar weight of responsibility swathed itself heavily around her shoulders and settled with the crushing endurance of a python. A family home, once treasured, now an experience akin to a lonely prisoner returning to the familiar solitary confinement of a cell. Fumbling within her bag, she extracted a house key and glumly placed it in the lock, aware of the likely response her untimely arrival would generate.

“’Rena, would you please tell this interfering woman that I don’t like, and never _have_ liked scrambled eggs.”

A loud wail pre-empted a crash of willow-patterned china meeting irreparably with an unforgiving tiled floor.

“Coming mum,” Serena replied numbly as she hung up her coat and leant momentarily against the wall as she plumbed the depths of dwindling reserves to find the patience for the morning ahead.

Wincing apologetically at the carer who was now caked in Adrienne’s rejected breakfast, Serena walked into the room and placed a gentle hand of restraint upon her distressed mother’s raised arm before yet another precious night carer was lost to an outbreak of physical violence and refused to return.
She took a deep breath before summoning up a reassuring smile and a cheery tone of voice which was almost successful in concealing the upset tremor which lay beneath it.

“Now then, what would you like for breakfast?”

---

6:30 PM, Queens Park Hotel, Holby.

Bernie Wolfe had never been on a date with a woman.

Furtive fumbles?

Stolen kisses?

Secretive, hurried sex in a quiet corner of a military base which left her burning with a confusingly potent mix of passion and raw guilt?

Yes, to all the above.

*This was different.*

This evening was about knowing who she was… and who she was now brave enough to admit that she wanted.

*Serena.*

The usually unflappable trauma consultant stood with her hands on her hips, indecisively surveying the strewn pile of clothes which littered the chintzy bedspread in front of her with an expression which was best described as one of perplexed panic.

She was starting to tire of living in the cramped hotel room. What had once been a temporary solution had somehow mutated into semi-permanent residence, a stop-gap where she didn’t have to set about the numbingly final solution of finding a new home of her own, of experiencing the loss of her name from the address of the family home.

*Stupid really,* she thought to herself as she flicked idly through potential outfits. *Why hold on to something if you know it’s broken?*

Divorce was inevitable; the bureaucratic wheels had long since been set in motion by the solicitors. But, somehow, letting go of the trivialities associated with her previous life was proving harder than Bernie had anticipated.

Especially since Marcus’s request for amicability following Keeley Carson’s accident. Bernie’s bewildered senses had filed that particular request away for another day’s consideration as she struggled to come to terms with her husband’s unlikely confession. Perhaps she would go and talk to Keeley.

*Another day. You have this evening to think of first and foremost.*

A faint flutter of nerves caught at the bottom of her stomach as she carefully stepped into a closely tailored pair of charcoal grey trousers and opted for the least creased shirt that she owned.

She looked softer somehow without the ubiquitous blue of her scrubs or the utilitarian lines of her fatigues, she thought vaguely to herself as she ran a hairbrush through errant clumps of hair in a
bid to tame the scruffy blonde mane.

Softer, but not scared. Shedding the protection of uniform and stepping out as Bernie.

“But,” she murmured as she rummaged through a small box of belongings which she had rescued from the house and extracted a small leather jewellery box. “I’m not afraid, not anymore.”

Opening the box, she bypassed the simple gold band which used to adorn her left hand and instead extracted a delicate pair of small silver earrings.

She seated herself at the dressing table and quickly fastened the earrings.

“I’m gay.” She whispered softly, verbalising an acceptance of what she had known, what she had secretly dreaded for years and ultimately reached a peaceful acceptance of.

Finally feeling as brave as the numerous citations and medals to her name would suggest, she continued. “And I am not ashamed.”

The quiet confession to the empty room earned her a slightly shy smile of approval from the glassy doppelganger which surveyed her closely from within the mirror.

She was broken out of her reverie by an impatient buzzing from her phone.

Her fingers shook slightly as she recognised the number and hurriedly accepted the call.

“Lottie?” she questioned carefully, scarcely able to believe that her youngest child had opted to contact her out of choice.

It had been months.

“Mum,” a quiet voice infused with the same anxious tension which was currently occupying every fibre of Bernie’s being chose to answer.

“What’s up?” Bernie prompted gently, concerned by her daughter’s uncharacteristic quietness. Charlotte was not usually one to struggle with expressing her opinion on a topic.

“Oh mum, I’m so sorry…. Sorry for everything that I’ve done… I’ve been such a cow…” a quiet snuffle accompanied a stream of escaping apologies.

Bernie went to speak but found her own eyes uncharacteristically damp as she spoke to her daughter.

“Lottie–”

“There’s something I have to tell you, something really important…. Charlotte cleared her throat to continue, “Something really exciting…”

---

**17 Marshdale Lane**

Bernie was thankful for the climb up the stairs to the first floor as she attempted to process the events of the past day. The drive to Serena’s had passed in a blur.

Nervous and excited in equal measures, she tapped tentatively upon the familiar front door.

Several moments passed before her nerve failed and she tapped again, a little louder.
After an excruciating wait, she gave in.

“Serena?” Bernie questioned gently once more as she pushed open the door. “Are you there?”

A loud howl to the affirmative was accompanied by a billowing cloud of acrid smoke emanating from the kitchen. Seconds later the smoke alarm began blaring at a deafening pitch.

“You useless…stupid…” a loud crash masked the rest of an angry tirade.

“Serena?” A perturbed Bernie rounded the corner to see a distinctly dishevelled Serena clutching a blackened dish with a look of utter dismay on her face. A second, slightly smoking accompaniment to the inedible main course sat in charred ruins where it had been lobbed furiously into the sink but a few seconds earlier.

“Smells good.” Bernie deadpanned as she leant amusedly against the doorframe and took stock of the situation as the screeching din finally subsided.

An uncharacteristically meek Serena met her gaze with a worried tremble to her lip. “I’ve ruined it… I’m afraid…” she mumbled ashamedly as she toyed with her necklace, “Completely cremated….”

Bernie had never been particularly renowned for a need for tactile contact, but at that precise moment she wanted nothing more than to step forward scoop the unfortunate chef into her arms and gently wipe away the charred smudge from her cheek. Instead, an internal battle as to the appropriate extent of such contact and whether it would be welcomed instead caused her to fidget awkwardly before resorting to her typically awkward brand of humour as a substitute to fill the echoing silence.

“So… um, did it ask for the last rites, or…” she gestured aimlessly to the dish and tailed off immediately at the crestfallen look on Serena’s face. “I’m sorry…”

“Something like that…” Serena muttered darkly as she dropped the second ruined dish on top of the first with a defeated nonchalance and doused the smoking remnants with cold water.

“Restaurant? Takeaway?” Bernie offered reassuringly as her stomach rumbled insistently. AAU had been running at capacity with an influx of sports injuries and her lunch break had been curtailed into a five minute window in which she had downed a black coffee and set off once more.

“Italian?” Serena suggested hopefully, “there’s a lovely looking little place a couple of streets away which I’ve been dying to try for ages. Not too far to walk. That’s what I was trying to create myself anyway… but evidently the culinary demons have other ideas tonight!”

“Lead the way,” Bernie smiled encouragingly, secretly delighted at how her agreement immediately caused Serena’s expression to brighten.

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**Primavera Italian Restaurant, Holby. Saturday, 8:30PM**

Angela Burman’s day had not gone well.

Following the disappointment of a collapsed business deal at work, she had spontaneously booked a table at her favourite restaurant in a bid to attempt to spend some time with her oft-neglected family only to receive a disinterestedgrunt from her teenage son and a text confirming her married
daughter’s previous plans. It had taken considerable diplomacy to negotiate a grudging acceptance from her curmudgeonly husband who had made it quite plain that the prospect of an evening in front of the live football game that was being aired on television had been at the top of his agenda for a romantic evening in.

She scowled sourly at her spouse over the top of her menu, silently contemplating where exactly her thirty-five-year marriage had gone wrong before snapping her fingers impatiently in a fruitless attempt to attract the exuberant waiter’s attention.

Little did she know that her evening was going to take a considerable turn for the worse.

“Table for two, please.” Serena Campbell flashed a winning smile at the waitress which somehow resulted in a cosy alcove space being found immediately within the heaving restaurant. Two large glasses of red wine materialised almost instantaneously upon the table with a slightly awestruck smile from the young attendant.

“You’re good…” Bernie tilted her head approvingly as she raised her glass to meet Serena’s with a soft clink.

“Charm offensive never usually fails…” Serena smirked knowingly as she took a welcome sip from her glass. “Years of practice, and all that…”

“Quite.” Bernie nodded.

Their friendly chatter continued, as effortlessly entertaining as it had ever been prior to Serena’s shock confession. Despite Serena’s prior concerns, it seemed that Bernie was sincere in her forgiveness, for believing that there was a solid basis for attempting to make a relationship work.

Several courses passed in a warm haze of delicious food and excellent company.

Serena felt a warm glow of fondness nestle within her chest as she regarded Bernie, hungrily drinking in every detail of the other woman’s features, content to watch Bernie talk, her characteristic conversational awkwardness set aside as she regaled Serena with stories of her military past.

Despite her previous concerns about the evening, Serena found herself almost weeping with laughter as Bernie finished a tale about the escapades of an escaped goat in the middle of a military camp in Afghanistan.

“I can’t remember the last time I went out for dinner,” she added quietly, her eyes taking in the full aspect of the bustling little eatery.

“Especially with such wonderful company,” her hand shuffled nervously upon the ivory linen tablecloth as her fingers intertwined with Bernie’s and she permitted herself a soft smile at the sight of their conjoined hands. A discrete act which would have escaped most passing eyes, but yet a bold deed which Serena inwardly rejoiced at the fact she was able to do.

“It’s been a good day all round,” Bernie smiled gently, “I had a call from Charlotte today as well.” She added, “First time we’ve spoken properly in months. To say it’s been rocky–, well, you know how everything’s been… with the divorce and everything….”

She broke off distractedly as a large, artistically presented tiramisu and crème caramel were placed
carefully upon the table in front of them.

“Turns out she’s been offered a journalist training placement in Paris of all places!” Bernie revealed proudly, “after a little help from her big brother and a certain woman of mystery who strangely matches your description…” she shot a quizzical look at Serena from over the brim of her wineglass.

“I can’t imagine what you mean…” Serena replied nonchalantly, casting her eyes downwards. “That’s absolutely fantastic though, I’m so glad that she told you!” Serena smiled warmly, gently squeezing Bernie’s fingers in hers and clumsily attempting to feed herself dessert with her non-dominant hand, not quite wanting to relinquish her gentle hold upon Bernie’s slender digits.

“Thank you.” Bernie was almost inaudible as her thumb stroked protectively across the back of Serena’s hand. “For watching out for her, and Cameron. Especially when Marcus and I didn’t… couldn’t. You’ve no idea how much that means… how much it meant to hear from her today…” she tailed off softly.

“Any time.” Serena whispered.

Bernie looked up to reply, words stilling in her throat as she grinned amusedly at the sight of Serena’s slightly furrowed brow as she set about inelegantly lining up a spoonful of tiramisu for a second attempt.

The effects of such a radiant smile upon Serena were enough to send the unfortunate pudding plummeting back to the plate where it landed with a luxurious plop and a rising mist of decorative icing sugar.

*Clearly not ambidextrous.*

“Here,” she leant forward gently and scooped up a spoonful of velvety caramel from the dish set in front of her which she rose to Serena’s mouth and allowed her to taste from the spoon.

A sliver of crimson tongue darted out from the corner of Serena’s mouth to catch the final dregs as an expression of exaggerated rapture crossed her face. A soft moan of approval escaped from between her lips.

It was Bernie’s turn to choke on her meal.

“Two can play at that game…” An emboldened Serena tilted her head flirtatiously, her eyes glittering dangerously as she chose that precise moment to wink somewhat deliberately at Bernie.

“I–” Bernie swallowed thickly, a crimson flush inching stealthily across her cheeks accompanied with a resonant thud from her quickening pulse. It was incredible what a physical response she felt to the slightest of actions from the enticing brunette.

An almost palpable tension hung between them in the dense air. She opened her mouth to speak.

“Serena, I–”

Bernie’s soft murmur was abruptly dissected by a loud gagging noise and a deafening metallic crash of falling cutlery as a tall, impeccably dressed woman seated several tables away began convulsing desperately in her seat, choking upon a morsel of steak which had lodged itself firmly in her airway.
Wild eyes, glazed in panic flickered erratically around the room in desperate search of aid.

A ruddy faced man, presumably her husband, who appeared distinctly ill at ease in a tight-fitting charcoal grey suit and pinstriped shirt which gaped slightly around a rounded belly, sat dumbstruck for several moments before coming to his senses and fruitlessly attempting to dislodge the blockage with several hefty blows to her back.

“Let me through, I’m a doctor!” Bernie’s brusque commanding tones, honed upon a military battlefield a million miles away from the softly spoken woman of moments before, were enough effortlessly to part the confused sea of diners as she fled to the woman’s aid and repeatedly attempted the Heimlich manoeuvre.

“She hadn’t attended a casualty in years. And yet, in a heartbeat, it was as if she had never left.

A deathly silence fell, punctuated only by failed, rasping attempts at breathing from an increasingly weakening Angela Burman.

“No. No good, it’s not shifting.” Bernie shook her head, addressing herself as much as Serena as Angela fell silent.

“Convert to emergency cricothyroidotomy?” Serena suggested, swallowing nervously.

“One hair’s width in the wrong direction… nick either the carotid or jugular and it’ll be a bloodbath.

“Only option left…” Bernie pursed her lips decisively and nodded in agreement as she observed a faint blueish tinge begin to appear on Angela’s extremities. “Help me get her on the floor.”

“Serena assisted in lowering the unfortunate woman to the ground as Bernie’s trained eyes methodically raked the surroundings for suitable implements to carry out the ad hoc surgery.

“We need to establish an airway. I need the sharpest, cleanest knife you have in your kitchen, and a biro. Hurry!” she snarled at the nearby waiter who fled behind the bar as if his very existence depended upon it.

Moments later, the requested implements were thrust into Bernie’s outstretched hand.

“Ready?” Serena’s eyes met hers with a grim urgency.

She was answered by an abrupt nod of determination as Bernie carefully felt along the exposed skin, utilising her vast experience to find the optimum site.

The steel blade flashed momentarily in the light and heavy scarlet droplets oozed cleanly from the precise incision in the prone woman’s neck. She deftly extracted the ink cartridge and snapped the plastic casing of the proffered pen in two before carefully inserting the hollowed out tube into the small open cavity she had created in the throat.

“I’ll breathe, you monitor the pulse?” she instructed lightly, only to find Serena hovering over the
other side of their patient, almost telepathically pre-empting her request.

“Yep.” A quick confirmation of her request as the two women continued to work in perfect tandem.

Leaning forward, Bernie set about establishing a regular airflow into the throat, bypassing the blockage and holding her makeshift breathing tube as still as possible from between bloodstained fingers.

*Breath... wait... repeat.*

She had lost count of exactly how long she had spent repeating the same cycle before the external wail of an arriving ambulance permeated her hearing and a cluster of paramedics and machinery swooped in to take over her makeshift efforts.

A smattering of shell-shocked applause accompanied the two women as they eventually followed the gurney bearing Angela Burman to the awaiting ambulance. Her grateful husband, somewhat lost for words, settled for shaking them profusely by the hand, stammering disjointed phrases of thanks before climbing into the vehicle to join his wife.

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17 Marshdale Lane, 11:00PM

“Well...” Serena was the first to break the silence as the two women walked home in the lazy warmth of a dying embers of a dusky midsummer’s evening.

“That was an unexpected twist to a meal out...”

“Quite...” Bernie exhaled slowly, still glowing with the adrenaline of the evening’s events.

“So... before you were called upon to save life and limb... what were you going to say?” Serena enquired as she slotted her keys into the front door with an efficient jangle and held the door open for Bernie.

“Oh, I don’t know... something about how wonderful and irresistible you are probably...” Bernie swept past and perched lazily upon the arm of the settee as Serena gaped momentarily and set about bustling around in a tidying maelstrom.

“Hey,” Bernie rose to her feet caught her arm as Serena swept past for the third time in thirty seconds, her movements as jerky and frantic as a clockwork toy which had been too tightly wound.

“What on earth’s the matter?”

“Nothing...” Serena replied, a little too brightly before letting out an anxious sigh and leaning gratefully into Bernie’s contact. “Nothing... just being silly... overthinking...”

“Really?” Bernie leant forward and placed a fond kiss on the tip of her nose, “A detective who overanalyses... shocking...”

Serena managed a weak smile.
“Wait…” she cleared her throat apprehensively, attempting to rein in her fluttering thoughts before
she lost all known reason.

“Look, are you sure this… this is what you… that I’m what you…” she stumbled awkwardly,
simultaneously attempting to give Bernie every opportunity to walk away as well as explaining
herself before the all too familiar look of uncertainty clouded Bernie’s eyes once more.

She wanted nothing left to chance this time. Nothing left unsaid.

“I’m mean... you’re sure?” concerned eyes deferred to Bernie’s professional judgement as an
uncharacteristically nervous Serena raked a hand through her hair in a bid to deter herself from
further anxious fidgeting.

Any fears instantly melted away in the warm rays of the smile which dawned upon Bernie’s lips.

“Why would I regret something that I have wanted for weeks… months even…” she murmured,
her hand rising to rest protectively upon Serena’s cheek. “You…. you’re absolutely perfect…”

Serena’s eyes visibly darkened at Bernie’s touch, her tachycardic heartbeat thudding so resonantly
throughout her entire being she was certain Bernie could feel its thrumming pace beneath her
outstretched fingertips.

Her breath hitched in her throat as Bernie’s emboldened arms swept behind her back, encasing her
in a close embrace, the warm contact of the other woman’s skin enough to set a scalding heat
pooling between her legs.

Slightly shorter than the blonde medic, her mouth nuzzled comfortably into the soft hollow
between Bernie’s clavicle and shoulder as she leant forward into the contact, inhaling the familiar
aroma of citrus shampoo and Bernie’s usual soft musky scent and marvelling at how familiar, how
right it felt to be this close… to be held without the intrusive barrier of a disguise.

Passion… comfort…reassurance and an infinite spectrum of emotions in between.

“You’re everything…” Bernie breathed.

Long fingers softly traced the firm terrain of her jawbone, a responsive shower of neural fireworks
igniting beneath the exploratory touch as Bernie chose to pause beneath the little dimple of
Serena’s chin and tilt her eager mouth up to meet her own.

Dark eyes fluttered closed with an appreciative groan as the last shred of Serena’s apprehension
melted away and her straying hands rose to tangle urgently in Bernie’s hair, firmly anchoring their
lips together in a shattering kiss.

Time lost any usual sense of meaning as she moaned softly into Bernie’s embrace, savouring the
exquisite sensation of the other woman’s lips on her own as they danced in a ceaseless tango, an
exquisite tussle for control... simultaneously acquiescent and demanding… a perpetual struggle
and submission.

Freed from the barriers of guilt and deception.

Eventually they broke apart for air; Bernie’s rigid frame trembling with the effort of not
succumbing to the sudden overwhelming urge to rip Serena’s expensive (albeit slightly
bloodstained) dress from her body.

She needn’t have worried.
The dangerous glint in her opaque eyes was matched in intensity only by that of the other woman currently pressed flush in front of her.

“Too. Many. Clothes.” Serena growled, briskly punctuating each word with a staccato nip of her teeth to the firm flesh of Bernie’s toned shoulders and yielding a surprising range of breathy whimpers from the usually stoic Major as she busily set about unbuttoning Bernie’s shirt to expose a simple grey bra trimmed with white lace, desperate in her fumbling bid for closer skin contact.

Bernie merely quirked a flirtatious eyebrow before her skilled fingers deftly reached behind Serena’s neck and effortlessly unfastened the simple hook and eye fastenings of her dress which skimmed her curvaceous silhouette in a soft hiss of plummeting satin as the unwanted garment fell to the floor. She was unable to suppress a subconscious lick of her lips as she surveyed the voluptuous bounty hidden beneath the discarded gown.

A semi-naked Serena was nothing short of breath-taking.

“Certainly a skill worthy of even your glittering CV, Ms. Wolfe…” Serena purred approvingly as she continued her deliberate mapping of Bernie’s upper body with her mouth, committing each sublime peak and trough to memory.

Bernie’s tailored trousers promptly joined the growing mound of discarded clothing.

“Shall we?” Serena held out her hand to Bernie in quiet invitation. Bernie took her cue to gently lace her fingertips between Serena’s and walk hand in hand through the doorway to Serena’s bedroom to nestle comfortably between the luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets in their underwear.

“Beautiful…” Serena murmured appreciatively from her right as she trailed tentative fingers upward along Bernie’s sternum, marvelling at the myriad of individual scars which spread outward across Bernie’s chest like a spider web.

“Not really…” Bernie muttered distractedly, a protective hand ghosting to her chest on reflex as she fought to resist the instinctive urge to flinch away from the alien contact. “Just the remnants of an old life…”

Serena leant forward and placed a soft kiss directly at the epicentre of the shadowy healed tissue, just above Bernie’s heart.

The alabaster skin looked as delicate as a restored marble sculpture; smooth uninterrupted lines dissected into a myriad of jagged segments, painstakingly restored to their former glory.

“You are the most talented, wonderful….” Words turned into a row of soft, unhurried kisses peppered Bernie’s small breasts before an unexpected grazing of teeth against an unsuspecting nipple had her arching upward with a surprised hiss of breath escaping from between her lips.

Serena’s proud smirk at having elicited such a reaction was soon replaced with a perfect ‘O’ of surprise as Bernie used her superior strength and combat training to deftly flip the shorter woman onto her back and pin her to the mattress.

“So….” the husky utterance was neither a question nor request. Daring her partner to set the trajectory of the next move, she regarded the prone Serena quizzically from beneath a trailing lock of blonde hair.
Serena gasped beneath the warm weight of Bernie straddling her lap, involuntarily rolling her hips upward in search of the friction she craved.

“Okay?” Bernie murmured protectively as she leant forward to capture Serena’s lips once more in reassurance, her free hand trailing lazily along the inside of Serena’s thigh and inwardly marvelling at the smoothness of the skin.

“Bernie….” A soft cry of need escaped unbidden against her mouth by means of reply as her fingers traversed lightly against the sodden fabric of Serena’s underwear.

“God, you’re soaking…”

“Please…” Serena’s eyes rolled back into her head in a wail of exquisite agony as Bernie slowly teased a finger into the silky wetness which pooled at the apex of her thighs and massaged a slow circle around her distended clitoris.

“Better?” Bernie found herself crooning quietly as Serena’s body writhed slowly beneath hers, each maddeningly slow brush of fingers driving her ever closer to release as panting assurances slipped from her mouth.

Expensive sheets be damned; clawing fingers clenched wildly, balling the opulent linen into tight fists in a vague yet ultimately doomed attempt at finding a grounding purchase on any nearby object.

An ungodly stream of curses poured from between Serena’s parted lips in breathless, ragged gasps as Bernie chose to cast aside her knickers before sitting back on her heels and sinking two dextrous fingers deep inside of her with a calculated slowness.

Serena was so aroused that it was almost painful. She could feel her muscles contracting tightly around Bernie’s fingers and offering resistance as they negotiated a steady rhythm.

A bead of sweat slid languidly from her forehead, disappearing into the tousled mane of cropped brunette hair which covered the white pillow in a dark stain.

She wasn’t aware for several moments that the chorus of guttural moans and encouragement which filled the dense air was of her own making as Bernie carefully added yet another digit, leaving her feeling delightfully full as she ground back repeatedly against Bernie with a positively obscene noise.

“Yes!”

A prolonged, ragged scream left her burning throat as her body arched almost magnetically towards Bernie’s, the final thread snapping as she lost her faltering grip on reality and succumbed to the overriding waves of sensation, lost beneath a tsunami of sublime ecstasy, tumbling towards the dark abyss of what was surely a temporary form of madness.

Incoherent words flew from her mouth in a drained shriek as her spent body bucked uncontrollably once, twice, and eventually shuddered to silent rest; cradled tightly in Berenice Wolfe’s arms.
A New Beginning

Chapter Summary

Serena and Bernie continue to build their fledgling relationship together. Bernie visits Keeley with an aim of untangling their unfinished business.

Plus, an epilogue set in Paris!

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has patiently followed this fic since I started writing it in early 2017. It's been a bumpy ride, but we've now reached the end! Reading all of your lovely comments has always spurred me on, and I'm so glad to have been able to share this story with you.

I can only apologise for the slow updates, but juggling writing a fic of this scale in terms of plot alongside full-time work and a PhD has meant it's been slow progress at times!

Thank you once again :)

A quick warning- the start of this chapter picks up immediately from the end of the previous one, so it's fairly NSFW at the start! Feel free to skip if it's not your thing... if it is, read on! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Bernie Wolfe’s fervent, if somewhat hazy, belief that in kissing Serena Campbell she had somehow unwittingly unleashed an insatiable Sapphic demon; hell-bent on systematically ravishing her to destruction.

She allowed herself to be steered back against a cocoon of soft pillows, thin tendrils of escaping blonde hair plastered messily across her sweat-streaked forehead in a heap of tousled straw. Her hips bucked greedily in an innate response to the glorious sensation of the other decidedly naked woman who was proudly straddling her lap, wearing nothing save for the emboldened, mischievous smirk of a rapidly discovering pioneer.

She had long since lost sight of the mundane concept of time: an interminable unit of measurement indeed when the rare chance had been granted to fully luxuriate in the previously unprecedented opportunity to slowly explore every inch of each other’s bodies without a hint of interruption or intrusion from the outside world.

Abandoned clothes still littered the floor in lazy confetti where they had fallen to rest earlier that night.

Her bony chest shuddered with barely contained desire as careful teeth grazed her nipple.

Surely it was illegal to feel this good?
“I-…” she murmured indistinctly before clearing her throat and trying once more.

Any longer and any surviving attempt at nobility would surely drown before the fledgling words made their escape from between her lips.

*She hasn’t done this before…*

“You don’t have to…” she gasped before trailing off somewhat pathetically; more than consciously aware of the mewling mess of arousal that she currently resembled.

*God…*

She was aware of a warm weight shifting carefully off her, leaving her instantly bereft as a cool draught curled intrusively across her naked frame; sensitive areola pebbling in response.

“Serena?” she raised her head slightly concernedly.

A pair of onyx eyes glittered wickedly from between her toned thighs by means of an answer.

It was at that precise moment that Bernie Wolfe momentarily forgot the inherent rudiments of breathing.

A horizontal row of scalding kisses interspersed with murmured adorations and reassurances raised a delicate track of goose bumps from one exposed hip bone to the next.

“But I *do* want to….” came the low purr of reply as the other woman set about reverently exploring the unfamiliar terrain. There was almost an expression of marvel upon her face at the smooth skin which was encountered and traversed beneath her ghosting fingertips, softly caressing wiry curls that she encountered as she began a slow, agonising descent.

“Very much so…”

Slender digits caressed her slick folds; worshipped with a sublime reverence that finally severed Bernie’s weakening hold upon reality as she felt herself dissolve into nothing more than a hedonistic wreck of glorious sensation and wanton desire upon the agonisingly slow arrival of two fingers sliding unhurriedly inside her aching sex.

“Have done for weeks…” Serena’s voice had fallen into its deepest, huskiest register.

It took her groggy brain several misfired attempts at processing before the source of the loud guttural moan which filled the hushed bedroom was revealed to be non-other than herself.

A calculated swipe from a dextrous tongue prompted an outbreak of violent, directionless writhing from her long limbs; hissing with exquisite agony as gentle suction from an eager mouth closed unerringly around her engorged clitoris.

Clenching fists clumsily sought a flimsy purchase within the cropped dark locks of her tormentor; as much a fragile anchor to prevent her from sliding into the unreachable depths of orgasmic stupor as it was a desperate, wordless plea for her assailant to never cease.

Serena Campbell prided herself on never having to be instructed on how to do anything more than once.

Her detective’s meticulous attention to detail and surgeon’s knowledge of human anatomy were proving to be a deadly combination as she explored Bernie’s body; gently tantalising and committing each and every sinew and curve to memory.
Broken raptures and breathless whines escaped as unformed sounds from between Bernie’s lips as she rutted impatiently back against Serena’s agonisingly slow thrusts.

“Patience, darling…” Serena murmured, the close proximity of her mouth sending delicious vibrations through Bernie’s core before she very carefully and deliberately curled her fingers, delighting in the look of surprised rapture which greeted her actions.

Bernie was beyond even a vague attempt at speech by this point; life had ceased to function outside of the powerful sensation which was currently dominating every trembling molecule of her being.

A choked sob flew from her as she finally toppled over the edge of climax, contracting tightly around Serena’s fingers as she plummeted in intoxicated freefall through every last wave of sensation.

Darkness.

“Alright?” She vaguely registered movement in her bleary state before she became aware of Serena gently stroking the side of her face and cradling her naked form in her arms.

“Fine… I’m fine…” Almost ashamedly, she blinked back the salty tears which threatened to escape with a faint snuffle, inwardly spurring herself to pull herself together. “That… that was…” she eventually abandoned any vague attempt at definition, instead merely choosing to sigh contentedly and lean back into the warm embrace of Serena’s arms.

“Bloody marvellous,” low alto tones murmured close to her ear as Serena kissed her tenderly on the forehead and snuggled closer, a protective hand gently brushing a stray lock of fringe out of her eyes. She could feel Serena smile lazily into the side of her neck as she curled tightly in behind her; warm breath tickling her bare flesh with a sleepy sigh as the brunette draped the nearest edge of a stray blanket across them.

“Yeah…” she whispered gently into the darkness of the room and squeezed Serena’s hand in reassurance, gently caressing the soft skin with her fingers and murmuring soft nothings as she felt the other woman’s breath slowly ease into a rhythmic pattern of quiet snuffles between the luxurious cotton sheets.

Berenice Wolfe had never been a good sleeper. Instead, she continued to stare into the inky blackness of the corners of the unfamiliar bedroom; spectres of anxieties old and new flitting noisily around her restless mind. Most of the particularly familiar doubts and insecurities were assuaged swiftly by the unfamiliar yet welcome presence of the other softly slumbering woman who happened to be sharing the bed with her.

Above all, she hated unfinished business. Tonight had been the realisation of many weeks of tentative hope, a new beginning after the personal disaster that the last few years had been. Fresh starts however required a blank slate.

You need to talk to Marcus. And Keeley.

She plucked mulishly at the corner of the duvet cover, grudgingly conceding the difficult point to her subconscious.
As if operating on some form of sleepy telepathy, Serena Campbell groggily reached out a stray arm and pulled her brooding lover into a closer embrace.

Bernie’s leaden eyelids eventually won the battle against her fretting subconscious which reluctantly permitted her to slide into welcome form of temporary oblivion.

Several hours later:

“Ready?” A freshly-caffeinated Serena Campbell turned to Bernie who sat in the passenger seat of her car.

Bernie grimaced slightly and nodded as she stared up at the towering hospital building. Her unsettled sleep had eventually disrupted Serena, who had eventually managed to gently cajole the source of Bernie’s fretting out of her.

“Well, I think I’ve got the easier job…” Serena gently patted Bernie on the arm in reassurance as they both exited the vehicle and crossed the grey expanse of tarmac. Even on a Sunday, the regular wail of sirens still punctuated the air as the next urgent case arrived on hospital premises.

“Coffee later?” She inquired hopefully. Her lips quirked in an attempt at an encouraging smile.

Bernie managed a swift nod as she made for the stairs, her lengthy limbs carrying her upward at a rate of knots as Serena opted instead to stand and wait for the lift. Taking the steps two at a time and focusing purely upon the act of swinging her lithe body up each flight of the seemingly never-ending staircase was a welcome distraction from the squall of nerves which was rolling within the pit of her stomach.

Eventually, she reached the linoleum-clad summit in the HDU with a lactic burn in the back of her legs serving as a suitable reprimand for her exertions. Swiftly flashing her ID badge to the nurses’ station, she swept past towards the corridor of little side rooms.

Peering nervously through the narrow sliver of window which opened into a private room, she caught a glimpse of the prone body of Keeley Carson.

Unkempt blonde hair tumbled messily around her bruised forehead like a grubby halo, the visible portions of porcelain skin marred by a mosaic of angry red welts, the rest of her abdomen hidden beneath swathes of snowy bandages. She had always been slender in build, but to Bernie’s eyes Keeley seemed to adopt almost childlike proportions within the hospital bed; trapped beneath a snaking plethora of wires and sensors.

“Mind if I come in?”

Dull blue eyes rolled greasily in their sockets to meet her gaze in a weak greeting.

“Bernie…” a quiet croak from between parched lips as she attempted in vain to ease herself into a more upright position. “Oh Bernie, I’m so sorry…”

Bernie hushed her gently as she walked into the room and took a seat at her bedside. Despite never professing to own the most empathetic of bedside-manners, she found herself intuitively pouring a glass of water which she helped the younger woman to take a tentative sip from.

“Thank you…” Keeley leant back against her pillow with a weary sigh.
“Long-time no see.” Bernie replied with a jerky nod of the head, unsure exactly how to proceed despite the numerous attempts at running the scenario inside her own head.

A heavy silence, laden with unspoken guilt hung between the two women.

“No, indeed…”

Keeley cleared her throat after what had seemed an eternity.

Nervous fingers fidgeted with the taping that secured the cannula in the back of her hand.

“So…” The younger medic’s resolve had snapped first. “Is this the point when you ask why on earth I turned up in Holby out of the blue, having lunch with your soon-to-be ex-husband before rolling my car and ending up on your operating table?” she offered awkwardly.

“Something like that…” muttered Bernie, glaring mutinously at the back of her hands. If her nails had been longer, they would almost have certainly been imbedded in the flesh of her palms by now.

“Thank you, by the way.” Keeley smiled weakly, “From what they’ve said, with the injuries that I had…. Well, let’s just say I couldn’t have asked for anyone better skill than–”

“Don’t you think we’ve somewhat outgrown the whole mentor slash fawning mentee thing?” Bernie’s gaze flicked up to meet Keeley’s as she heard herself snap coldly.

Keeley’s face fell at the stern rebuke. “Bernie, I–” she tailed off quietly.

“Sorry… sorry.” Bernie exhaled tightly before changing tack, feeling the anger dissipate within her at the sight of her crestfallen former protégée. “I didn’t mean…”

Silence once more.

“You know…” Bernie began eventually, a fond smile of reminiscence fleetingly crossing her lips. “As a junior doctor, you always reminded me so much of myself: so focused, so driven… absolutely determined to become the very best that you could be. I could see the impact that the breakup of your relationship with James had upon your work… your training…. I couldn’t just stand by and see you throw away everything that you had worked so hard to achieve… all for the sake of someone like him…”

She shrugged limply. “I don’t know… maybe having you come into our house, into our lives at that time even helped to add years to a marriage that was already falling apart at the seams… even if Marcus and I were oblivious to it at the time…”

“And then I had to go and ruin everything…” Keeley shook her head slowly and kneaded her forehead with icy fingertips. The next few words left her lips in stilted fashion. “Bernie, I swear that we never–”

Bernie interrupted her with a quiet shush. “I know. Marcus cut all contact, tried to mend the damage that he thought he had done to our marriage, to the family… ran away from everything rather than face it head on. Tried to appease his own guilt over what might have been. Can’t say I blame him; I’d have done the same… did the same in the end…. secrets never do anyone any good, especially ones that are buried…” Bernie smiled ruefully. “Did Marcus tell you what finally broke up our marriage?” she added bluntly.

“Not exactly…” Keeley shook her head. “He mentioned an affair…”
Bernie nodded slowly, a familiar flutter of nerves rolling in her stomach. “I suppose that’s what it
does boil down to in the end….” She shuffled slightly in her chair before looking directly at
Keeley with an unflinching honesty. “I met a wonderful, kind, woman called Alex in the middle
of the Afghan desert and fell completely in love with her. Quite the personal revelation after fifty
odd years of assumed heterosexuality, I can tell you.” She tilted her head thoughtfully.

“I bet…” A momentary glimmer of surprise crossed Keeley’s face. “And is she… are you still
together now?”

Bernie shook her head. “No.” A single taut word escaped painfully from her lips in guilty memory
of how she had treated Alex.

“We were completely in our own little bubble, a perfect little world of our own…. And then the
IED hit and blew us back to reality. Well, fairytales rarely do translate well into the real world…”

Bernie paused starkly.

“And then, inevitably, Marcus found out. Alex moved on, I tried to pick up the pieces whilst
Marcus set about trying to take some form of revenge in the divorce settlement. I don’t regret what
I did… but I do regret all of the hurt that I’ve caused. If only I’d told him… if only I’d been honest
from the start…”

“But, life isn’t perfect, is it?” Keeley cut across her former mentor. “I mean…”

She gestured limply to the photograph of James Carson and her two smiling children which sat
pped up against the water jug on the table. “I adore my children…. But how on earth I thought
that a wedding band on James Carson’s finger would change any of his habits, I don’t know… So
many affairs, so many times he’s asked, begged for my forgiveness… and I’ve taken him back
like a mug every time. Some things never change.” She sighed and tailed off.

“But,” Keeley added thoughtfully, “the difference is that I’m not brave, not like you.” She
shrugged apologetically. “Anything for a quiet life, for stability…even if it’s a slightly crap but
consistent version of familiarity… anything that if you squint hard enough could be seen as the
successful marriage, the growing career…” she paused. “But, just occasionally, things don’t go to
plan, no matter how hard you try to do the right thing.”

She paused and looked Bernie squarely in the eye, “I don’t know what made me reply to Marcus;
what made me just drop everything out of the blue and drive all the way down to Holby, but I did.
Whether it was loneliness, whether it was weakness, whether it was a vague hope of something
different… I don’t know, but I did…

“The police still want to speak to me about my blood-alcohol levels from that night…” she cut
across her own train of thought. “My consultant has been an absolute darling for keeping them
away from me until I’m strong enough for questioning, but it’s not going to be forever, I know
that.” She grimaced at the thought of what lay ahead. “And my cowardice, my own stupid, stupid
actions might have even cost me the right to practice. All for the sake of one stupid moment, one
huge lapse of judgement.” Anger faded out of her voice as swiftly as it had arisen. “But it’s all that
I deserved I suppose. And I’m sorry, genuinely sorry for everything.”

She reached up with an arm which trailed wires and patted Bernie gently on the hand.

“It’s such a bloody mess all of this, isn’t it?”

“You’re telling me…” Bernie quirked her lips in what could be fleetingly described as a half-
smile. “Complicated doesn’t even begin to do it justice.” She laughed hollowly.
“Still,” she exhaled thoughtfully. “You’ll need a damn good lawyer… and a bit of luck on your side from the blood test results, I’m warning you now. I’d be prepared to face the worst potentially…”

“I know.” Keeley’s face was ashen as she slumped back against her pillows, her voice thick with unshed tears. “I know…”

“Oh Keeley…”

A more comfortable silence fell once again as Bernie carefully took Keeley’s hand in hers and gently squeezed it in reassurance. A soft snuffle greeted her in thanks.

“And is there… is there someone else on the scene at the moment?” Keeley asked gently, eventually attempting to change the topic.

Bernie’s face visibly relaxed at the thought of the brunette detective several floors below them.

“I hope so…” she added shyly after a slight pause, “Complicated again, yes. But she’s very much worth it.”

“You know…” she grimaced slightly as she looked up to see a familiar face hovering outside the doorway. “It’s rare you’ll hear me say this; as rare as hens’ teeth in fact as I usually trust my own judgement implicitly. I may not have got everything right, in fact I freely admit that in terms of my personal life I have got a great deal wrong, but there’s one thing the past year has taught me, it’s that life is just too short to be unhappy, too short to just exist but not live. For both mine and my childrens’ sake.”

She gently relinquished Keeley’s hand with a soft pat of reassurance as she rose to her feet.

“Whether it’s James, whether it’s Marcus, whether it’s neither of them, don’t feel that you have to sacrifice your own happiness to appease others. It’s always a fool’s errand; I should know.”

She smiled gently, “Do whatever makes you happy. The rest will all fall into place eventually.”

“Quite.” The door clicked softly as an unshaven Marcus Dunn who looked as if he hadn’t slept in several weeks entered the room and nodded in agreement with his soon-to-be ex-wife. He slid into the maroon plastic-coated chair that had somehow become his permanent address in the past few days. “Morning Bern,” he added quietly.

“Marcus.” Bernie nodded briefly in greeting as she stepped past, a small smile gracing her lips in return. Cordiality was at least a start.

“The police are waiting downstairs; I don’t think we’ll be able to keep them out the way for much longer…” Marcus’s hushed voice was taut with concern as Bernie slipped quietly through the door.

“Then don’t.” she heard Keeley reply, “It’s about time this was all sorted out once and for all…” a touch of steel had entered her ex-student’s voice as she determinedly pushed herself upright.

One footstep into the deserted corridor, Bernie turned thoughtfully upon her heel and briefly mouthed “good luck” to a watching Keeley through the small window. Her warm breath left a steamy mist of condensation upon the cold glass, temporarily hiding the occupants of the room behind a smokescreen.

*Enough.*
It’s done.

It’s over.

She sighed before turning and vanishing into the shadows of the narrow corridor.

It was time for a new beginning.

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**Six months later: Gare du Nord, Paris**

Bernie Wolfe shivered slightly in the chilly December breeze and wrapped her pale pink coat tightly around her slender frame as she walked briskly into the bustling station concourse.

A rich aroma filled the air from the numerous little pop up coffee kiosks that were doing a roaring trade on the icy morning.

The clatter of a thousand mismatched footsteps filled her ears, frequently punctuated by broken snatches of passing conversations in a multitude of different dialects.

A stampede of wheeled suitcases and their besuited owners slalomed frantically between the green-painted pillars and dissected her path at a gallop; desperate to somehow defy the known limitations of time and space as their intended train eased slowly away from the platform.

The ex-major paused briefly, her trained eyes flicking up to the enormous arrivals board and quickly ascertaining the information that she sought. Satisfied, she granted herself a slight nod before lengthening her stride towards the Eurostar platform where the familiar elongated white train cockpit was slowly easing to a halt.

A momentary façade of calm on the deserted platform before the doors slid open and unleashed a tidal wave of passengers and luggage. Bernie paused and combed the scene before noticing a splash of crimson amidst the churning sea of black and grey.

A wide smile spread rapidly across her face.

“Serena! Over here!” she waved frantically until the brunette woman clad in the flowing red coat finally caught sight of her lanky gesticulating and quickened her pace until she was all but running towards her.

“Bernie!” a soft thud as a bulging shoulder bag hit the floor and a pair of arms wrapped themselves tightly around her torso. “Oh, I am so glad to see you!”

A lingering kiss upon her lips suddenly reduced the external hustle and bustle to muted nothingness. A fond hand rose gently to her cheek and carefully brushed the stray tendrils of her fringe away from her eyes in a familiar sweep.

“A week seemed so long somehow,” Serena muttered softly as she finally pulled back to capture Bernie’s gaze with a dazzling smile which somehow seemed brighter than the watery sunlight which was filtering through the glass domed roof.

“And how is Charlotte?” she cleared her throat slightly, her usual confident tones firmly back in place.

“Doing very well for herself, I—dear god, what on earth have you packed in here?” Bernie
squawked in surprise as she went to nonchalantly sling Serena’s abandoned luggage over her shoulder and staggered slightly beneath the unexpected weight.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Serena’s eyes twinkled dangerously as she fell into step with her partner. Bernie settled for a fond smirk by means of reply. It had not taken her long to establish that Serena Campbell had a somewhat ungodly talent for being able to inject suggestion into any conversation.

“But yes, Charlotte seems to have really taken to Paris.” She added softly as they rounded the corner towards the exit. “She took me to see a show last night; premier tickets nonetheless as she was writing a review for part of her placement.” A contended smile crossed her lips at the memory of the previous evening. She couldn’t remember the last evening she had spent purely with her daughter.

Bernie had finally been able to procure some sought-after leave during the festive season and had chosen to spend it with her daughter in Paris. Since accepting Elinor’s offer of a journalism training placement, Charlotte Dunn had seemingly found her niche and had produced several notable theatre critiques for the arts sector which had passed publication scrutiny. She was already making plans to stay within the city once her placement had ended in the New Year. Sharing an apartment with Elinor and following in the older woman’s footsteps had certainly managed to help the wayward twentysomething keep a foothold on her newfound path.

“Well, I think you’ll find the administration is finally up to speed…” Serena muttered somewhat darkly in recollection of the haphazardly stacked mountains of paperwork which had sat mournfully upon the other side of the consultant’s desk. It had taken her trademark efficiency to eventually whittle down the neglected stack of forms. “If you want to keep that trauma bay open, you’ll need to get those bloody files logged properly. I, for one did not sacrifice the best part of a month’s sleep and Shiraz rations over securing that expansion bid. But,” she paused to smile triumphantly at her partner, “apart from that, it was as smooth as clockwork!”

Bernie squeezed her fingers and gently swung their interlinked hands. “See…” she beamed proudly, a faint air of swagger entering her walk. “Evidently supervised by the best.”

“Quite.” Serena smirked fondly at the faintly ridiculous expression currently adorning Bernie’s face.

Serena had, after some reflection upon the events that had taken place on the dramatic evening at Primavera restaurant tentatively approached the hospital with the request to not only take up the managerial administrative post offered to her by the board but also to be overseen in rebuilding her surgical skills after the best part of fifteen years out of practice. Several months of close supervision and intensive re-training and she was in the final stages of being proclaimed fit to wield a scalpel once more by Hanssen. Once reinstated, it was intended that she would work on a secondment basis as needed to support AAU in times of particular strain in addition to her administrative duties.

Despite the flicker of nerves in her stomach at the first sight of the chest cavity laid open to the
elements in front of her, the familiar sanguineous gush of blood and subsequent spike of adrenaline had almost served to steady her hand. Some things never changed. Surgical technique had returned as naturally to Serena’s skilled hands as riding the proverbial bicycle.

The beige library of files which documented the tangled lives of her surveillance targets, the bulging photo albums and typed testimonies had all met an unfortunate end in an impromptu bonfire to christen the garden of their new home together. Serena had stood shivering in the chill of an autumnal afternoon, quietly watching the glossy faces of both the innocent and the guilty crinkling and curling into grey ash at the mercy of the tongues of flickering flames.

It had never been Bernie’s intention to steer Serena out of detective work. In fact, the mere memory that Serena’s deception had nearly lost her what she had desired the most had proved more than effective in forcing her hand on the issue.

Bernie.

Serena paused momentarily, almost out of habit as they finally reached the majestic stone arches of the Pont Neuf which cleaved a straight path across the rushing frozen waters of the Seine.

Leaning contemplatively against the ivory stone wall, she gazed across towards the pointed turrets and steeples of the Ile de la Cité which stood out against the cluttered skyline. It had been her favourite view since the days of exploring Paris on foot with her parents in the summers of her childhood years. Times gone by when she had truly believed herself to be somewhat sophisticated for drinking wine out of her mother’s glass in smoky little bars and developing an affection for the sort of slow jazz piano repertoire favoured by the omnipresent grizzled musicians who seemed to haunt such venues.

Eons had passed since then.

Heartbreak. The intense pain of loss. The scarring humiliation of scandal.

But eventually, peace had come.

The protective weight of Bernie’s outstretched arm folded wordlessly around her shoulders and she automatically snuggled closer into the warm fibres of the woollen garment.

“Oh, look!” she exhaled softly, gazing upward in sheer wonder as the slate-coloured sky finally yielded what it had promised all morning and released a slow cascade of tumbling snowflakes which eddied and whirled in the frozen air before nestling in the hair of the two women.

“Happy?” a soft whisper tickled warm breath against her ear.

Serena’s eyes sparkled with quiet emotion as she twisted to capture Bernie’s lips with her own.

“Yes.” She eventually breathed quietly against her lover’s lips, resting her forehead gently against Bernie’s.

“Very much so.”
I can never resist writing happy Berena in France! Paris is one of my favourite places in the entire world, so it felt right to have them stroll off into the snow together along the Seine!

PS: For those of you wondering about Keeley's fate, I deliberately chose to leave it open-ended for people to draw their own conclusions as to what she chose to do, but I personally believe that she's currently trialling a separation from James but hasn't yet decided if she will make a go of things with Marcus. After a thorough police investigation, she was eventually released without a charge of drink driving, but was banned from driving for a year for causing an accident by dangerous driving.

PPS: Thank you so much to all of the lovely people who have read this fic from start to finish! :)

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