

## Scenes From A Year of Love

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# Scenes From A Year of Love

by [variousflumps](#)

## Summary

Scenes from Bernie and Serena's first year together, starting from a few months after The Kill List.

"Serena calls me Berenice when I'm in trouble."

"I don't!" Serena says indignantly.

"It's Berenice *Griselda* when I'm in a *lot* of trouble."

"Will you please stop talking nonsense," Serena says firmly, although Bernie can see the happiness behind her attempt at a stern expression.

# Chapter 1

“Hi Serena,” Zosia says cheerfully, a little drunk. “Come and sit with me and Bernie, we’re forming a club for unusual names.”

“Ah, I see.” Serena sits down and grins at them. “May I join or is mine not good enough?”

“Not good enough, I’d say, but your girlfriend certainly qualifies. She doesn’t look like a Berenice I don’t think, do you?”

Serena smiles at her. “No, I wouldn’t say so. Bernie fits much better.”

“I’ve been Bernie ever since I can remember, no-one in my family calls me anything but Bernie. Although Serena calls me Berenice when I’m in trouble.”

“I don’t!” Serena says indignantly.

“It’s Berenice *Griselda* when I’m in a *lot* of trouble.”

“Will you please stop talking nonsense,” Serena says firmly, although Bernie can see the happiness behind her attempt at a stern expression.

“What about Zosia, is it from a particular country?”

“I’m told it’s Polish, but Dad says they got it from a book.”

“It’s very pretty, it suits you.”

“Why thank you Ms Wolfe,” says Zosia, grinning at her.

“Oh...no, I didn’t mean-”

“You think I’m suited to a pretty name? I’m flattered.”

“I meant that your *name*’s pretty, not that you’re...I mean, not that you’re *not*, er-”

“You think I’m not *not* pretty, so that means-“

“I think your *name* is pretty, your face isn’t-“

“Shut up, Bernie,” Serena says calmly, the hint of a smile on her face.

“I’d quite like to extract myself from this conversation.”

Serena leans forward and takes Bernie’s hand. “What Berenice Griselda is trying to say Zosia is that firstly, you have a very nice name, which you do, and secondly, she is unable to offer any opinion on your own personal level of attractiveness as she became completely blind to

the charms of other women the very moment she clapped eyes on me. Isn't that what you were trying to say, Bernie?"

"That was it exactly," Bernie says stiffly.

"Good. Drink your gin."

OOOOOOOOOO

"Serena?"

"Mmm?"

"What's that?" Bernie says, pointing.

"What?"

"On your desk."

"The telephone? That's a telephone."

"Next to it."

"That's a computer, it's a clever little invention--"

"The photo! In the frame!"

"That's you, Bernie, in a photo, in a frame," Serena says slowly. "Are you feeling quite all right, you don't seem to be altogether with it."

"Obviously it's me, but why is it there?"

Serena's face falls. "I would have thought that was just as obvious. I thought we'd been through all that, you don't mind that everyone knows about us?"

"That's not what I mean, I don't mind you having it there."

"Then what's the problem?"

Bernie smiles at her. "Serena. Look at the photo. Then look at me."

Serena does. "I don't see your point. It looks just like you, I only took it last month. Your hair's much neater than usual but--"

"The point is that we sit directly opposite each other, all day every day. You sit looking at me all day and you have a photo of me on your desk when you could just as easily look at the *actual* me. I don't understand."

"Well you're not there all the time, are you? Some days you're not there at all. What am I supposed to do then?"

A long pause.

“Oh,” Bernie says eventually. “That’s very...”

“What?” Serena says warily.

“Sweet,” she says softly. “It’s very sweet.”

“Oh. All right then.”

They smile at each other and go back to their paperwork.

“Might ask Jason to make me a screensaver.”

“Don’t push it.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“It’s...the thing is, Serena...”

“Yes?”

“The thing is...”

Serena waits for the rest of the sentence but it doesn’t come. “You look dreadfully uncomfortable. Why don’t you come and sit down next to me rather than propping yourself up against the mantelpiece?”

Bernie smiles nervously. “I’m trying to talk about...sex.”

“All right. And that requires a standing position?”

“I might need to pace up and down a bit.”

They smile at each other but the nerves are clear in Bernie’s body language. A nervous Bernie always brings out a mixture of anxiety and protective affection in her; she badly wants to give her a big hug.

“Before we, that is, before you and I...” she trails off helplessly. “Before there’s any sex, I think we should talk about it first,” she says all in a rush.

“All right. Are you rubbish at it?”

Bernie stares at her. “What?”

“Lesbian sex, are you crap at it? Don’t know a clitoris from a catheter, couldn’t make a woman come if you had a vibrator, a harness and a dildo the size of your arm?”

Bernie stares at her for a few seconds before bursting out laughing.

“Because honestly, Bern, I couldn’t care less. It’s not like I’m going to have any idea what I’m doing, is it? I might end up in the wrong place entirely, give you a good seeing to in quite the wrong orifice. It’ll be you and me naked in a bed, Bernie. That’s all I want. All I dream about. I think it’s fair to say that neither of us is going to be an expert in the bedroom department but quite frankly just kissing you is more exciting than several entire relationships I’ve had the misfortune to endure previously, so you’re not going to have to try very hard. Believe me.”

Feeling the tension drain out of her, Bernie joins her girlfriend on the sofa.

“Is that true? Really?”

Serena leans over and kisses her. “Really.”

“How did you know what I was going to say?”

Serena smiles at her. “Because funnily enough, it turns out my big macho army medic is a bit of a worrier when it comes to such matters. And you’ve been snogging me into a sexual frenzy practically every night and then bugging off home even though it was obvious you wanted to stay, so I’ve been thinking about why that might be. And feeling like you had to be the world’s most accomplished lesbian lover because you once had a girlfriend for a few months seemed like a very Bernie thing to do.”

Bernie reaches out to take her hand. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

“Well, I’d wait until you’ve been to bed with me before you say that.”

“You can’t possibly be bad in bed, Serena, you’re so warm, so vibrant...”

The look in Bernie’s eyes is so earnest she finds herself fighting back tears. “What a lovely thing to say,” she manages.

They gaze at each other for long moments, the air becoming charged with electricity.

“You and me naked in a bed?” Bernie says softly.

“That was what I was thinking, yes.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes,” Serena replies simply. “Oh yes.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Auntie Serena, Bernie got the conundrum again! It was ‘abrasions’.”

“Well done Bernie,” Serena says wearily, kicking off her shoes and dropping her bag by the front door.

“You’ve never, ever got the conundrum have you Auntie Serena?”

“Might have got that one,” she mutters, hanging up her coat.

“That’s three times now Bernie’s got it right, she’s still a long way behind me but she might catch up eventually if she watches Countdown every day. She said she didn’t know it was on every weekday but that was a stupid thing to say because it’s been on every weekday for 34 years, two months and twelve days.”

Serena walks into the living room to find Jason’s eyes fixed on the television as he fast-forwards to the next episode of Countdown, sitting as usual as close to the screen as possible. And a rather smug-looking Bernie grinning at her from the sofa.

“Have you really never, *ever* got the conundrum?” Bernie asks innocently.

“It would appear not,” Serena says.

“Not one single, solitary time?”

“Have you two eaten?”

“Bernie made me scrambled eggs, they taste much better than yours do.”

“Of course they do.”

“Be quiet now, I’m starting the next episode. Bernie said she’d watch Monday to Wednesday with me.”

“Lovely,” she mutters. “And do you mind terribly if I’m in the room too?”

“I don’t mind but you can’t talk.”

“Duly noted.”

She sits down heavily on the sofa, the ten-hour shift catching up with her. Leaning back she closes her eyes and sighs as quietly as possible to avoid being told off. After a few moments she feels a soft kiss on her cheek and she opens her eyes to find Bernie looking at her with a slightly guilty expression.

“I would mind terribly if you weren’t in the room,” she says quietly. “Even if you’re crap at conundrums and don’t put butter in your scrambled eggs.”

Serena smiles at her. “Good to know someone still likes me.”

“Be quiet, Auntie Serena.”

“Bernie started it.”

“You’re the one talking now. How are you going to get better at Countdown if you don’t even pay attention? Bernie doesn’t talk unless I ask her to.”

“Bernie’s better trained than I am.”

“She is when we watch television, you always talk.”

Serena sighs again. “Bernie’s superior in every way.”

“But you don’t leave the kitchen in a state or make a loud honking noise when you laugh, so I think you’re about equal overall.”

Bernie’s mouth drops open; Serena bursts out laughing.

OOOOOOOOOOO

“What on earth’s that?”

“It’s a hat.”

“No!”

“Yes it is!” She puts it on to prove it.

“It’s a cylindrical badger!”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Did you hunt it down yourself or were they selling them pre-slaughtered?”

“It’s polyester from Marks and Spencers.”

“It’s astonishing.”

“Thank you.”

“Did it come with a matching stoat that you can wrap around your neck?”

“No.”

“Did it come with two matching voles that you can wear as little earmuffs?”

Serena takes the hat off and places it firmly on Bernie’s head.

“You no longer have to look at the hat. Problem solved. Come along.”

OOOOOOOOOOO

“So how are things in the old Berena bubble of love?”

“The *what?*”



“*Berena*. That’s you and Serena, you know, like Brangelina. Or Brexit. Zosia wanted to go with Campwolfe but I thought that was pants.”

“That is thoroughly juvenile, Dr Copeland.”

“Thank you. So how are things? Serena seems very happy these days now that you’re all loved up.”

Bernie looks away. “Hopefully. I mean, I think she is.”

“You *think*? I caught her singing in the supply closet the other day, something about sunsets and moonlight. And she looks at you like you’re heaven in human form.”

“Hardly,” Bernie mutters, shifting slightly on the steps.

“Are you blushing? You are! I didn’t know soldiers blushed. You’re adorable.”

“Knock it off, doctor.”

“You’re so in *lurve* it’s sickening. I might vomit right now you’re so smitten.”

“Dominic-“

“Sorry, I’ll shut it. I’m pleased for you, I’m not taking the piss.”

“Mmm. It is, contrary to my expectations, going surprisingly well.”

“I knew you two were going to work out, once you moved back from Outer Mongolia.”

“One hurdle left, though.” She takes a deep breath and wishes she had a cigarette. “I’m starting to work up to the whole...three little words conversation. Girding my loins as it were.”

Dom stares at her. “Three little words?”

“I, you and the unspeakable. Unspeakable if you’re me, that is.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Love, Dominic, you must know-“

“You haven’t *told* her yet?”

“Of course I haven’t told her, it’s only been six months.”

“But I told her! Two weeks ago! I assumed she already knew, it’s been six months!”

Bernie stares at him in dismay. “You’re not serious.”

“Deadly! Two weeks ago, in your office. You’d just left and she was talking about you and all glowing, you know how she gets when she mentions you, and I said how pleased I was that

you had finally got your head out of your arse and admitted how much you loved her because I was crap at keeping secrets and you'd told me ages ago. How can you not have told her?!"

"Oh God. What did she say?"

"Not much, really, now I think about it. I mean she was a bit more glowy than usual but I just thought that was, you know, because you'd recently been in the room and she was still suffering from the after effects."

"Oh fantastic. So she finds out I love her via Chinese whispers and I still haven't said it to her a fortnight later. Jesus Dominic."

"Sorry. Me and my big mouth."

"It wasn't...Friday two weeks ago, the weekend with the bank holiday?"

"Uh...yeah, actually, I think it might have been, how did you know that?"

"No reason," Bernie says quickly.

"No, come on, how did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"Major, you're blushing like a beetroot. Out with it."

"She may have, uh, expressed her happiness in a...non-verbal manner. More than once."

"What do you...OMG, Berena sexy times!"

"You really must stop that."

"You *have* to tell her. For your own sake as well as hers, it's getting ridiculous. You'll get married before you tell her at this rate."

"I know. Although not the married part, thank you, I'm sure if I can manage to propose I can manage to say the other thing first."

"Oh Bernie, are you thinking about *proposing*? That is so--"

"Right, Dr Copeland, I've suddenly remembered I left a patient on the table with his spleen hanging out, if you'll excuse me." She gets up and starts to head back inside.

"Berena forever!" he calls after her. "And for God's sake woman, 'fess up!"

OOOOOOOOOO

"Here," Bernie says, placing the wine on the table within Serena's reach.

"Mm. Thanks."

She sits down on the sofa next to her, smiling to herself as Serena immediately snuggles into her again.

“What did I miss?” she says, wrapping an arm around her.

“I think the brother did it, the one who looks a bit shifty all the time. He was opening a mysterious envelope.”

“What does a mysterious envelope look like exactly?”

“Yes all right smarty-pants, the envelope wasn’t mysterious, it was the music. Now quiet please, he’s looking shifty again.”

Bernie watches for a few minutes as the characters on screen play out another scene and then an ad break comes on.

“What time are you in tomorrow? I’m not on until 10.”

“I’ll be in early but I can wait for you later and catch up on paperwork.”

“Sounds good. I should be done by about seven. Maybe we can go out to dinner if you’re not too tired and also I love you.”

“Good plan, that Italian place was...was...what did you say?”

“I said I love you.”

Serena sits up straight and stares at her. “You...”

“You heard. Sorry, that sounded...I meant, you heard what I think you said. What you think *I* said. Was what you heard. Because I said it. Bloody hell.”

Serena doesn’t say anything, but she’s smiling. And starting to glow.

“You knew that already though, didn’t you? A certain F1?”

“I did.” There’s a catch in her voice that goes straight to Bernie’s heart. “But it was awfully nice of you to finally mention it.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Serena reaches forward and tenderly strokes her cheek. “I think you already know how I feel, but I’m going to say it out loud, all right? Don’t want to frighten the horses this time round. Are you ready?”

“I am.”

“Then if I may say so, Bernie Wolfe, you wonderful, wonderful woman, I love you very much. But don’t go to Russia.”

It’s a good ten seconds before she can speak. “Not a chance,” she whispers.

OOOOOOOOOOO

The soft, magical hands glide over her back one last time before she feels the light tap on her shoulder that Serena uses to signal the end of a massage. It's all she can do not to beg her to continue, but it must have lasted at least 20 minutes already and she knows it's hard work – Serena doesn't hold back when she touches her like this and she's *fantastic* at it. Any pain she'd been experiencing had disappeared long ago and since then it's been pure, unadulterated pleasure.

"Thank you," she says earnestly. "That feels so much better."

"Your trapezius muscle felt rather better this time but there's still some tension in the latissimus dorsi that we should monitor."

Bernie fights to keep a grin off her face. "Oh really?"

"Yes, I think that's the main area of concern, it would correlate with your original injury of course." She's sitting bolt upright on the side of the bed, her eyes looking anywhere but at Bernie who is still lying down, naked from the waist up.

"I really do feel much better."

"Yes, that's good, good, glad to hear it." Serena looks at the lampshade, then the carpet, then an ornament in the shape of a frog.

"You know what the best part is?"

"Hmm?"

"The best part is afterwards when you try to hide how much this turns you on."

Serena turns to her sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking, Ms Campbell, about the fact that you're exhibiting all the classic symptoms of arousal. You're flushed, your breathing is accelerated and your pulse..." Bernie sits up and places two fingers gently onto Serena's neck. "Oh my, your pulse is racing. This really gets you going, doesn't it?"

Bernie grins wickedly as Serena immediately pulls away and stands up, looking thoroughly offended. "That was *medicinal! Recuperative!* I wasn't *enjoying* myself!"

"I certainly was."

"...I...you..."

"Serena, you've just had your hands all over me, I don't know why you feel like it's not supposed to excite you. It always excites me."

The blush on Serena's face starts to spread to her neck, although she's still feigning detachment. "I thought you couldn't talk about sex," she says sternly.

“What can I say, we’ve been having so much of it I think you’ve cured that little affliction. Shall we have some more now?”

Silence. But then she can actually see the moment that Serena’s desire wins out.

“Fine,” she says, still sounding a bit cross but starting to take her shirt off anyway. “But don’t put your back out.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Oh Bernie, don’t get upset about it, it didn’t mean anything.”

“I’m pretty sure he thought it meant something.”

“Of course he didn’t, it was harmless flirting!”

“I’m pretty sure he thought he was going home with you.” She opens her sock drawer and then, realizing she should be shedding clothes rather than gathering them, closes it again with as much fury as a sock drawer can muster.

“What he thought was that he was having a perfectly ordinary conversation with a woman at a bar and he’d pay her a compliment, that was all.”

“What a *beautiful* necklace, really brings out your eyes, really sets off your nose, really dangles around your neck so *cleverly*.” She starts to get undressed.

“For goodness’ sake woman you were sat right next to me! I’d told him who you were, I even said you’d been in the army. Do you honestly think he was making a pass at me when my army major girlfriend was looking daggers at him?”

“Damn right he was,” she growls, throwing her shirt onto the floor angrily.

“Pick that up please.”

“I will not.” She throws her trousers on the floor for good measure.

“You know I flirt with everyone!”

“That’s your *defence*?”

“Yes, it is actually! If you were flirting with someone I’d know you meant it, that you were attracted to them, but it doesn’t mean that with me. I flirt with everyone at work, you know I do. I flirted with Hanssen the other day when he was all dolled up in his tuxedo, you were stood right there. Did you think I was going to run off with him?”

Bernie starts pulling on her pyjamas, turning her back on her lover who’s already in bed.  
“Maybe.”

“Of course you didn’t. What about when I told Raf he had beautiful eyes, did you think I was propositioning him for sex?”

“That man thought you were propositioning him for sex.”

“That man thought nothing of the kind. You’ve put your trousers on back to front.”

She looks down at her pyjama bottoms, checks the little label and starts to take them off again, barely suppressing a growl of frustration.

“I will try to tone it down if it makes you uncomfortable, but you really must understand that you and I relate to people in different ways. Flirting for me is just talking, more or less, it happens without me even noticing. Flirting from you means something.”

Having corrected her pyjamas she stands at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips.

“I hated the way he was looking at you. He obviously wanted you and I *hated* it. I wanted to tell him that you’re taken, you’re *mine*.”

Serena, to her surprise, grins wickedly. “Why didn’t you? I would have loved that.”

Bernie stares at her, completely thrown. “*What?!*”

“You coming over all possessive, the big macho army medic putting him in his place. Sounds delicious.”

She stands there, trying to fathom her lover’s mind. “But surely...I mean me coming over all Neanderthal is hardly what you want, is it?”

“Why ever not? Like I said, it sounds delish. I rather wish you’d done just that.”

“Marcus used to be possessive and it drove me round the bend. He’d put his arm around me whenever another man was anywhere near me, always made sure that any single men knew I was taken. It used to make me feel like an object he was laying claim to.”

“Ah. I see. Well, that may be another area where you and I differ. I wouldn’t mind in the least if you went all possessive and shouted to the whole world that I was yours.”

Bernie sits on the side of the bed, not quite ready to get in it yet. “But I don’t want to have to shout about it,” she says quietly.

“Oh, Bernie. You *don’t* have to shout about, I promise you. I *am* yours. I *do* belong to you. It hasn’t upset you when I’ve flirted at work, has it?”

“No,” she says, reluctantly but truthfully.

“So do you think tonight it was because that man didn’t know me, he didn’t know that I was a big old flirt and might have taken me seriously?”

“Maybe.”

“But as long as *you* know I’m not serious, that I’d never, ever hurt you, isn’t that what counts?”

Bernie looks at her, turning everything over in her mind, trying to recall the feeling of furious jealousy that is rapidly fading away.

“So what we’ve concluded here is that you’re allowed to flirt with the world and his wife and I can’t flirt with anyone, is that right?”

“Well,” Serena says hesitantly. “Yes. I suppose so. Because we both know what that means. Or doesn’t mean, in my case.”

They gaze at each other for a few moments.

“Come to bed,” Serena says gently.

“That doesn’t seem fair at all.”

“No. It doesn’t. But I think that’s the way it is. Do you really disagree?”

Bernie looks at her lover. She’s wearing a silky nightgown that bares the tops of her shoulders; her face is scrubbed free of make-up and her expression reveals only gentle, honest love.

“No,” she says quietly. “No, I don’t disagree.”

“Then come to bed, sweetheart. But please pick your clothes up first, I won’t be able to sleep if I know they’re down there.”

OOOOOOOOOO

Bernie watches quietly from across the living room, waiting. Her girlfriend is engrossed in a magazine.

“I quite like this jumper.”

“Mm,” Bernie says.

“It’s only ten thousand pounds from Harrods, I’ll put it in my Christmas list.”

“OK.”

“It’s got diamonds sewn into the sleeves.”

Bernie stands up.

“Goodness knows what happens if you lose one in the washing machine.”

Bernie walks over to stand beside her.

“I suppose if you can spend ten thousand pounds on a jumper you can send your servant down the drain to fetch it.”

“Stand up.”

Serena looks up at her. "Sorry?"

"Stand up."

Serena stands up, looking puzzled. "Is everything-"

In one quick movement Bernie takes hold of her, pushes her firmly against the wall and kisses her passionately, holding Serena's arms by her sides and pressing their bodies together tightly to trap her in the embrace. Serena is motionless for a few seconds, stunned, and Bernie almost pulls away in alarm, but then she hears a groan of pure arousal and her lover melts into her, kissing her back with a hunger that sends a thrill down her spine. They kiss deeply, intensely, the shared lust of the moment making her ache with longing.

When they finally break apart they're both panting. Serena looks more than a little dazed; Bernie's pulse is a mile a minute. She gradually loosens her hold but doesn't let her go.

"What...what was...where did that come from?"

"You, the other day," Bernie says breathlessly. "What you said about being possessive, the macho army medic stuff. I, um, got the impression that you might like a bit of..." She trails off, unable to verbalise what she's just done.

"A bit of what?" Serena grins at her.

"A bit of...that. Don't know what to call it. Was I right?"

"Damn right you were right. I'd like a bit more, too."

"Your wish is my command."

In one smooth, swift movement, she picks Serena up and starts heading to the stairs. Serena looks at her as if she's heaven in human form.

"But I'm not buying you that jumper, that's just mad."

OOOOOOOOOO

"Berenice Griselda Wolfe!"

Raf turns to her in alarm. "That can't be good," he whispers.

"Nope," Bernie says weakly.

"My office, now." Serena disappears back into the office and slams the door behind her.

"Do you want me to call the police if you're not out in an hour?"

"Undertakers, more like it. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, soldier. Some corner of a foreign field..."



“That’s not helpful.”

She heads over to their office, taking a surreptitious deep breath before entering and closing the door behind her. No need for the entire ward to hear the explosions.

“Everything all right?” she says breezily.

“No it bloody isn’t! Look at this mess! Is it too much to ask that you don’t turn my desk into a pigsty for God’s sake, I mean is that genuinely too much to ask?”

Bernie glances at the crisp packet and empty can of Coke. “Sorry, I was-“

“I mean *seriously* Bernie, how hard is it to use the bin, is it really beyond your capabilities?”

“Of course it-“

“We’re completely swamped with patients, I haven’t had five minutes to myself since eight o’clock this morning, Hanssen’s on my back about turnaround times, the agency keeps sending nurses who can barely dress a wound, Jason’s had a massive strop because the television broke and we can’t buy a new one that’s *exactly* like the old one and on top of that you leave your mess everywhere and expect me to clean it up!”

Bernie gingerly picks up the crisp packet and Coke can and puts them in the bin. “I’ve cleaned it up. Sorry.”

Serena puts her hands on hips. “Yes. Well. Shouldn’t have left it there in the first place, should you?”

“Won’t happen again.”

“Well then.” She sits down heavily. “All right then.”

There’s a long, tense silence. Bernie can’t tell whether she’s supposed to leave or stay so she hovers awkwardly by the door.

“I’ll put a rocket up the agency, you’re right about the nurses and it’s not good enough.”

Serena runs a hand through her hair. “Good. Fine.”

“And I can have a chat with Jason. If we get him a bigger telly than you had before he might not mind so much.”

“Right,” Serena says quietly.

Another silence.

“Would it help if I killed Hanssen? Quietly, in a corner. No-one would know.”

Serena sighs, but she relaxes slightly in her chair. “It’s possible that some of what I just said may not have been entirely your fault.”

“Well...”

“Possibly even *most* of what I just said. Obviously the Coke can and salt and vinegar were your doing and as I happened to see them last...”

“Straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Looks like it. Although you seem to have got the blame for the whole camel.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, no, it’s not. I shouldn’t take things out on you just because you’re handy. I’m sorry.”

Serena sits forward and reaches out to her. Without thinking Bernie takes her hand, leans down and gently kisses the back of it. Immediately she feels self-conscious, but the brilliant smile that appears on her lover’s face makes it worthwhile.

“Oh my. How very chivalrous you are, Ms Wolfe.”

“Only for you, Ms Campbell.”

“Very dashing. Please don’t murder Hanssen.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Bought you something.”

Bernie hands her the plastic bag, smiling at the look of anticipation that appears on her girlfriend’s face. But her reaction when she pulls out the grey Holby City hoodie is rather underwhelming.

“Uh...” says Serena. “Right. Thank you.”

“You don’t sound very pleased.”

“No, no, it’s nice.”

“Is it not the right colour? They had them in white I think.”

“Colour’s fine.”

“Then I’m lost. I thought you wanted one, you’ve been wearing my one all the time.”

Serena smiles at her tenderly. “Yes. I have.”

“So that one’s exactly the same.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes it is, same colour, same size, same logo.”

“Bernie.”

“Same hood.”

“Bernie. Sit quietly for a little while and have a think.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m an imbecile, I know a grey hoodie when I see one.”

“Sit. Quietly. And. Think.”

Grumpily, she does. *Grey*, she thinks. *Hood*, she thinks. *High maintenance girlfriend*, she thinks. And then...

“Oh,” she says softly. “Because it was mine.”

“There it is.”

Serena smiles at her again, another beautiful, tender smile. It does something to her heart that she couldn’t articulate in a million lifetimes.

“I’m not used to this,” Bernie says earnestly. “To someone loving me like this.”

“Well get used to it sunshine because this is your life now.”

They gaze at each other quietly.

“Can I have this new one?” says Bernie. “If you’ve officially pilfered mine.”

“Of course.”

A small pause.

“Can I have your orange shirt?”

“No you can’t!”

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

A couple of Christmas scenes based on last night's jumpers and mistletoe. Merry Christmas and thanks to everyone who read and/or commented on the first chapter!

“Fletch! Psst! Get in here!”

“Did you just say ‘psst’? You’re not supposed to actually say it, you make the noise.”

“Just get in here will you and close the door.”

She practically hauls him into the office where Jason and Raf are already waiting.

“All right Raf,” says Fletch. “Hello, mate.”

“Hello,” says Jason. “I have eight minutes left on my lunch break. Bernie’s acting peculiar.”

“Is she now? Even more than usual?”

“Never mind that, Fletcher, pipe down and listen. I need your help. All of you. I want to give Serena a present but it has to happen stealthily. This is the plan...”

Five minutes later the three men are lined up neatly at the admin desk with Bernie stood at the back. She takes a deep breath and tries to push down her nerves.

“There she is. Ready everyone?”

“Ready,” say Fletch and Raf.

“I have three minutes left on my lunch break,” says Jason.

“That’s why you’re going first, Jason. On my signal, all right?”

“All right.”

“Good.” She takes another breath. “Ms Campbell?” she calls out across the ward. “Can I have a word?”

Serena heads over to the desk. “Yes? Why are you lot all standing around doing nothing?”

“We were waiting for you.”

“All of you? What do you need?”

“Look up.”

Serena looks up. “Mistletoe? Who put that there?”

“Oh look, chaps,” Bernie says loudly, pointing at the ceiling. “Mistletoe! Where could that have come from? And Ms Campbell has stood right underneath it! What do you think we should do, Jason?” She taps the side of her nose.

“You kiss people who are under the mistletoe,” says Jason. He steps forward and kisses his rather surprised looking Aunt on the cheek. “I’m going now.”

“Uh...right,” says a slightly puzzled Serena, watching him go.

Raf steps forward and kisses her on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Serena.”

Fletch steps forward and kisses her on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, boss. Have a good one.”

Bernie steps forward and kisses her gently – still on the cheek, but far closer to her lips than any of the others.

“Merry Christmas, darling,” she whispers.

A blush starts to bloom on Serena’s face as the understanding dawns.

“A clandestine Christmas kiss,” she says softly, a pleased smile dancing around her eyes.

“For the lady who likes kisses but not gossip.”

“A cunning scheme indeed.”

“I like to think so.”

They smile at each other happily. Bernie looks up at the mistletoe.

“Shall we take it home?”

“Oh please, as if you need an excuse to kiss me at home. I can barely fight you off as it is, it’s very trying.”

Fletch and Raf both snigger.

“You little—”

“Now everyone back to work and stop your dawdling.”

OOOOOOOO

The knock on her office door makes her jump; it’s six o’clock on Christmas Eve and the ward is unnaturally silent. “Come in.”

Henrik Hanssen steps through the doorway. “Ms Wolfe.”

“Mr Hanssen. What can I do for you?”

“Just a final check before I leave. Everything in order?”

“A well-oiled machine, Mr Hanssen, I assure you. All surgeries completed, all locums in place for tomorrow, all patients fed and watered.”

“Good. I shall leave things in your capable hands, Ms Wolfe. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

He turns to leave but she can't quite resist.

“I like your jumper,” she says casually.

He turns back to her, giving her a clear view of the large happy reindeer motif.

“Thank you,” he says. “And I like yours.”

She looks down at the dancing snowman. “Thank you. Does yours sing?”

“Excuse me?”

“My snowman sings ‘Silent Night’ if you press his carrot.”

“Ah. I believe mine lights up around the nose. I have yet to try it.”

“I'll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Hanssen studies her for a few moments; she just about retains her composure.

“After three?” he says eventually.

She nods.

“One...two...three.”

They both press their buttons. The reindeer's nose emits a bright red glow and a tinny rendition of ‘Silent Night’ comes out of the snowman. Bernie stares carefully at the carpet.

The music stops.

“A persuasive woman, your co-lead,” says Hanssen.

“That she is,” Bernie says, nodding. “That she is.”

A small pause.

“A threatening woman, one might say.”

“What was your punishment for non-compliance? I was going to be eating turkey by myself in the conservatory.”

“Mince pies would be hurled at my head.”

“Well that’s no way to talk to one’s superior.”

“Indeed not. I’m glad you concur.”

He turns to leave again; she looks down at the snowman and smiles.

“You know, Mr Hanssen, it occurs to me that in the season of goodwill to all men we may have been a bit uncharitable just now, towards someone who is rather dear to me and was only trying to persuade two Ebenezer Scrooges to enjoy themselves. Perhaps we could agree on ‘formidable woman’ instead?”

What may or may not be the hint of a smile appears on Hanssen’s face.

“I believe you’re quite correct, Ms Wolfe, both in sentiment and in vocabulary. ‘Formidable’ is far more apt.”

“‘Formidable’ it is. Merry Christmas, Henrik.”

“Merry Christmas, Berenice. And merry Christmas to your snowman.”

## Scenes From A Second Year of Love

“Not that one.”

Serena pauses, standing in her bra and skirt and holding the shirt that’s still on its hanger.

“Don’t you like this one?” she says.

“It’s just...it’s a bit...”

“A bit what? I bought this when you were coming home from Kiev, to lure you back into my clutches. Perfect for a first anniversary, I’d say.”

“It’s just rather...”

“What?”

“Taupe.”

“Taupe?!”

“Yes.”

“You mean dull.”

“...Yes.”

“It’s got stripes.”

“Stripes of taupe.”

“Well I like it.”

“Then you should wear it.”

“But I bought it for you. Or for you to look at, rather, when you’re looking at me. So it’s hardly fulfilling its purpose if you don’t even like it.”

“If I was classifying you as a shirt I wouldn’t pick that one, that’s all.”

“Classifying me as a shirt?!”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Serena holds up the shirt to her body and studies herself in the mirror. “What category of shirt would I fit into if not this one?”

“That shirt isn’t you. Your leopard print shirt is you, certainly. The black one with white splotchy things on it. The orange one, or that really bright red one that made my socks go



pink. You're not taupe. Taupe is Kevin in accounts who collects rulers, it's not Serena Campbell."

Serena looks in the mirror again. "I suppose it is more subdued than I'd usually buy. Perhaps..." She trails off, suddenly looking sad.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Not this one, I think you're right." She drops the shirt onto the bed.

"Serena? What is it?"

"I don't want to say. It might hurt you. And I have no desire to hurt you, especially not today."

That makes her pause. But honesty, however painful, has to be the choice; honesty is the only reason she has a relationship this wonderful in the first place.

"Tell me. I can take it."

There are a few moments of tense silence.

"I was taupe when you ran away," Serena says quietly.

Bernie closes her eyes, takes in a long, deep breath.

"I did warn you--"

"I know."

"I do *not* want another apology. We can accept the past without uprooting it. Accept that we've both moved on while acknowledging where we came from. All right?"

She says the only thing she can think of; the only thing she knows.

"I loved you. I loved you then and I love you now. That's why I ran."

To her relief, Serena smiles. "I know. I love you too."

Bernie crosses the room and picks up the striped shirt from the bed. "Permission to burn it with fire," she says.

Serena laughs. "Permission granted. Now, what am I going to wear. I do have some shirts you haven't seen yet, you know."

"Is that right?"

"Oh yes. You don't know all my secrets, Major. This, for example." She takes out a sleek, black velvet top and slips it on. It is very, very low cut. She is very, very beautiful. Bernie gapes at her helplessly.

Serena reaches her hands up under the back of the shirt. “Can’t wear a bra with this one.”

“We have a winner.”

OOOOOOOOOO

Three glasses, she decides. Three is the absolute limit. Three glasses of Shiraz means a bubbly but dignified Serena and a lovely evening.

Four glasses of Shiraz means...problems.

She shifts uncomfortably as Serena leans in even closer. As well as the head resting heavily on Bernie’s shoulder there’s now the arm around her waist to deal with too. Not to mention at least half a dozen colleagues scattered around the room and the acting CEO of the entire hospital sat opposite her.

She knew she should have just watched Countdown.

“An eight-week programme to begin with,” Ric is saying, “but it all depends on the funding, we might manage to extend it to ten or twelve.”

“Results of the preliminaries available?”

“Not yet, it should be end of June sometime. I’ll be sure to pass them on to you.”

“I’d appreciate that, the ventricular fibrillation data in particular is right up my street.”

But no, why choose a quiet night at home when you could paint the town red with your girl; that’s what Serena had said, anyway. So now she’s sitting on a sofa at Albie’s trying to act as if women regularly drape themselves over her in bars.

Her right arm has been resting awkwardly along the back of the sofa but that’s starting to feel ridiculous so she gradually lowers it down, slides it around Serena’s waist as nonchalantly as possible and tries to concentrate on what Ric is saying about cardiac rehab.

A quick check to see whether people are looking. Across the room Dominic meets her eyes and winks. She looks back at him steadily with her very best Major Wolfe stare of authority, which she is pleased to see still has the desired effect as he drops his eyes and turns away. On the other side of the room she notices Raf watching her; he grins and gives her a small salute. She can’t help smiling back, relieved to find that no-one else seems to care about her predicament.

As her self-consciousness slowly begins to fade she becomes more aware of her lover’s delicious body heat; of the intimacy of their embrace; of the warm, fuzzy feeling that’s growing inside her from this very public display of affection.

Maybe four drinks is the limit after all.

Ric continues to explain his clinical programme and she tries to concentrate on nodding at the appropriate intervals rather than the soft breath on her neck. Serena might actually have gone

to sleep and Bernie is weighing up whether this is a welcome development or not when Serena makes a quiet snuffling noise and opens her eyes.

“Good evening, Ms Campbell,” Ric says. “I wasn’t sure you were still with us.”

“I’m cuddling Bernie,” Serena announces. Bernie tenses and thinks about conundrums.

“I see that,” Ric says, smiling.

Serena sighs happily and snuggles in closer. “I love Bernie,” she says sleepily.

Bernie shoots a look at her boss. He looks back at her, still smiling, a gentle look in his eyes.

“I see that too,” he says.

OOOOOOOOOO

“I don’t, really. Nothing to tell.”

“Oh come on, you can tell me. Everybody fantasises Bernie, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just me. Tell me what you fantasise about.”

“No, really, I don’t, I’m not being coy. I suppose I used to when I was younger but not these days.”

“Oh.” Deflated, Serena tries to hide her disappointment. “You don’t think about sex at all?”

“Of course I do.”

“You just said-“

“I think about *sex*, Serena. I think about you. But that’s not fantasy, that’s reality. I like to...”

“To what?”

“You know.”

“No, I’m going to have to insist on the use of words on this occasion, my darling. You can be as explicit or euphemistic as you please, but you have to use your words.”

Bernie half-heartedly hits her with a cushion. “I told you. I think about you, the last time we were together, I sort of...replay it in my head. Or sometimes...”

“Yes, what happens sometimes?” Serena says, sounding as if she really wants to know.

“Sometimes I think about a specific time that we were together. I have a few, um, a few times, not a list as such, but a list, uh, *no*, a collection of...I’m going to stop talking now.”

“Not if you wish to remain alive.”

“There are just, you know, certain times we’ve been together when things are really, uh, when it’s been really...and I remember them. Obviously. And think about them afterwards.”

“You think about the sex you enjoyed the most?”

She smiles wryly. “That would be a quicker way of saying it, yes.”

Ten seconds later she has a notebook and pen shoved into her hands. “What’s this?”

“Write the list. Right now.”

Bernie laughs. “I’m not writing it down.”

“If you loved me you’d write it down. If you *really* loved me you’d draw diagrams.”

“I love you very much. Have a notebook.” Bernie throws it at her; Serena pretends to pout.

“I want to make you happy, darling.”

“You do.”

“Happier and happier. In every aspect of our lives, including the bedroom. You never tell me what you want in bed. And I have to say that this is hardly an altruistic exercise. I’m very happy to admit that you asking me for something sexual that you want is one of *my* fantasies.”

Bernie looks at her quickly before she has to look away again. She can tell Serena is serious – and she can tell from the desire in her eyes that she’s not lying about her own interest in the subject – but this conversation is really not in her comfort zone.

“What are your other fantasies?” she says, stalling for time.

“Sex in the office, sex in a public place, handcuffs, lingerie, watching you with another woman-“

“Hey!”

“Strap-ons, feathers, teasing me until I scream-“

“Stop, stop, good heavens, you have to stop.”

Serena grins at her. “I have a vivid imagination.”

“No kidding. We are *not* having sex in our office.”

“Oh *that’s* where you draw the line, is it, so watching you with another woman-“

“No! None of them! Ever!”

A little voice in her head insists that there were at least three things on Serena’s list that she’d almost certainly love, but she studiously ignores it. Serena puts a hand on her thigh.

“All I’m saying darling is that, as wonderful as our sex life is, if you never ask me for anything you’ll never get it. I’ve asked you for oodles of things, for more, for faster, slower, for your mouth or your hand. But you always leave me guessing. All you’d have to do is tell me the top item on your list and we could do it, right now, tonight. We could do it every day. Doesn’t that sound lovely?”

The hand rubs slowly up and down her thigh. Her voice is even more seductive than usual.

“Tell me one thing, Bernie. Tell me the one time that you think about more than any other. The one that makes you soaking wet.”

She sucks in a breath at her frankness, feeling her arousal start to build as the hand continues to stroke and Serena leans into her.

“I’ll get the notebook if you’d be happier writing it down, but one way or another I’m getting it out of you.” She kisses her lips softly. “And then we’re going to re-enact it,” she whispers in her ear before licking gently at her neck. “Every.” Kiss. “Last.” “Second.” Kiss.

Bernie snaps and starts talking all in a rush.

“We’d gone out for the day to that castle place with the ice cream, and it was hot and you were stunning and you were flirting with me and I wanted you all day. And when we got home you let me...”

“I let you...” Serena whispers.

“You let me hold you from behind, in my arms, and you let me touch you over and over again and touch you however I wanted for as long as I wanted and it was really very...nice.” She winces at the anti-climax. Serena has pulled away slightly and is looking at her with a very strange expression on her face.

“That’s the top of your list? The time you think about more than any other?”

“Don’t make fun of me, I’m baring my soul here.”

“I’m not making fun of you, but Bernie!”

“What?!”

“That should be *my* fantasy!”

“What do you mean?”

Serena bursts out laughing. “The night you made me come until I couldn’t see straight? You don’t see any reason why I might have found that mildly pleasurable?”

“Oh. Well, yes, I see, but so did I.”

“Why that night? And what do you mean that I ‘let you’ give me thousands of orgasms, I don’t usually object to that part do I?”

“No, but you, you usually want to touch me straight after I’ve, er, completed that part. And I usually want that too, of course, but there are times when I...”

A spark of understanding appears in Serena’s eyes. “When you want to be in control. But sometimes you don’t want to *take* control. You want me to give it to you. Surrender.”

“I...yes, I suppose that’s part of it. I hadn’t analysed it in quite this forensic detail, but it’s not only about control. I love touching you, giving you pleasure like that, hearing you...hearing you enjoy it.”

“So after all that, what we’ve learned here is that your idea of the perfect erotic evening is for me to lie back and think of England?”

Bernie shrugs sheepishly. “One of them. When I used to think about women that was most of what I thought about, being able to touch a woman like that, exciting her, even though I knew that I’d never have the chance. And being with you is far better than the fantasies ever were. I understand if it’s not really your-“

Serena drags her to her feet and pulls her bodily along the hall, up the stairs and into the bedroom.

“Honestly, Bernie, the things I do for you.” Serena grins at her and starts to strip. Bernie does the same, albeit rather more slowly, her heart beating wildly.

“Are you sure you’re OK with this?”

Serena walks over to her, takes her hand and slips it gently beneath her underwear.

“A comprehensive answer to your question, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh,” says Bernie. “Crikey.”

Serena laughs. “Now get your clothes off and get on with it.”

“Just one more quick question.”

“Yes?”

“Do you already have the handcuffs?”

OOOOOOOOOO

“I bought you a little present,” says Serena, setting it down carefully on the coffee table.

“What’s this?”

“What does it look like? It’s a cactus.”

Bernie leans forward and touches one of the spines. “Ow!”

“What did you do that for?!”

“I was...checking.”

“Checking what, that it isn’t a hamster in a cactus costume? It’s a cactus.”

“I kill plants. It’ll never make it.”

“Even you can’t kill a cactus.”

“You vastly over-estimate me in the plant department. Why exactly have I got a cactus?”

“It’s your favourite expression, everything’s gone cactus lately, the car, my laptop, the washing machine. You got them all fixed so I thought you deserved one.”

Serena sits down on the sofa. Bernie looks at her cactus.

“It’s called Claud,” says Serena.

“It is not.”

“That’s its name, you can’t change it at this late stage. It says so right on the label.”

She has a look; it does, indeed, say ‘Claud’ on the label sticking out of the little plant pot.

“I’m not ready for this level of responsibility.”

“You’re a trauma surgeon, I’m sure you’ll cope. Now, what are we having for dinner?”

One week later she looks up from her desk to see Bernie watering the cactus from a plastic cup.

Two weeks later she finds Bernie carefully dispensing plant food into the pot. “It’s looking a bit peaky,” she says.

Three weeks later she finds Bernie doing something strange with a paint brush. “I’m dusting him,” she explains. “It said this was the best way online, you can get right in around the prickles.”

Four weeks later she notices that Claud has a new ceramic pot.

Two months later she walks into the office on a Monday morning and finds Bernie standing over the plant.

“My cactus is cactus,” she says forlornly.

Serena snorts before she can stop herself, covering her mouth when Bernie glares at her.

“Sorry. You look like you actually care, it was just a bit of fun.”

“He was jolly dull, not to mention preposterously needy for a cactus, but I still wanted to keep him, he was from you. And now he’s dead. I tried really hard.”

“I know you did. Poor Claud. It was sweet of you to try.”

“Will you buy me an artificial one?”

Serena looks at her, confused. “Why would you want one of those dreadful things? It won’t be the same, surely?”

“No, it’ll be so much better. Mortality rates of zero and no maintenance whatsoever.” She picks up the dead cactus and throws it in the bin.

The plastic one doesn’t have a name. It sits on the filing cabinet for a few days before Serena finds it on her desk under a post-it note reading: ‘Changed my mind. Please purchase real cactus. I will prevail.’

The second one’s called Albert. Two days after he arrives Serena sees that his name has been crossed out on the label – he’s now Claud II.

He lives for a very long time.

OOOOOOOOOOO

Three drinks is definitely the limit.

“We go to-GETH-ER, like a-ramma lamma lama, kerplunky-de dingle dong!”

Bernie tries to hide behind a plant.

“Remembered for-EVER as a shoo-bop sha super duper, uppity coo-ca choo.”

Bernie tries to pretend she’s somewhere else. Most of the party guests seem to be having the time of their lives watching Serena serenade them. Only Jac Naylor is standing with her at this end of the room; she’s not having fun.

“CLANG CLANG! Clonk-a-plonk shooby plop, that’s the way it should be-eee, wah-ohh, YEAH!”

This is the longest, stupidest song she’s ever heard. It’s from Blood Brothers, she thinks, or maybe that one about cats. Wherever it’s from, it’s ridiculous. Several months later it comes to an end; Serena basks in the loud applause, bowing dramatically.

“Sturdy set of lungs on that one,” says Jac.

“Yep.”

“I’m planning a suicide pact if they don’t stop caterwauling before midnight. I’ll kill you, you’ll kill me. Deal?”

“Deal. Although technically that’s not suicide.”

“I don’t give a damn what it’s called as long as I’m ending up dead.”



They stand there for a while and don't talk. It's the best part of the evening so far.

"Where was that song from?" asks Bernie. "Was it from that musical about cats?"

"No."

"Oh. What was it called? That one about cats?"

"Cats."

"Ah."

The karaoke machine sparks into life again and the opening bars of Bohemian Rhapsody boom from the speakers. Fletch takes hold of the microphone. He is much, much worse than Serena; at least she could hold a tune.

"I see your suicide pact and raise you a murder-suicide," says Bernie over the din. "We kill everyone in this room and then each other."

"Done. Left my machine gun at home though."

"I'm military, Naylor, I know a thing or two. We make use of our surroundings. There are cushions for suffocation, there are wine glasses, heavy ornaments, there's a fork over there."

A loud laugh makes her look up; Serena is talking to a group of nurses, waving her arms around animatedly.

"We kill everyone except Serena."

"Soppy cow. You were all right when I met you and now you've gone marshmallow."

"Take it or leave it."

"Fine. Everyone except Campbell. So that'll leave her the sole survivor surrounded by two dozen corpses."

"Ah. An unforeseen flaw in the plan."

From across the room Serena heads over to join them, a rather alarming look in her eye.

"Hello Berenice," she says in the way a lion might address a wildebeest it's planning to consume.

"Hello," she says nervously. "Jac's here too."

"Hello Jac. I'm going to cuddle Bernie," she says.

"Oh dear," says Bernie.

"Bernie loves to be cuddled, don't you Bernie?" Serena wraps her arms firmly around her lover. "And that's not all she loves."

“I liked your song, what musical was it from again?”

Serena nuzzles at her neck. “Bernie loves many, many things.”

“Jac was just saying it wasn’t from Cats.”

“She loves kissing, she loves cuddling, she loves me very, *very* much, don’t you darling?”

Jac passes her the fork. Bernie glares at her and gives it back.

“But her favourite thing *ever* is when I let her-“

“RIGHT, it’s time I took you home, say goodnight Serena.”

“Goodnight Serena, Bernie’s taking me home to give me a good-“

“Long bath and an aspirin, quite right. Come along you.”

With great difficulty she manhandles her outside and into the car. Leaning over she tries to put Serena’s seat belt onto her but she keeps getting kissed, which delays the proceedings considerably. By the time she gets her safely belted up she’s too aroused to mind all that much.

“You’re so good to me,” Serena says. “I’ll let you ravish me when we get home, a good old rogering. You’ve got to take one for the team now and then and I’m a trouper.”

“You’ll be out like a light in five minutes.”

She’s snoring before she even starts the car.

OOOOOOOOOO

“I miss you.”

“I’ve only been gone three days.”

“I still miss you. It’s not the same without you here.”

“Tidier, I would imagine.”

“Will you please let me tell you how I feel without deflecting.”

“You’re not going to wither up and die because I’m working somewhere else for a week.”

Serena sighs. “This is a very unsatisfactory conversation, it’s not how it’s supposed to go at all. There’s a way people talk to each other when they’re madly in love and parted and you’re not doing it. You should be consumed with longing by now.”

“You read too many romance novels. You’d hate it if I was actually that pathetic, if I fainted clean away every time we had to spend a day apart. And it’s sweet that you miss me but you’re not that pathetic either, thank goodness. What surgeries have you done this week?”

“Two appendectomies, a splenectomy, a suspected brain tumour that wasn’t and a major car crash.”

“That’s my girl.”

She can’t help the glow that she feels from the pride in Bernie’s voice.

“It’s just, being away from you properly for the first time, you away from me...it’s made me think about what it would be like to lose you.”

“Hang on, hang on a second, why are you losing me all of a sudden? I’ve only gone to Kent.”

“But you’re not here, and it’s the first time that you’re *really* not here since we got together. It’s made me think about it, I don’t know why. When Edward and I split up I was so furious about the affair I was carried along on a wave of rage and that got me through it. If you and I ever split it would just be...absence. Longing. *Awful*.”

There’s no answer from Bernie.

“I’m sorry, I really don’t know how I got us onto this. It’s silly.”

“We’re not splitting up, Serena. You shouldn’t think about it. I don’t. There’s no point torturing yourself over things that aren’t going to happen.”

“You sound so certain.”

“It is certain. You don’t want to and I don’t want to so it’s not going to happen. That’s that.”

She smiles at the calm assurance in her voice.

“I still miss you,” she says softly. “If you were here right now I’d wrap my arms around you and hold you so close to me. I’d hold you so tightly and kiss you so gently and tell you how beautiful you are, how wonderful, that I’m so in love with you and I’m going to hold you for a thousand years.”

There’s silence on the phone.

“Bernie?”

“It’s getting late, we should say goodnight.”

Serena suppresses an exasperated sigh. “Yes, sure, goodnight then. I’ll let you get some sleep.”

Silence.

“In a minute,” Bernie says quietly.

Serena smiles.

OOOOOOOO

“Whoops, sorry!”

Serena immediately retreats and shuts the bedroom door, blocking out the sight of a very surprised, totally naked Bernie. Hurrying away she takes a few steps towards the stairs and then stops dead. She’s still standing there motionless, her mind whirring, when Bernie comes out of the bedroom dressed in a t-shirt and tracksuit trousers and rubbing her wet hair with a towel.

“Hello,” Bernie says.

“Hello.”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You’re aware that you live here?”

“I am.”

“And that was your bedroom you almost walked into.”

“It was.”

“And we’ve been having sexual relations for over a year now.”

“I had noticed something of that nature.”

Bernie gives her hair one final rub, hangs the towel around her neck and steps closer to Serena. “So what on earth just happened? You ran away like you’d just seen a ghost.”

“Promise you won’t laugh at me.”

“I make no such promise.”

“I sort of...forgot.”

“Forgot?”

“Yes.”

“That I was here?”

“No, that you were...*are*...a woman.”

Bernie gapes at her. “You’re joking!”

“Look it doesn’t happen often but I’ve had 30 years of heterosexual conditioning! Longer than that, even, I had my first boyfriend at 15, so occasionally all of the soft skin and breasts and whatnot is a bit of a surprise to some half-asleep part of my brain, that’s all.”

“Wow. That’s crackers.”

“Don’t you forget, sometimes? After all those years with Marcus?”

“That I’ve been indulging in how’s your father with a woman for over a year?”

“*How’s your father?!*”

“Don’t turn this around on me, you’re the one who’s forgotten she’s got a girlfriend.”

“Not *forgotten*. Temporarily misplaced the information. Failed to retrieve it quickly enough.”

Bernie stands there, trying to quash the feeling of unease that’s starting to wash over her.

“Do you ever...” she says hesitantly. “Do you ever wish you were with-“

“Oh *no*, no! Of *course* not!”

“I understand if you sometimes-“

“Right, listen here, you.” Serena steps closer to her, wearing an expression that usually means an F1 is about to get the lecture of a lifetime.

“I’m sure this has bothered you before, you have an aneurysm when men flirt with me, so let’s get one thing straight. I want *you*, Bernie Wolfe, not a man. That was *not* what you just saw. I didn’t explain it very well but I don’t *forget* that I’m with you, I’m so used to men that it’s still new to me, *you’re* still new to me, I didn’t expect to be changing teams at this stage of the game.

“When I moved into this house I spent at least six months coming halfway down the hall before remembering I had an en suite, which didn’t mean I was secretly longing for my poky old flat, it meant that I was used to what I was used to, that’s all. I soon got used to luxury. That’s what you are, luxury.

“And maybe there’s a part of me that hasn’t quite accepted that I’m allowed to see you naked yet, that I’m allowed to desire you because honestly Bernie until you planted one on me that day I thought we were going to be best friends. Lovely close best friends, but not this. The love of my life came in an unexpected package and there are very rare days when I’m still a bit surprised by that package. But very, very pleased. And I wouldn’t swap that package for anything in the world, believe me. I wouldn’t change a hair on your head.”

Bernie stands silently, a little stunned. A smile gradually appears on her face.

“What?” Serena says softly. “What’s that beautiful smile for?”

“You haven’t said that before. The love of your life.”

“Haven’t I?”

“No.”

“Picked a fine time to do it.”

“You did.” They smile at each other. Bernie reaches out and touches Serena’s face. “Me too. I mean, you know. Me too.”

Serena laughs. “Luckily for you I now speak fluent Wolfe so I do know, yes. Thank you for saying so.” She steps forward and takes Bernie in her arms. “Yuck, you’re all wet.”

“Aye aye.”

“Oh stop it.” Serena draws back, smiling at her while brushing a droplet of water from her face.

“I should get dressed, properly that is. And dry.”

“Right. I should get the washing on, that’s what I was planning on doing in the first place.”

They walk into the bedroom; Serena starts to collect laundry from the basket, Bernie starts to undress.

“Oh, Serena,” Bernie says innocently, holding the waist of her trousers.

Serena looks up. “Yes?”

“Do you want to see my-“

“Oh don’t say it, don’t you dare-”

“-package?”

“You said it! I’ve gone right off you, where’s your sense of romance. After everything I’ve just said about bathrooms.”

“Couldn’t resist, sorry.”

Serena shakes her head in dismay and turns her attention back to the washing.

“I shall show you my whatnot instead.”

“Oh good grief.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“My sodding boiler’s broken again, can I stay here all next week?”

“Of course you can, you don’t have to ask. Come and sit down, you look exhausted.”

Bernie sinks onto the sofa and exhales a long breath after a very long day at work.

“The landlord’s said he’ll get it fixed on Monday which means Thursday at the very earliest.”

“That man’s a moron.”

“Yes indeed. I’m thinking about looking for somewhere else when the lease runs out but I’m not sure I can be bothered with all the hassle. Maybe I’ll just demand some money back.”

Serena’s heart sinks.

“What’s the matter?” asks Bernie.

“Mm?”

“You look like I’ve personally drowned your smallest child.”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

“Out with it.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Out with it right now, I’m not joking. I’ve had a bugger of a day already, I’m not going to round it off by upsetting you idiopathically and breezing past it.”

Serena tries to choose her words carefully. “Don’t you ever want us to live together?”

“Live together?”

“Yes. Live together. I know it’s an outrageous suggestion after only two years and you probably want to wait a few decades until you’re comfortable with the idea, but I thought I’d mention it anyway.” She winces at the tone of her voice but feels partly justified by the fact that Bernie hasn’t shown the slightest interest in living with her the whole time they’ve been together.

“I’d love to.”

“...What?”

“I’d love to live with you. Are you really asking me?”

“I...of course I am! You sound very sure for someone who’s never been the tiniest bit interested in the subject before.”

“You’ve never asked before.”

“Don’t be daft.”

Bernie stares at her, bewildered. “Daft? Serena, you’ve never asked me to move in with you, that’s not something I would have forgotten.”

“But you knew...”

“Knew what?”

“I thought...I assumed...”

Bernie’s mouth drops open as she realizes what she’s saying.

“You assumed I’d know that I could *move in* with you whenever I felt like it? Into the house you own and have lived in for 20 years, where you live with your autistic adult nephew who hates change?”

“Er...”

“Oh Serena.” Bernie shakes her head and sighs dramatically. “Serena, Serena, Serena. Whatever am I going to do with you. You’ve not got the first idea how to run a relationship, that much has become clear to me. I’ll have to start tutoring you in order to pass on my superior skills; if you recall it was me who said the first ‘I love you’ when you were still bumbling around undeclared. If I’d known you’d end up in such a bad way I’d have started the lessons long ago.”

“Bloody cheek! You can wipe that smirk off your face buster, I don’t live with smirkers. I’m not taking all the blame for this either, you could have told me you were ready to move in rather than sitting back and waiting for me to ask. How long were you going to wait anyway, what if I never mentioned it?”

“Well. I hadn’t really planned things that far. It was so obvious that we couldn’t all fit in my flat and we’d have to live here that I didn’t think it was my call.”

“There is one other option, we could always buy somewhere together.”

“But I like this house.”

“So do I.”

“Well then. We stay here. I could buy half if you wanted.”

“The house next door sold last year for £1.2 million.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I could buy the garage if you wanted.”

“We can sort out the money side, we should at least get your name on the deeds but we can talk about it later.” Serena smiles at her affectionately. “I don’t understand you, sometimes. Things that I think are complicated are black and white with you. We won’t break up, we’ll live here, done and dusted. You love me so you say it while we’re watching telly. You see me wearing your hoodie so you buy me one.”

“If you’re trying to say I’m a hopeless simpleton-“

“You’re romantic, Bernie. That’s what I’m trying to say. Not in an empty, dozen red roses and chocolates from the petrol station kind of way, but properly romantic, *grown-up* romantic, with solidity and depth and commitment. You’ve been mine since the day you came back from Kiev, haven’t you? All mine, every last bit of you. Romance that you can build a life on.”



Bernie's silent, staring at her with her mouth open slightly and a look of mild panic on her face.

Serena laughs. "OK, *this* Bernie I understand. Don't worry, I won't make you articulate any feelings tonight, that would be highly unfair of me when you're so good at making me feel loved without saying the words. In fact I think you're much better at it than I am, so I hope you won't mind if I continue to tell you over and over again that I love you, Bernie Wolfe, you wonderful, wonderful woman, and that I'm so pleased you came into my life."

Bernie shrugs. "If you have to," she says nonchalantly, the sparkle in her eyes giving her away. "Not bothered, really. Just looking for a place with central heating."

## Scenes From A Third Year of Love

“Hello? Anyone home? Hello?”

There’s no answer. It’s not entirely unexpected – she knew Serena might get called into work – but it’s still a bit of a disappointment. Today she had officially moved in, bringing the final few bags of possessions from her flat and handing back the keys to the landlord. And there was no-one here to welcome her.

She stands and listens to the silence for a few moments before thinking *Oh pull yourself together you big girl’s blouse*. She chucks her keys onto the table by the door, flicks through the post, strides into the kitchen – and stops dead.

A large bottle of champagne is standing on the kitchen table with a big red bow tied around it. She grins. Next to the bottle is an envelope with her name on; she opens it, takes out the note and starts to read.

*Dear Bernie,*

*Welcome to the madhouse!*

*I’m very sorry neither of us could be there to officially welcome you on your very first evening but Jason’s gone to the ninth Stars Wars film (or the first or the minus tenth or whatever it is) and you and I crossed shifts at work.*

*Jason wanted to get some house rules down on paper now we are three, so some suggested rules are enclosed with a space for all our signatures. (Jason insisted on the signatures, presumably in case he needs to sue us in a court of law for eating his crisps.) You will know some of these already but it makes sense to have them written down. This is a first draft so if there’s anything you want to change or add before you sign we can negotiate tomorrow.*

*My rules for you, incorporating a few requests from Jason, are on the next page. On the page after that I’ve had a go at guessing some of your rules for us. If there are any you don’t want just cross them out or note your suggested changes. Jason and I will sign tomorrow when (if!) we have all agreed.*

*With much love from your live-in lover,*

*Serena xxx*

*PS: Open the champagne if you’d like to but please save me some, it’s the good stuff!*

*Serena’s Rules for Bernie*

1. *The first rule is I love you.*
2. *See rule one.*
3. *Thursday is bin day. This is Jason's job – he likes wheeling them onto the pavement. He also sorts all the recycling.*
4. *Jason's other jobs are: hoovering mid-week, cleaning the filter on the tumble dryer, mowing the lawn, cleaning the main bathroom, putting the little tablets in the dishwasher and pressing the appropriate buttons. Do NOT do any of these jobs as he will not see this as you helping him, he will see this as you ordering him to swap with one of your jobs, whatever he decides that job might be. This can result in a) fish pie made from tinned tuna and potato waffles, b) your books rearranged by smell, c) a fat goldfish.*
5. *Your jobs are: hoovering at weekends, loading/unloading the dishwasher, cleaning the en suite bathroom, getting things fixed if they are cactus, basic DIY and car mechanics, tidying BEFORE the place looks like a bomb site, maintenance and care of Claud II, second chef. My jobs are washing/drying/ironing, household admin, ordering groceries and first chef.*
6. *Do not eat Jason's crisps (cheese and onion). Ready salted are communal.*
7. *Bills will be split 50/50 between me and you. The mortgage will be split 45.5/45.5/9 rather than the 50/50 we had talked about. This is because when Jason came to live with me he worked out the exact amount of mortgage and upkeep he should be paying based on a comparison of our salaries relative to the size of our outgoings; he now insists you are integrated into this system. I have no earthly idea what we are going to do when the mortgage is paid off in three years' time and we're trying to establish who owns the house. One of us may need to get a maths degree.*
8. *If you have a problem you can always, always tell me. If I can't fix it I will search for someone who can. If there is no-one who can fix it I will help you bear it with all my strength. Stoic, suffering silence is not respected in this household; it will not be tolerated.*
9. *You are acquainted with Jason's weekly meal plan, which must be followed at all times unless Jason gives his express permission; other adults may choose whether to eat meals from his planner or not. He would like to convey that now you are living with us he is prepared to deviate from his schedule for the following occasions: a) your birthday. This is a great honour and was only bestowed on me last year.*
10. *I hereby announce that as an official resident of this residence I will now reveal to you the sacred Waitrose password. It is PRES TREND AFIL. This is "wait rose" in Albanian. No, I don't know why it's in Albanian, Jason picked it. (Officially their online shop is called "Ocado" but Jason thinks that's just a bit of an avocado and therefore stupid. Plus it doesn't translate to Albanian.)*

11. *Waitrose deliveries come on Sunday afternoons. If you want to add things to the order this must be done by Saturday at 11pm. With great power comes great responsibility. Do not accidentally order 10kg of bananas instead of 10 bananas; 10kg is a thoroughly astonishing amount of bananas. Do not add seven cauliflowers or five pineapples on a whim, you will not eat them. You may not add extra crisps.*
12. *I am happy for Jason to mow the lawn. I am happy for you to fix the car and use the power tools. I am happy to do your washing and your ironing and cook for you. None of this means anything much about any of us.*
13. *Although it does mean I love you. This is the first rule and also the last.*

*Bernie's Rules (Unconfirmed But Informed Conjecture)*

1. *Do not eat my crisps (salt and vinegar).*
2. *Do not talk to me before six o'clock in the morning unless you require one of the following answers ONLY: yes, no, how would I know, it is the middle of the actual night Serena please can I just read the paper.*
3. *Normal people do not have deep conversations about their feelings the very second they walk through the door. Do not ambush me with love; please sneak up quietly.*
4. *Four episodes of Countdown maximum.*
5. *It is not kind to teach me that Katy Perry is a world famous oboe player and Taylor Swift is the prime minister of Sweden. Others will find out and mock me.*
6. *If I have gone off to sit peacefully in another room it means I wish to sit peacefully in another room. It does not mean I have suddenly fallen out of love and plan to leave you at my earliest convenience.*
7. *Ditto for any of the following: occasional grumpiness; referring to Valentine's Day as 'a marketing swizz for cretins'; refusal to snuggle in company unless one or both parties is drunk; refusal to call it 'snuggling'; refusal to admit how much I love snuggling because I'm a big macho army medic even though I love snuggling so much it should probably go on The List; forgetting the anniversary of the first time Serena thought we were about to go all the way but in the end didn't.*
8. *If you have been talking for more than 20 minutes and I am starting to zone out please consider that this may be due to too much talking rather than not enough listening.*
9. *Do not wake me on a day off unless two-thirds or more of us are on fire.*
10. *If I have told you five times that I will remember to lock the door please consider the possibility that I will remember to lock the door. I am a grown woman.*

11. *The fact that I once forgot to lock the door should have no bearing on item 10.*

12. *You like my hair messy and you know it.*

Bernie leans back in the chair, shaking her head slightly but grinning all the same. She signs the two sheets of paper, reads the rules about love two or three more times and sends Serena a text: *“You have gone completely and irretrievably round the bend. I’ve signed the contracts and I’m saving the champagne so we can all open it together tomorrow. It’s good to be home.”*

OOOOOOOOOOO

Realizing that she’s been reading the same page for the last ten minutes, Serena finally admits defeat and puts the book down. There’s a limit to her attention span under the circumstances. The black shirt circumstances. Soulful, dark-eyed circumstances. Hair like strands of spun gold.

“Do you fancy an early night?” Serena says softly.

“No thanks, I’m finishing this article on hepatitis.”

Serena stares at her, speechless; Bernie doesn’t look up.

“...Fine.”

“It’s fascinating, they’re doing wonderful things with platelets.”

“Righty-o.” Serena can’t quite keep the hurt out of her voice; Bernie finally looks at her.

“Is there a problem?”

“No. No problem.”

“You sound a little...”

“What?”

“Pissed off, are the words that spring to mind.”

She paints a smile on her face, surprised by the sting of this minor rejection. “Not at all. You’re allowed to say ‘no’, of course you are. Now and then. Occasionally. Sporadically.”

“Say no?”

“Yes. You’re allowed.”

“It’s nine-thirty in the evening.”

“So what?”

“So I’m not tired yet.”

“Tired?”

“Yes. Why would I go to bed if I’m not tired?”

“Go to...oh, sweetheart.” Her heart melts a little; the rather innocent, unworldly side of Bernie is something she finds endlessly endearing.

“What?”

“I was asking if you wanted to go to bed to make love, not to go to sleep.”

“...Oh!”

Serena grins broadly at her surprised expression, complete with raised eyebrows.

“Yes. Oh.”

“In that case I wish to change my answer.”

“You don’t have to-“

“I definitely wish to change my answer.”

“You really don’t have to say-“

“I ardently wish to change my answer.”

Serena grins again. “Oh, well. I won’t argue with ardently. But just for future purposes, you do know that...I mean, I know I sounded a little...curt, just now, but that was very unfair of me, you really can say no if you don’t fancy it one night.”

“Of course I know that,” Bernie says, puzzled.

“Only you haven’t, ever, not really...a few times when you were so tired you were practically comatose, maybe once when you were falling ill...but that’s it.”

“You haven’t either.”

“Haven’t I?”

“Nope. Now I come to think of it, I can’t remember a single time, actually, not even when you were tired.”

“Well. Yes. Possibly. Can’t say I recall the exact number.” The heat of a blush spreads across her face as she realizes the truth of Bernie’s words. And it’s not helped by the irritatingly gorgeous smirk that has appeared on her face.

“The exact number, my darling, is zero. It is unprecedented for you to spurn my advances.”

“Spurning them right now, I’ve decided.”

“Those were *your* advances, dear heart.”

“I rescind them immediately. As well as all future advances until further notice.” She picks up her book and opens it.

“Good book, is it?”

“Very.”

“Do you not find it a bit tricky that all the words are upside down?”

Serena turns the book the right way up. “All future advances full stop. There will be no further advances. We will both live like nuns and you will be quiet about it.”

Bernie leans across the sofa and gently, with infinite tenderness, kisses her neck.

“So none of this, then?”

“Certainly not.”

Bernie slides a hand underneath her shirt and softly strokes the delicate skin of her stomach.

“And this would be totally off limits?”

“Indubitably,” she says a little breathlessly.

“And this...” The hand glides upwards and begins to caress her breast. “This would have me in a world of trouble, I imagine.” Bernie starts to kiss her neck again, over and over, as Serena tries valiantly to ignore her.

“Twenty hail Marys...in the morning,” she says between kisses. She caresses her breast more firmly, kisses her neck with more passion. Serena’s breathing quickens; her fingers are almost white as they cling to the book.

“Expelled from the nunnery without question.” She rubs a nipple between her thumb and finger and runs her tongue slowly up her neck. Serena drops the book and moans quietly.

“A disgrace to the nunning profession.” She slides a hand downwards. “God would smite me without delay.”

“Oh stop blathering on and take me to bed.”

“Still on zero.”

OOOOOOOOOOO

“Morning.”

“Good morning Raf.”

“Can I join you?” He gestures at the bench.

“By all means.” Bernie offers him a cigarette as he sits down.

“Oh, no thanks, I don’t smoke.”

“I don’t either.”

He looks pointedly at the lit cigarette in her hand.

“Apart from that one.”

“Mm.”

They watch the world for a little while – doctors and nurses coming in to work, patients arriving and leaving, a few birds flying in the open air. Bernie finishes her cigarette and stubs it out.

“How long have you smoked for?”

“Off and on, far longer than I care to admit. I do quit on a regular basis.”

He grins at her. “When was the last time you quit?”

“Not long ago, actually.”

“What caused the relapse?”

“I wouldn’t call it a relapse.”

“No? What would you call it?”

She studies him curiously. “Excuse me?”

“Was it stress? Work stuff, kids, love-life? Scratch that, it can’t be love-life.”

“Why not?”

He laughs. “You two are joined at the hip. I have to drag her away from you kicking and screaming to do a surgery.”

Bernie looks away.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to-“

“I like smoking. So I smoke. No need for the deep and meaningful.”

“Then why do you keep trying to quit?”

She narrows her eyes at him. “It’s too early for this conversation.”



“Half of all smokers die from a smoking-related disease.”

“Goodness me, really? Do you think I should see a doctor?”

“There’s an increased risk of stroke, heart disease, heart attacks, lung cancer, stomach cancer, infertility-“

“Oh heavens, will I not be able to have children?”

“-cancer of the mouth and tongue, emphysema, bronchitis, narrowed arteries. Not to mention all that money you’d save from not buying cigarettes in the first place.”

“This is becoming a very odd conversation, doctor, and not one I’m convinced I’m enjoying all that much. Do you think I’m unaware of the risks of smoking? That I’d stop the second you lectured me? Or do you...”

She trails off, suddenly struck by a thought.

“Did you happen to speak to Serena this morning?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Raf,” she says sternly. “Answer the question.”

“Yes?” The sheepish look on his face all but confirms her suspicions.

“I knew it! The sneaky little so-and-so. Good job you’re as subtle as a brick, I was about to pick a fight with you instead of her. I had a feeling she wasn’t keen on the smoking.”

“Don’t be too angry with her. Her exact words were that she had no intention of being the nagging wife but she wants you to live for ever and ever so she can love you for the rest of her life. I wish someone felt that way about me.”

Unable to reply, she traces the route of an incoming car with her eyes and tries to think about ordinary, everyday things. Finally she gets to her feet.

“Right, back to the coalface,” she says. “See you in there.”

“See you. Sorry about-”

She waves away his apology and heads off. A few steps later she stops, turns around and throws the cigarette packet to him. “There’s a bin behind you. Will you do the honours?”

He does.

OOOOOOOOOO

“I think I’m having an existential crisis.”

“Oh dear,” says Bernie. “Do you need a tissue?”

Serena snuggles deeper into Bernie's arms under the comfort of the thick duvet. They've turned the main light out but the bedside lamp is still on, bathing the room in a soft glow.

"Sometimes I think about all the parallel universe versions of the world and get depressed about all the versions of me who aren't with a parallel you. Online dating, for example."

"What do you...what?"

"Online dating! Tick all these boxes, what do you want, tall, short, old, young, how many miles away, how much money do they earn, a great long list of your deepest needs and desires and I would have ruled you out at the very first box! 'Male or female', tick! And no you! It's bloody tragic. You tick all of my boxes, even the boxes I never knew I had, and I would never have even gone on a date with you."

"It's like people who bang on and on about wanting to live in the countryside and then they actually move to the bloody countryside and they hate it, with all the cowpats and noisy sheep and mud everywhere and really, *really* they deep down wanted to stay in the city all that time but they never *knew* they wanted to stay in the city so how is anyone ever going to be happy in a world like that! Do you ever think about things like that?"

"..."

"Well?"

"I'm still recovering from all the words you just flung at me. Give me a minute here."

"I swear we have whole conversations where I'm twelve steps ahead and you're answering a question from last Thursday."

"That sounds about right. You're the hare to my tortoise."

"Do you have some kind of power button that you press when you're at work, an on-off switch secreted about your person that you deactivate when you come home?"

"When I'm at work I'm not surrounded by people saying 'The heart's bleeding and we'll need to bypass and look a lettuce is over there and what's that film with that woman who looks like a squirrel and why have you been quiet for 15 seconds are you sure you're not dead'."

"I am *deeply* offended."

"Okey-dokey."

Serena shifts slightly, getting comfortable.

"Bern?"

"Mm?"

"Which box would you have ticked?"

“What box?”

“The first box on online dating, the very first box, male or female. Which one would you have ticked?”

Bernie doesn't answer, her body still.

“Bernie?” she says softly.

“Mm?”

“Are you a lesbian?”

There's no answer.

“You can say it to me, if you'd like to, if that's what you are. Have you ever said it to anyone? Did you ever tell Alex?”

“We were doctors in a war zone, we didn't sit around and gossip about who we'd fucked.”

Serena instinctively starts to move away but Bernie stops her, wrapping her arms tightly and holding her in place.

“Sorry,” she says quietly. “Sorry, sorry.” She runs her fingers gently through Serena's hair.

“I know it's difficult...what I mean is, no, I don't *know* it's difficult at all, I don't think my experience has been anything like your experience, that's why I'd like you to be able to talk about it. Maybe I'm wrong...it just occurs to me that if you've never been able to talk to anyone about this then that's...well, *appalling*, is what it is, that the world's made you feel like that. Like you couldn't ever say it out loud. I do remember what it was like when we were young, the attitudes back then. The ignorance.”

There's silence again; Serena knows better than to fill it. She waits as patiently as she can for a response.

“I would have ticked ‘male’,” Bernie says eventually.

Serena pauses, treading carefully. “You would have ticked ‘male’ in the past, do you mean, or...”

“I would have ticked ‘male’ but wanted to tick ‘female’.”

“Since you met Alex, or for a few years before that, or...”

“Since as far back as I can remember.”

Serena feels tears pricking at her eyes but she knows sympathy will not be welcome. She places a soft kiss on Bernie's collarbone and then another.

“I can’t imagine it’s been easy for you, and you can talk to me about any of it any time you’d like to, about Marcus or Alex or any of it. But I hope you know how grateful I am that you were made exactly as you are. If you weren’t who you are my life would be unimaginably worse, unimaginably colourless and loveless and hopeless.”

“Don’t go overboard, you weren’t a hobo.”

“It’s true! You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, equal best with Elinor and Jason. It’s why I was having a crisis from thinking about a world without you. You being a heterosexual would have ruined my life. Say it to me once, sweetheart. Once and never again if that’s what you want.”

“It really isn’t-“

“Say it to me just this once.”

“All right, OK, I’m gay. There. Done it.”

“How does it feel?”

“It feels exactly the same as two seconds ago.”

“Oh.”

There’s quiet; Bernie’s fingers have stilled in her hair.

“Promise me that if I died or we split up-“

“Serena-“

“Promise me that you’ll never tick the wrong box again. I mean it, Bern, I can’t bear to think of you-”

“Fine, fine, don’t panic, I promise I won’t.”

“Good. Good. Thank you.”

“Just out of interest, what box would you be ticking if I snuffed it?”

“God. Neither of them, I don’t think. I wouldn’t want a man or a woman.”

“Alien? Horse?”

Serena digs her in the ribs.

“Root vegetable?”

“I’d want a Bernie. I’d always want you.”

Bernie doesn’t respond but the gentle fingers start to sift through her hair again, occasionally rubbing softly at her scalp or ghosting across the nape of her neck. She’s starting to feel a

little sleepy.

“I tried online dating once, after Edward ran off with his floozy.”

“You never told me that before.”

“It was an unmitigated disaster, I’ve never seen so many penises.”

*“Excuse me?!”*

“*Photos* of penises, little miss jealous, not penises in person. Mating habits of the heterosexual man, or a particularly caveman variety of online heterosexual man. They think you’ll go weak with lust at the sight of their bulging manhood.”

“Wait, wait. You’re saying men sent you photos of their genitals out of the blue? You can’t be serious.”

“Oh believe me, I’m serious. Some of them were polite enough to at least wait until we’d exchanged a few messages, but I preferred the ones who got it out of the way up front, at least you knew where you were with those delightful fellows. Much better than the ones who lulled you into a false sense of security talking about their hobbies and top ten favourite films and enduring love for Bristol Rovers and then ‘Boom’, here is my todger.”

“Sit up for a second.”

Serena sits up slightly, meeting her gaze. “What are you...”

“I can’t tell if you’re having me on.”

Serena laughs and lies down again. “I wish I was, my love, I wish I was. You ask Dom on Monday, I bet he’s received some dodgy pictures over the years, I’m sure some of the gay chaps are at it too. I never figured out what they wanted in response, apart from the obvious. What is it you’re supposed to say, I wonder. ‘Oh that one’s *lovely*, well done, shall we arrange for it to penetrate me shortly.’ I never knew.”

“Good Lord. I’m so glad I’m gay.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Ms Campbell, thank you for coming. Have a seat.”

“Hello darling.”

“It’s Bernie or Ms Wolfe.”

“Yes darling.” She sits down, drinking in the sight of Bernie sitting at Hanssen’s large desk wearing her smartest shirt. “You look right at home in here, the power definitely suits you. I could get used to having such a beautiful boss. Shame it’s only for a week.”

“It’ll be two weeks now, Hanssen called this morning and said his placement’s been extended.”

“Ooh, *lovely*. Even more time to admire you. Shall we start with some admonishment, I’d love a good telling off.”

Bernie fixes her with a look. “This is a real meeting, Ms Campbell, regarding the completion of form 357-B.”

“Okey-dokey. Give us a kiss.”

Bernie looks down at her paperwork. “Form 357-B is an extremely important document regarding the acquisition of hospital hygiene supplies which your ward is failing to submit to agreed deadlines.”

“Form 357-B is thoroughly unimportant and nobody has completed it properly since 1973. I know you must have got orders from the higher-ups but this is box-ticking nonsense and you know it. Give us a cuddle.”

“Patients’ *lives* are at risk.”

“Are they bollocks. Tell me I’m pretty.”

Bernie sighs as she leans back in her chair. “I knew you’d be like this, I *knew* it. You’re impossible. I must never, ever be your boss.”

“Oh don’t say that, it’s such a turn-on. You’ll be getting very, very lucky over the next fortnight, I hope you’re prepared.”

“You’re not even pretending to respect me. I think I’m a bit offended.”

“Piffle, you know I respect you more than anyone.”

“But you’re not going to take orders from me.”

“Not on this occasion, no. Is there anything else or am I allowed to sit here and adore you for a while?”

“Our meeting has concluded, Ms Campbell, you may now leave my office.”

“Yes, Ms Wolfe, thank you, Ms Wolfe.” Serena stands up and saunters slowly to the door, pausing before she leaves.

“Bernie?” she says innocently.

“What?”

“You’ll always be my boss in the bedroom.”

“Get out!”

OOOOOOOOOOO

Jason's crying when Bernie comes home, sitting at the kitchen table with Serena's arms around him and fat tears running down his cheeks.

"What happened?" she says urgently.

"Jason went to his film club at the residential home and one of the men there said something horrible."

"What? What did he say?"

Serena draws away from Jason slightly, stroking his hair. "Jason? Do you want me to tell her?"

He nods, looking thoroughly miserable.

"He said Jason was a..." Serena makes a face, struggling with the word. "He called him a retard."

"Who said it?" she says immediately.

"Bernie--"

"Tell me who said it!"

"Why?"

"So I can punch him in the fucking face!"

There's a shocked silence. Serena stares at her; Jason wipes the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand and then blows his nose on a handkerchief.

"You shouldn't swear," he says reproachfully.

"No," says Bernie, taking a deep breath and trying to get herself back under control. "Sorry."

"Auntie Serena swears quite a lot but she mostly does it under her breath. You said that quite loudly."

"I did. I apologise."

"Ahmed said 'arsehole' in front of a patient and got a written warning. It was relevant to the conversation because the patient had bruising on his bottom but he still got told off so it's not a habit you should get into."

"No, of course not, that's good advice."

He wipes at his cheek again; he doesn't look like he's going to cry anymore but he still looks a bit wobbly.

“You also shouldn’t punch people.”

“No. That’s right.”

“I’d like you to punch him but you shouldn’t do it. You need to promise me that you won’t.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

He doesn’t speak for a while. Bernie sits down at the table and exchanges worried glances with Serena.

“Can I have a packet of crisps?” says Jason.

“Uh...I think I ate them,” says Bernie.

“I bought some more, don’t worry. You lot and your crisps.” Serena goes to the cupboard and gets a packet of cheese and onion flavour. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

He opens the bag and starts eating.

“Do you want me to go with you next week, Jason?” says Bernie. “I don’t mind. I’d like to. We can make sure he knows I was in the army.”

“I’ll go with you too if you’d like me to. We can all go, a family outing.”

Jason munches on his crisps and thinks about this for a while. “I’ll go by myself,” he says eventually, “and if he’s mean to me again I can imagine Bernie punching him. He lives in the home all the time so he doesn’t have his own television and he’s never had a job so he isn’t intelligent and I don’t think he’s got someone to get angry and promise not to punch people in the face for him, so he might have been cross about all of that. Can I have another bag of crisps after this one?”

“No,” says Serena.

“Bernie sometimes eats three in a row.”

“Bernie is a very bad influence.”

“Can I have a packet of crisps?” says Bernie.

“No.”

“You can have one of mine,” says Jason, offering her one. “Auntie Serena’s too strict about crisps.”

“Agreed. That’s why I sometimes need a binge. Thank you, Jason.” She takes a crisp.

“I don’t think she is a bad influence, not overall.”



Serena smiles at him and then at Bernie.

“No, not overall, all things considered. I think the rampant crisp eating is probably balanced out by all the good stuff.”

“She loves me. She’s never told me though.”

Bernie’s speechless; she can feel Serena’s eyes on her but she can only stare at Jason, who calmly eats his crisps.

“Would you like her to tell you?” asks Serena.

“That would be a complete waste of time, I just told you I already know.”

“Good point,” Serena says, smiling. “I’m not sure she could manage it right this second, anyway.”

Serena reaches out and takes hold of her hand. Bernie stares at the table through watery eyes.

“Are you going to cry?” asks Jason.

“No,” she says in a slightly strangled voice, “I’ve got something in my eye.”

“It’s probably an eyelash, Auntie Serena will get it out for you. I’m going to watch World’s Strongest Man, it’s the semi-final.”

He gets up and leaves the kitchen. Bernie’s vaguely aware of Serena getting up too but she’s too busy concentrating on not crying to take much notice. A few moments later four items are placed on the table in front of her – one box of tissues and three bags of crisps.

## Chapter 5

The world was conspiring against her, Bernie was sure of it.

The ward was horribly short-staffed which meant that they were both working long, unsociable hours. At home, Jason was involved in a long-running battle with his film club over the provision of bourbon biscuits, so he was refusing to go to their evening meetings – and also, for a reason she couldn't begin to understand, refusing to go to Alan's house at the weekends because he *did* have bourbon biscuits. And while Jason tried hard to respect their privacy he was also prone to knocking on their door at very inconvenient moments to inform them that they had selfishly drunk all the orange juice or he had individually counted the Rice Krispies and they were down to their last 412.

On top of that Serena had been suffering from an awful cold and now she was finally feeling better Hanssen had given her some imbecilic report to write about admittance procedures. Outside of theatre she'd hardly seen her for days. And they hadn't made love in weeks and weeks.

The upshot of it all was that she was tired, irritable...and frustrated.

Very, very frustrated.

It was odd, really – she'd almost forgotten what it felt like. Her marriage had been so physically unsatisfying for so long that in some ways she'd become resigned to it, an unhappy but bearable state of denial that let her live undisturbed with a good, kind man and two healthy children.

Meeting Alex had led to an explosion of pent-up desire – until an even more powerful explosion meant that passion was replaced by pain. There'd been a brief, heady gap between realizing how much she wanted Serena and going to bed with her, but at that point she hadn't known what she was missing.

She knew now.

It was like seeing the face of God and being condemned to a world without him. It was torture. Finally, after all these years, she had a wonderfully satisfying sex life full of mutual lust and love and now it had suddenly been cut off. And it wasn't remotely Serena's fault, so whenever she saw her, in theatre or over a hurried meal at home, she had to try to hide the rapidly building, burning desire without getting cranky.

Which was easier said than done.

“Did you cook this salmon with a blowtorch? I believe it's supposed to be pink. You're lucky Jason's had fish and chips, if he was eating this there'd be an almighty tantrum on the horizon.”

Serena looks at her with such surprised hurt in her eyes it makes her feel like the anti-Christ for ever uttering a cross word.

“Sorry, I know it’s a bit overcooked.”

“Bloody burnt is what it is. Look, I’m sorry, I don’t care about the chargrilled fish, but God the *week* I’ve had, you’ve no idea. It’s endless, bloody staff who think I’m their mother, bloody patients who insist on dying, bloody *biscuits*...”

Her tirade continues; she’s so wound up now she can’t seem to stop. One hour, she thinks, if she can just get that much she can cope...one hour alone with her, completely alone, just one solitary hour and her hands all over her, her mouth all over her, her tongue...

Serena’s talking now, trying to soothe her, calm her down. She’s so gorgeous in her red shirt, the line of her elegant neck, her beautiful hands...oh her hands...

“You need to get some rest, sweetheart, you’ve been working so hard, you need a few days-”

“What I bloody need is a month in bed with you!”

Well. She certainly hadn’t meant to say *that*. Certainly not in that tone, accusing her, as if Serena’s been neglecting her conjugal duties. Serena’s staring at her, now. She’s probably put her off women for life.

“I didn’t mean to shout it at you, it’s just...I’ve hardly seen you. Not at home. And I need...” A heated blush starts to spread across her face; she stares sheepishly at her salmon. “I need to see you. I can cope with all the other things but I can’t...I can’t work with you for 12 hours a day and sleep in the same bed and never touch you, I can’t go weeks without feeling you close to me...not now...not now I know how it feels...”

There’s silence. Bernie sits frozen, hugely embarrassed now and with no idea at all how to save herself.

And then Serena suddenly gets up and heads out of the kitchen. “Wait here,” she says firmly.

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to Jason.”

“What?!”

From the kitchen she hears the muffled sounds of a conversation in the living room, followed quickly by Jason’s heavy footsteps on the stairs. Five minutes later he comes downstairs again.

“Goodbye Auntie Serena, goodbye Bernie.”

The front door slams. Serena returns to the kitchen looking flustered.

“He’s gone to Alan’s for a few nights.”

“But...but the biscuits...”

“I’ve taken care of the biscuits. And now I’m going to take care of you.”

She straddles Bernie’s lap and pulls her into a deep, long kiss. As soon as they break apart she starts trying to undo Bernie’s jeans but they’re tight and the position is too awkward to get them open.

“Let’s go upstairs,” says Bernie.

“No. Here. Right here. I’m going to take you *now*, do you understand? I want to have you *now*.”

“Here’s fine...” she says breathlessly.

Serena gives up on the jeans and cups her between her legs, rubbing hard, over and over. It’s fantastic and not nearly enough, the pressure simply adding to her arousal without any hope of release; she suppresses a frustrated moan and tries not to beg for more.

“Get up,” Serena orders impatiently, climbing off her lap and taking a few steps away from her. “Come here.”

As soon as she stands she’s shoved back against the kitchen counter. A few seconds of fumbling with her jeans and then finally, *finally*, Serena’s touching her, swift, firm strokes of her fingers making it clear that she’s almost as impatient as Bernie is.

“Please,” she whispers and Serena slips her fingers inside of her as the heel of her hand rubs deliciously against her. She leans back against the kitchen counter to take some of the weight from her trembling legs, acutely aware of how wet she is, how quickly she’s responding to Serena’s touch, the helpless urgency in the movement of her hips. With each thrust she loses herself a little further, feels the tension coil and flame inside of her, the focused, flushed look on her lover’s face only adding to her arousal.

“I can’t stand,” she gasps. Through the haze of pleasure she feels Serena pull her arms up to rest on her shoulders, supporting her. The pleasure is so intense, so precisely what she’s longed for, that it’s all she can do to keep breathing.

She’s right on the edge in an embarrassingly short amount of time.

“You’re so beautiful,” Serena says earnestly. “You’re beautiful and you’re mine and I love you like crazy, do you hear me? Only ever you.”

She closes her eyes, manages to resist the climax for a few more delicious seconds and then grips onto Serena’s shoulders for dear life, the orgasm bursting through her with an almost unbearable intensity, powerless to suppress the long, deep groan that escapes from her. When it’s finally over she takes in a long, deep breath and then another. And another.

“Wow,” Bernie says weakly, dropping her head down to rest on Serena’s shoulder.

Serena laughs, resting her head gently against Bernie's. "I'm honoured, I don't usually get a 'Wow'."

"You certainly deserve one tonight."

"Shall we go to bed and shag each other stupid?"

"Oh, that sounds splendid. Yes please. Just give me a few minutes."

Serena kisses her hair, waits for a little while and then gently withdraws her hand. Bernie zips up her trousers with shaking fingers.

"Ready?" she says.

"Ready. Let's go."

They head towards the stairs, Bernie walking slowly behind her as she tests her wobbly legs.

"Serena?"

"Mm?"

"That is *definitely* going on my list."

OOOOOOOOOO

The door to the roof creaks as it opens, followed by the sound of Dom's footsteps on the concrete. Bernie decides to fire the first shot.

"*No* we don't scissor, *yes* I know what it means, *no* you can't tell people I thought it was called stapling."

There's no reply from behind her so she turns round, expecting to see Dom's smirking face. Instead she's met with an astonished Serena.

"I have clearly been missing some *fascinating* conversations," Serena says. "Do go on."

Bernie opens and closes her mouth a few times. "I thought you were Dom," she says eventually.

"Yes of course, that explains it, I often talk to Morven about cunnilingus."

Bernie just looks at her, not at all sure what to say. Serena sits next to her on the step and bumps against her gently with her shoulder.

"Don't look so worried you daft thing, you're allowed to talk to your friends about me, there's nothing wrong with that."

"It's not usually about anything remotely like that, it's perfectly innocent."

“It can be about anything you like, including our sex life. I trust you. I’m sure you wouldn’t reveal anything I wouldn’t want you to.”

“Only good things, I promise.”

“I hope not. It’s very healthy to have a good moan about one’s partner now and then, you know I whinge to Jason about your lack of housekeeping skills and occasional grumpiness.”

“Ah, but anything you tell Jason he’ll tell me. And often a selection of other people.”

“Well that’s true. I wouldn’t say Dom was a master of discretion either, bearing in mind how I learned you loved me. But the point still stands, you can talk about us to whomever you please. He’s in theatre, by the way, Dom is, he got called in at the last minute and I said I’d let you know.”

“You could have sent a text.”

“I wanted to see this little hideout of yours, see where the cool kids are hanging out these days.” She looks around. “The view’s great, but it’s chilly and awfully hard on the buttocks.”

“We don’t sit here for hours, it’s just a…”

“An escape?”

“That doesn’t mean…not from you…” That’s not quite true, she realizes guiltily – working so closely with a lover meant that there had actually been a few times when an escape from their relationship was the sole reason she came up here.

“A roof of one’s own. As Virginia Woolf never quite said. Any relation, do you think? You’ve got an extra ‘e’ so probably not. Bright woman, though. I’m going to leave you alone.”

Serena stands up.

“Wait, no, you don’t have to go.”

“I should get back to work.”

“But I haven’t seen you today, not properly.”

Serena smiles at her and tenderly pushes a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “You’ll see me tonight.”

Bernie watches as she walks away, a little confused. At the door, Serena pauses and turns around.

“Bernie?”

“Mm?”

“I want you to know that I won’t come up here again.”

“No, you can, I don’t mind if you-“

“I won’t come up here again,” she repeats. There’s a long pause as they study each other and Bernie absorbs her meaning. “Do you understand?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Good. You’re a bright woman too.” She grins before opening the door. “I shall go and tell Raf about your stapling.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Can I have your phone number?” the woman says.

“Yes of course, do you have a pen? I might have one actually, let me check.” Bernie starts searching her pockets.

“Here, put it in my phone for safe-keeping. I wouldn’t want to lose you.”

“Mm,” Bernie says as she takes the phone and tries to figure out the unfamiliar screen. “I think that’s got it, I’m not great with technology.”

“That surprises me, I’m sure you’re wonderful with your hands.”

“Portosystemic shunts are a doddle compared to apps and Twitter, believe me. I don’t know how you youngsters cope with it all.” She gives the phone back to the other woman.

“Thank you. It’s been an absolute pleasure to meet you, Bernie. I hope to see you again very soon.”

“It was nice to meet you too.”

The woman leans forward and kisses an awkward Bernie gently on the cheek, gives her a little wave and walks away.

Fletch, Raf and Serena all stare at her.

“What?” says Bernie. “Why do you all look like goldfish?”

“Who was that?” asks Raf incredulously.

“Some woman who recognised me from the hospital, she’s a nurse in ICU. Sarah something or other, I think she said. Cindy maybe. Might have been Jill.”

“And you just gave her your number?” says Fletch.

“She wanted a few pointers, she’s interested in getting into surgery.”

“She’s interested in getting into-“

*“Fletcher!”* barks Serena.

“She kissed you,” says Raf.

“Yes that was a bit odd, wasn’t it? Might be a generation thing, she can’t have been more than 35.”

“Younger than that, I’d say,” says Raf. “Very pretty, too, I thought. Did you think she was pretty, Bernie?”

“I hope I typed my number in properly, I wish they’d go back to proper keyboards on those things. I miss analogue technology.”

“OK, look, I have to ask,” says Fletch. “Do you two have a...a bit of an understanding. Bit of an arrangement.”

“An arrangement?” asks Bernie, confused.

“You know what I mean. Doesn’t matter where you get your appetite as long as you eat at home. Wait, no, wrong one – more a friends with benefits sort of thing and you’re allowed to stray if you ever fancy it.”

“I’m not following.”

“Mr Fletcher is asking if you and I sleep with other people.”

“No! I mean, none of your bloody business! I mean no!”

“Bit of swinging on the side, spice things up? Keys in the bowl and all that? Never fancied it myself but maybe the lesbian version’s better.”

“Are you sloshed, Fletcher? It’s very early to be three sheets to the wind but you seem to have taken leave of your senses. One minute I’m talking to a nurse about her career and the next you’ve got me cheating on Serena.”

“Right,” says Serena purposefully, leaning forward. “Let me take care of this shall we or we’ll be here all night. Bernie, say to me in the simplest possible terms what happened with that woman.”

“Happened? We were talking and-“

“Did she come over to you?”

“Yes, I was sitting here waiting for you.”

“So a woman approached you in a bar.”

“Well she knew I was-“

“And then she asked for your phone number.”



“As I said she’s a-“

“And then she said you were good with your hands. And she wouldn’t want to lose you. And she looked forward to seeing you. And *then* she caressed your cheek softly with her lips before gazing at you tenderly as she waved goodbye. So in the simplest possible terms, my petal, say to me what happened with that woman.”

Bernie looks at her for a few moments; she can practically see the cogs turning in her head. “She wants to go out with me!”

Serena can’t help smiling. “Yes, darling, she does.”

“How dare she!” she says indignantly. “Right in front of you! You’re sitting right there!”

“Funnily enough, Bern, she may not have guessed that we were intimately acquainted just because I came and sat at your table.”

“What a cheek though, pretending to be interested in trauma surgery. That phone number was obtained under false pretences.”

Serena leans back in her chair and gazes at her fondly.

“Gentlemen, you might think that loving a woman this gorgeous would mean I was constantly fighting women away from her with a stick. But the *enormous* advantage I have in this area is that Bernie wouldn’t know a woman was flirting with her unless she stripped naked, swung from the chandelier and said ‘Berenice Griselda Wolfe I want your sex’.”

Fletch and Raf hoot with laughter; Serena winks at her triumphantly and sips from her wine glass. Bernie crosses her arms and glowers.

“Even then she might ask for an affidavit,” Serena adds.

“It really isn’t that long ago that I was a highly respected member of the British armed forces. I do distinctly remember that being the case.”

OOOOOOOOOO

“Left or straight on?” says Bernie.

“Hang on, I don’t know where we-“

“Which is it?”

“The sea was on our left so the cottage would be-“

“For God’s sake do I turn left or not?”

“The post office was behind us and the sun’s over there...” Serena peers out of the window at the afternoon sun before turning back to the large map.

“Stop faffing about and just-”

“I’m doing my bloody best, keep your hair on, we might have gone wrong at those sheep, or maybe that crossroads with the honeysuckle-”

“AM I SODDING TURNING LEFT!”

“OH JUST KEEP SODDING GOING!”

She does. There’s silence. Then some more of it. And some more.

“Oh *no*, Bernie, why ever would we buy a *satnav*, Bernie, you’ll have *me* there to read the *map* for you, Bernie.”

“Sarcasm is your least attractive trait.”

“Map reading is your least apparent trait.”

“Oh put a bloody sock in it and drive the car.”

“We’re going to end up in Peru.”

“If we do I’m leaving you there. Forever. I’ll tell people you died suddenly in a tragic but self-inflicted boating incident. I bet they’d hardly miss you, I certainly wouldn’t.”

“You do that.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Some more silence. After another few minutes of driving a turning appears on the left.

“Left or straight on?” Bernie says as calmly as she can, which isn’t very.

“No fucking clue, have a gamble.”

“SERENA!”

“STRAIGHT ON.”

She drives straight on. Suddenly there’s a road sign up ahead.

“Is this it?”

Serena checks the map. “Christ alive, that’s it. Turn left here.”

“Now she sodding tells me, when there’s a bloody great buggering sign on the sodding road.”

“This is our first and last holiday, Berenice bloody Wolfe, mark my words. First and last.”

“Oh hush up Wendy.”

Ten minutes of silence later they finally arrive at the cottage. Unlocking the door they enter to find a wonderfully cosy interior and a truly spectacular view of the sea. They stare out of the window and simply breathe for a substantial period of time.

Eventually Serena reaches out and cautiously takes Bernie’s hand in her own; the other woman doesn’t resist as their hands entwine. They continue to stare at the sea.

“Satnav for my birthday then?” says Serena.

Bernie laughs. “No question.”

“Sorry for all the shouting.”

“Mine too. Got a bit hot under the collar.”

“We’re turning into an old married couple.”

“Hardly. If that had been Marcus and me it would be world war three by now and we wouldn’t speak for three days.”

“I was threatened with divorce once at a roundabout in Chichester. Edward spent most of the following month in the shed.”

“You see, we’re not the old married type.”

“No.”

Serena smiles at her but there’s a trace of...something, in her eyes, a touch of melancholy perhaps...and Bernie decides to be brave.

“That’s not to rule out the growing old together part, you understand, or indeed the other part. Just the bickering.”

“Oh?” Serena says, staring intently out of the window. “The other part not ruled out, you say?”

Out of the corner of her eye she can see Serena sneaking a little glance at her. Bernie grins at her terrible attempt to appear casual. “No, I wouldn’t say so. Best to consider all one’s options in a reasonable and orderly fashion.”

“That sounds sensible.”

“If one were ever...considering one’s options, in that area, at some future time and place, would it be fair to suppose that a relatively, um, *traditional* method of enquiry would be the most effective way to elicit the desired response?”

She cringes at her stilted vocabulary, but Serena has apparently understood her gibberish perfectly well and a surprised smile appears on her face.

“Yes, I think that would be preferable.”

“I was hoping you might say that.”

She gets down on one knee. Serena stares at her.

“What...”

Bernie takes the ring out of her inside pocket and opens its little box. Her heart pounds.

“What in heaven are you...”

“Marry me, Serena.”

Serena stares and stares. “Because I was talking about old married couples?!” she says in astonishment.

“Of course not, where have I summoned this ring from if I wasn’t planning to ask you anyway?”

“We’ve just had a huge argument about directions!”

“Doesn’t matter. We made up. That’s one of the many reasons I want to marry you, you’re furious in 10-second bursts and then you love me again immediately. You’re the most forgiving person I’ve ever met, take-it-to-the-grave grudges notwithstanding.”

Serena continues to stare at her. Bernie continues to kneel on what she is starting to realize is an extremely unforgiving hardwood floor.

“Please say something, I feel ridiculous-“

“Yes.”

“-down here. Yes?”

“Yes!”

“Really?”

“No I’ve changed my mind, take me home, first turning on the left and - mmph!”

Her words are lost in a kiss.

THE END



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