



MAJOR SURGERY

LOLA KEELEY



CHAPTER 1

THE KNIFE COMES AS SOMETHING of a surprise.

Not because they're in a busy central London hospital, where knives of every blade and sharpness are a common accessory to any number of plunging stab wounds or aggressive patients refusing to be treated. Not even because they're in the entrance corridor of the Acute Medical Unit, first stop for non-trauma patients being admitted after rocking up to Accident & Emergency. Which is the actual spiritual home of knives, expected and otherwise. The sharps bins there overflow with cutlery as often as they do used needles.

No, the unexpected nature of this knife is that it's being wielded by a slender blonde woman, in her late thirties. Where Veronica's own complexion retains the brown hues of her father and grandparents, lady-with-the-knife is porcelain pale.

The knife itself isn't even especially tricky. Who knew anyone still carried a Swiss Army knife? Though the famous red casing seems to have considerable mileage on it, the chosen blade is immaculate as it gleams under their sickly fluorescent lighting.

"Stop right there!" Veronica barks, an order that would have any of her foundation-year doctors scurrying for cover. The blonde, who's currently straddling an injured cyclist lying on a gurney, drops the blade next to the injured man's arm. Order restored.

Except her next move is to brace herself and pick up the knife again. This will not do.

"Put. That. Down." Well, at least there's a pause before the re-enacting of *Psycho*. "Pauline, call security. Lea, can you find out whether Mr Wickham is planning to grace us with his presence anytime soon?"

Peter Wickham, her second-in-command, should be off preparing to face his promotion panel today, but his sporty strength does come in handy at times. Veronica intends to get best use out of the consultant she's trained since he first emerged, blinking, from the hallowed halls of Oxford.

"There's no need for security." Veronica's surprised when the woman finally speaks. Her voice is like aural lidocaine, smooth and comforting, entirely unflappable. It's the bedside manner Veronica's been trying to capture for more than fifteen years. "There *is* a distinct need for an emergency splenectomy."

Veronica's head says she's some kind of fantasist, but her gut recognises a fellow professional.

"Last I checked, the Swiss don't include a ten-blade."

"This is for the Lycra."

She promptly snags the collar of the man's cycling leotard—Veronica assumes it has a considerably more butch-sounding proper name—and slices it like a strip of wallpaper, straight down the middle. Pulling it apart, she starts to palpate the upper left quadrant of the patient's abdomen. Despite being mostly out of it, he hisses through his teeth at first contact.

"See? And a moment ago he was clutching his shoulder." The blonde looks triumphant. "Where's your nearest general surgeon?"

"That would be me, but I'm not in theatre today. Let's get him to Imaging—without a passenger if you please. Then we'll see who's on the board."

"He doesn't have time."

"You're not a CT scanner, so you can't possibly know that!" Veronica's notoriously short patience is close to snapping. "So if you could get off our bloody patient, Dr...?"

"Taylor," she corrects, spine straightening. "Major Cassie Taylor, in fact. Trauma surgeon. But I'd much rather get him open and see if we can't save part of this spleen, rather than letting him bleed out until we have to remove the little bastard."

"But...you can't do that!" Veronica is relieved to see the two bumbling security guards from A&E, a modern day Tweedledum and Tweedledee in scratchy black wool jumpers, ineffectual rubber batons clipped to their belts. At least they're built like brick shithouses. This slip of a thing won't be a match for them, Major or not. Which branch, anyway? Army, navy,

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air force? Veronica blinks a few times to stop picturing her in uniform. Or Action Man fatigues.

Patient. Spleen. Intruder riding his gurney like a hobby horse. Focus, Veronica chides herself.

“Ms Mallick?” Lea comes sprinting back, Peter Wickham in tow. He’s wearing one of his nicer suits, Boss or Armani no doubt, and his sandy blond hair is ruffled already. “Mr Wickham’s here.”

“I can see that, Lea. Peter, if this woman—sorry, Major—won’t get off my patient, I’d like you to lift her. Bodily.”

“I wouldn’t try it,” Cassie Taylor warns, her pale cheeks getting pinker. “But someone can wheel us into the nearest available operating theatre, and get me some scrubs.”

“Oh, I don’t think so—” Veronica begins.

“Since none of the surgeons here seem interested in much other than paperwork,” Cassie accuses, nodding at the stack of files under Veronica’s arm and then the papers in Peter’s. “Listen, I’ve got my GMC card in my bag, so if someone wants to root around in there, I can get on with this.” Sure enough, there’s a nondescript black leather bag by her foot.

“Listen—” Peter tries turning on the charm, moving close, but Cassie turns away in apparent disgust.

“You!” She barks at a passing orderly, one Veronica only vaguely recognises. “Get a hold of this trolley and get us into the surgical wing. Can you do that?”

The orderly, six-foot-something and muscular, looks at the gaggle of doctors and nurses, before shrugging. He positions himself at the head of the cyclist’s portable bed and starts wheeling them off, at pace.

“Did she just...” Peter watches them go. “Steal a patient?”

Veronica is half-inclined to chase after them, but the surgical staff will soon deal with it. She gestures for security to follow them, and they huff and puff, but they do it.

“Do you really care?” She cranes her neck to look after them. Should she go and physically intervene? All the training says don’t engage, but Veronica will be damned if patients can be picked up on a whim, like takeout coffee. Still, no point in stressing out Peter before his hour in the spotlight. “How’s the panel prep? Ready to be grilled?”

“Well, that’s the thing; she’s just come out of the panel.” He points after the patient-pinching Major. “She must have been first up.”

“That lunatic is up for Head of Trauma?” Veronica looks at him like he might have lost his mind, too. “Well, I’d say that makes you even more of a sure thing, Peter.”

“Taking it a little personally, Vee?” says a familiar voice behind her.

Veronica turns to see her brash and brilliant best friend, Edie, whose attention has already switched to Peter.

“Best of luck, darling.” With a kiss to his cheek, Edie dispatches him back to wherever the panel is being held.

“Thanks. I’ll just check that someone has actually verified her,” Peter says. “Do me good to stretch my legs before I face the firing squad.” He lopes off, those easy athletic strides of his eating up the long corridor.

“Edie.” Veronica greets her properly with a brisk hug. “You choose the worst Monday mornings to show up like a bad penny, you know that?”

“Well you were all standing around staring as I approached. Who was putting on a show? And was she your type?”

Veronica dismisses Edie with a wave. Forever trying to set her up, regardless of who the other woman actually is in any given equation. Just when the morning can’t get any more frustrating, the new Deputy CEO comes barreling along the hallway towards them. Veronica has got to stop hanging around at the intersection of hospital corridors. These interruptions happen less when she’s tucked away in her broom closet of an office.

“Oh Christ, here comes Travers,” she groans, patting Edie on the shoulder. “You should run while you still can.”

“Ms Mallick!” Wesley Travers shouts at Veronica, as though she can’t see him charging towards her like a bull separated from the herd at Pamplona. If bulls wore tweed and too much spiced cologne. “Have you seen my email about—”

“I’m just getting in, Dr Travers.” Despite outranking her in the management hierarchy, Wesley never trained as a surgeon. In fact, some days Veronica has her doubts as to whether he finished his medical training at all before jumping wholeheartedly into management. She quite fancies his job title for herself one day, without the ‘Deputy’ in front for good measure. She intends to get there with the understanding and experience of a great surgeon under her belt. “I’ll respond just as soon as I’m at my desk.”

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Veronica ignores completely that she's usually glued to her phone and could respond just as readily from there. She learned long ago to set boundaries with superiors and direct reports alike, lest they try to tell her how she should be spending her time.

"I don't believe we've met." Wesley turns the good-old-boy act on Edie, offering his permanently clammy hand to shake hers. While they both share the redhead genes, his is a weak sort of strawberry blond, the few strands hanging on arranged in a combover of sorts. Edie is the fiery red of Ireland-via-Hollywood, salon perfect on every strand.

Veronica seizes her chance to cause trouble, because frankly why she should be the only one on the receiving end?

"Oh, this is just one of Peter's one-night stands we can't seem to get rid of," she says, poker face firmly in place.

"Yes," Edie confirms, energetic in her handshake. "Only that was about nine years, a wedding, and two children ago. Dr Hyatt-Wickham. So pleased to meet you, Dr Travers."

"That name does ring a bell," he says, smarmy smile firmly in place as his beady eyes dart back and forth between the two women. "But you're not on staff here?"

"No, God no! Just visiting." Edie corrects him with her fakest, tinkling laugh. She withdraws her hand, discreetly wiping it on the hip of her pale grey Burberry trench coat. Despite the two children under five situation, she's rarely anything other than spotless. "But if Veronica here is too much trouble, you just say the word and I can have her sectioned."

"Ah, psychiatry," he replies, clearly pleased to be in on the joke. "Oh no, we need our Ms Mallick. AMU wouldn't run without her. I suspect she's keeping certain other hellscapes from spilling over too. Still, must be getting on."

He turns back to Veronica, who is preening just a little at the unexpected compliment. It's true that she does her share of standing up to, and babysitting, the lawlessness of Accident & Emergency. Still, that sort of thing is acknowledged about as rarely as a female director at the Oscars around here.

"Look forward to your email reply!" Wesley strides off.

"Shouldn't you be overcharging someone to talk about their dreams?" Veronica diverts Edie back over to a calmer exit, one that avoids A&E

altogether. “Don’t worry about Peter; between the pair of us we’ve primed him perfectly. He’ll be the next Head of Trauma here, and everything will settle.”

“It better.” Edie sighs. “He’s so cheerful about his backup plan. Fancies himself a Dr Kildare, dishing out Valium and rabies shots in the countryside, while the kids go frolic with lambs and take lessons in a one-roomed school.”

“It’s just the stress talking,” Veronica reassures her. “I’ll have one of the keener juniors talk him into a squash game or something this evening, keep his mind off it.”

“You know, when we met I didn’t think you’d become my partner in keeping my marriage on track.” Edie almost looks wistful. “Speaking of the old days, I was talking to Angela—”

Veronica cuts her off right away. “My darling ex has already been on my case, thank you very much. I’m more than willing to take on my share of weekends and after school, but I won’t force our son to spend time with me when he doesn’t want to.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Edie says. “He’s a good kid. Let’s have lunch this week, okay? You can tell me what happened with this mystery woman today.”

“Assuming she hasn’t been arrested yet. Peter would have called by now if it had gotten out of hand, right? You think you’ve seen everything in this madhouse, and then people start jumping on patients.” For all her cool exterior, Veronica couldn’t help worrying about the injured cyclist. Still, between Peter, security, and the operating theatre staff, she had to trust in the system for now.

“What team does she play for?” Edie interrupts her fretting.

“I didn’t get a chance to check her sexual preferences while she was trying to perform surgery in the hall,” Veronica points out, feeling about as reasonable as she’s ever been. “She had an actual Swiss Army knife. What next? Sticky-back plastic? Anyway, I think I’m free Wednesday, but you’re buying.”

“Make it somewhere with a decent wine list and you’re on.”

Edie runs her own practice, so it’s easy enough for her to agree.

Veronica waves her off before turning back to the Monday-morning hum of her department. The paint might be institutional pale yellow,

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flaking in the corners, and the floor might have the squeak of linoleum worn down by too many trolley wheels and sensible shoes, but it's her kingdom, her domain.

All around her the noises of the hospital continue. The low buzz of the lights overhead, the faint beeping of thousands of monitors, the constant murmur of traffic on three sides of them, and the vibration of trains running underneath.

Another week is starting. Time to get this show on the road. No amount of mysterious military blondes can get in the way of that.

CHAPTER 2

CASSIE DOESN'T EVER INTEND TO get herself into these situations; they just have an uncanny knack of happening to her anyway.

It's not that other people won't eventually see the same things she can—Cassie is no savant—but for most of her career “eventually” has been a luxury her patients could ill afford.

And sure, there are other ways to make a point beside climbing on people. But the critical lack of urgency in this department is what the attractive, dark-skinned doctor, with her perfect hair and her tailored pantsuit, should be yelling about. Not Cassie's well-intentioned attempts to save this man's spleen.

It's a shock tactic of sorts, grabbing the nearest able-bodied helper to wheel them away, but Cassie has little choice. It's been a bad introduction, anyway, and only going downhill from there. There's not much chance of restoring her credibility, other than by getting this bleed under control. Still, there's a defiant little part of her that wants to wave at this Mallick woman like Cassie's the captain of a cup-winning football team on an open-top bus.

An even cheekier part would like to flick her the Vs, but there's something almost too suggestive about that.

Still, at least the theatre staff are more cooperative. Maybe it's Monday-morning lethargy, but when sufficiently barked at, they stand back and make room. They're not entirely subservient, Cassie discovers as she goes about the business of quickly changing into the supposedly unisex scrubs that, in her size, make no accommodation for hips nor bust. She debates whether straining seams or another change is more irritating, only for

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another officious woman in a skirt that makes her walk like a penguin to come storming in.

“Look,” Cassie interrupts before she can receive her institutional scolding. “I’m a trauma surgeon and I’ve pulled bomb fragments out of more people than you’ve had hot dinners, so instead of twenty questions, why don’t you give me something to sign that gives me temporary privileges?”

“Well, our insurers—”

“I’ve just interviewed for a job here, so believe me when I say I’m qualified. And the man they’re covering in blue sheets over there will likely die by the time you find someone else. Which do you think makes a bigger financial splash?”

“This is highly irregular,” the woman answers with what can only be called a harrumph. “As Surgical Manager—”

“Oh, you must be Jean.” Cassie sticks a hand out, though she’d rather be sticking it under a tap and getting scrubbed in. “I was sorry to hear I hadn’t snagged you for part of my interview panel. Major Cassie Taylor.”

They shake hands, and Jean looks pleased to be recognised. The managers always are, especially when they’re non-practitioners.

“There is a form for extenuating circumstances,” Jean says, rifling through her stack of papers. “And since we’re technically on emergency standing, what with the winter overload...”

She drones on as Cassie snatches the proffered form and signs it without looking. Nodding along to Jean’s explanation, she backs up into the scrub room and taps the pedal to turn the tap on. From her vantage point she can see the anaesthesiologist arrive and take his seat, surgical cap untied and at least one night of no sleep in his weary expression. Fantastic.

The team turns out to be solid, though. As soon as Cassie steps out in her too-tight scrubs, her gown is slipped on. While one curvy, middle-aged scrub nurse ties the loops down her back at regular intervals, another slight young man is snapping a brand-new pair of latex gloves into place over the sleeves. Mask in place, Cassie steps up to the table and watches her patient settle under the full strength of the anaesthetic.

“For those of you who don’t know me,” she begins, reaching for the tray of instruments and selecting a ten-blade. “And I suspect that’s everyone here. I’m Major... That is, *Ms* Cassie Taylor. I came in today to interview for the Head of Trauma, no doubt competing with some people that you

all like and respect. That said, all that matters right now is the life in our collective hands, are we agreed?”

Nods on every side, some more tentative than others.

“I’m going to work very quickly,” she tells them, her hands doing exactly that as she opens the abdomen just far enough. “And there’s no time for laparoscopy, I’m afraid. Every minute we delay, more of this spleen is compromised. Not only could this man lose his life, but even if we save him, delay means a life of being immunocompromised for no bloody good reason.”

A layer of subcutaneous fat—not much; the cyclist is clearly in good shape—gives under Cassie’s knife as she continues to make quick deft cuts until her splenic ground zero is fully revealed. The team move to retract and pack the open incision, absorbing blood even as suction starts up.

“Who’s my, uh...helper?” she asks, at a loss for the correct terminology. A man opposite her, the one applying suction with great care, raises his free hand.

“Well, I suppose I’m your registrar,” he replies. “Don’t have any F2s in yet; they’re at some training meeting or other this morning. It’s why there were no scheduled surgeries for another hour.”

“Really? You can’t operate without your grunts? I’m assuming that’s what an F2 is?” Cassie asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, we have F1s and F2s—they’re foundation-year doctors. You know, juniors, House Officers? They do the grunt work—holding things, standing for hours. It’s important for their learning to start with the dull, repetitive tasks and—”

“Thanks for the explanation. But surely you must still remember how? Besides, you’ve done a great job already with holding the suction.”

“No, of course, but—”

“Between us and these very competent nurses, I’d say we can handle a little spleen, surely?”

“Absolutely, Major.”

“Really, ‘Ms’ will do fine,” she replies. “Going to have to get used to civilian life sometime. Now, hand me that retractor, because this one isn’t going to get the job done.”

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It's easy work in the end; she's more than used to impact injuries. Nobody questions her decisions, simply hands her what she asks for almost quickly enough.

Only when it comes to closing does her registrar clear his throat behind the white surgical mask.

"Usually I do that for the consultant," he explains, almost apologetic.

"Oh, right." Cassie is used to racing through each procedure, start to finish. She doesn't generally have a fleet of waiting juniors. On the best days every pair of hands is usually occupied with CPR and halting bleeding. This is going to take some getting used to.

Assuming she even gets the job, which is looking far less likely after her spree of rule-breaking. She must still be a little demob happy, missing the structure to bounce against.

Scrubbing out doesn't take much time in comparison, throwing everything disposable in the bin and seeking out the nearby surgical locker room to change from scrubs back into her interview suit.

Which, in a fantastic development for an already challenging day, has blood on the jacket and what appears to be bike oil smeared on one thigh. Her blouse hasn't fared much better, but she pulls it all together as best she can.

Cassie has never been one of those women who looks effortlessly put together, outside of uniform which makes it easy. She washes her hands one more time, using damp fingers to try and tame her hair again. Blonde wisps are escaping in too many directions, just like every other time she's tried to fix it herself.

Buttoning her jacket, she's just about to leave when the locker room door swings open.

Of course, it's the woman from earlier. She doesn't have a huge stack of files this time, but she does have that inscrutable "in charge" vibe that Cassie more readily associates with a general.

"Well, if it isn't the gung-ho army medic. How's your patient, Major?"

Is it a plus that she actually remembers the rank? Paying attention for hints of an accent, Cassie hears only that sort of BBC Home Counties polish so beloved of those in a certain social class. Cassie doesn't fancy her chances in a war of words with this one, so she nods towards the operating theatre door instead.

“Yes, I came that way and a very competent registrar is closing,” the woman continues in the face of Cassie’s silence. “I can assume that means I’m not putting a plus one on the mortality rates for this quarter?”

A bureaucrat. Of course. Makes perfect sense, since they’re always the first to get squeamish at the prospect of someone actually taking action.

“He survived. And kept what I’d estimate to be forty percent of his spleen. Enough to spare him a life of drug regimens and avoidable infections.”

“Yes, well. I wouldn’t make a point of raiding the admission wards for stitching practice. We do actually have processes here. Ones that keep patients alive and people employed.”

Jean, bless her and her bustling, comes barging in at that very moment.

“Major Taylor, that was a wonderful job. We were expecting the theatre to be booked out another half hour at least, but I see they’re already clearing out. Ms Mallick,” she adds in acknowledgment.

“Just lending a hand,” Cassie replies, trying to skirt around both women to get to the door. “It seemed like your other general surgeons were all busy.”

Jean gives a disapproving glance at the Mallick woman, confirming another suspicion.

“Ms Mallick here doesn’t operate on Mondays unless it’s emergent. It’s not on the schedule.”

“Well, I don’t think our patient scheduled his bike being clipped by the number twenty-seven bus either, but I understood this was a hospital, not a spa.”

“I actually have an entire department to run,” Mallick cuts in. “Time in surgery is something that does have to be scheduled. I thought you would have known that, being up for Head of Trauma and all.”

“That might be how things run in... Sorry, what’s your department called again? Minor Injuries Unit?”

Well, that one lands. Mallick absolutely bristles at the condescension, dark eyes flashing under the stale fluorescent lights.

“The AMU is the first point of admissions for everyone who comes through A&E. I don’t suppose you glanced at an organisational chart?”

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“The way I understand it, non-emergent cases from A&E go to you. The real cases go straight to Trauma, and more often than not straight to theatre.”

Jean steps in as voices and tempers rise in tandem. Shame. Cassie could do with a good barney to let some of the day’s steeped tension out of her muscles. “Well, we all play a vital role,” Jean says. “I’m sure if you do end up in Trauma—”

Mallick snorts.

Cassie isn’t going to give her the satisfaction. “I’m sure I’ve ruled myself out with prioritising the patient this morning, but it was very nice just to be considered.”

“Yes, well, you’ll be hearing from Mr Travers one way or another,” Jean replies. “Do you need a hand getting back to the car park, or...?”

“I can find my way, thanks.” Cassie is done with chatty. She lets Jean leave, in case she does want to walk-and-talk her out of there. It’s more of a surprise when Mallick doesn’t go, too.

With a steadying breath, Cassie makes her way towards the locker room door. She’s stopped by an unexpected hand on her forearm. Getting this close to Mallick wasn’t intentional, but now she is, Cassie can’t ignore the tantalising notes of perfume, something floral and summery despite the drizzling autumn grey outside.

“Don’t feel too bad about the job.”

“Oh?” Cassie bites back a more sarcastic reply.

“We have a terribly strong internal candidate. I trained him myself, so he’s practically hand-picked. Just in case you were holding out hope.”

“I’m a big girl; I think I can handle their decision, Ms Mallick.”

“Very well.”

Mallick releases her grip, and Cassie almost stumbles with a sudden burst of momentum. That’s quite enough hospital politics for one day. For a supposed fresh start, this place is making her long for Basra.

“Well,” Cassie says, fresh out of witty retorts. “Good-bye, then.” At least she doesn’t default to “nice to meet you”, since it so clearly wasn’t.

She strides out into the corridor before waiting for a response, if there is one, and focuses on getting the hell out of there.

CHAPTER 3

GOING TO CHECK ON THE interloper is a prime example of Veronica's worst instincts, the nosiness and impetuous decision-making that she's spent years trying to train out of herself.

And yet she does it anyway.

Worse, she lets the kamikaze commando have the last word, which would surprise just about everyone in this building that Veronica has gone toe-to-toe with.

Bustling out of the surgical locker room, she heads straight for the solace of her office. It's one of the larger ones in this wing, two small offices knocked into one quite by accident and never put right. Aside from her desk, a master of bland Scandinavian whiteness that's ergonomically sound in five different ways, there's not room for much else since the meeting table and chairs dominate half the space. She's done what she can to liven it up with some Klimt prints and a few well-stocked bookcases. Her last attempt at cultivating a green thumb has been mercy-killed by the cleaners, so no plants clutter the surfaces.

The laptop she left to boot up before her morning meeting has finally blinked into life. Sunday is always a strictly no work day, the one attempt at disconnecting in her otherwise screen-filled life. Unfortunately that means every Monday morning the thing takes longer to revive than the average drowning victim. There's a requisition form in for a new computer. It might be granted sometime before all their brains are uploaded to Skynet and robots are doing the surgeries.

The bad mood has settled behind Veronica's eyebrows like an incipient headache, and she knows frowning isn't going to chase it away. The brief meetings with this new doctor, this intruder trying to steal Peter's place and

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Veronica's plan away, keep replaying on a mental loop. Each time, Veronica thinks of a wittier or sharper remark she might have made, frustrating her afresh with every round.

She's saved from her own obsessing by a rap of knuckles on her firmly closed office door. Lea, barely five foot nothing in her royal blue nurse's tunic. It's only three years since Lea moved to London from Manila, passing the rigorous nursing conversion exams with flying colours. Her glossy black hair is braided tightly, and unlike a lot of staff with a twelve-hour day ahead, she's made the effort to apply lipstick and mascara. Warpaint, she calls it.

Veronica is glad to see her at the best of times, but especially so when Lea has two travel mugs of coffee in her hands.

"It's like you read my mind," Veronica says. "I was too busy snooping over in theatre to swing by the cafeteria."

"Cafeteria?" Lea scoffs. "I'm not that cruel, not on a Monday. I took the scenic route to the Greek place."

"You're brave, fording the stream on Praed Street at this time of day." Veronica takes a first sip, the milky coffee still hot enough to sting lips and tongue just a little. "Sometimes I think why fight it? I should just pick a vein and have you start an IV for me."

"You can take a number." Lea sets her charts down but doesn't take the other free chair. She glances back towards the corridor, as though on the lookout for spies. "Were you checking on your army doctor?"

"She's hardly mine. I just had the misfortune to try and stop her opening abdomens in the waiting room."

"But they let her operate? Only I heard that Jean marched down there to put a stop to the whole thing, finds the woman already scrubbed in and ready to operate. Signed a bunch of forms with a pen between her teeth, just to stay sterile."

Veronica wonders where the impenetrable NHS bureaucracy is at moments like this. She can't order the wrong kind of pens without it being an insurance problem, a budget issue, and a political shit-storm all at once. But now they're offering a walk-in operating theatre to any passing surgeon.

"So you can what? Just waltz in and cut, as long as you know your way around the tools?" Veronica asks Lea. "Sounds more like a hairdresser than a hospital."

Lea shrugs as though she's seen worse. "How was the surgical meeting? People are still chafing at cancelling everything but emergency surgery. The backlog's getting harder to handle."

"Electives have been cancelled because we're overstretched," Veronica reminds her. "And we can't operate on people if we don't have anywhere to put them afterwards."

"I know this." Lea's reminder is gentle. "But there's a lot of unused space. You don't get off the ward much, but we all see it."

"Well, I've made my suggestions." Veronica has finally gotten access to her email, and amongst a hundred needless circulars there's the promised missive from Wesley Travers. She takes great delight in not clicking on it, knowing he'll be on his way the moment he sees the read receipt.

Lea smiles at someone in the corridor before taking a swig of her coffee. "Mr Wickham," she says, stepping out of his way. "I should get going."

Peter comes in to take his habitual spot in the visitor chair, long legs stretched out in front of him as he drops his briefcase to the floor with more theatricality than usual.

"Sorry to bother you before," Veronica says, and he's one of the few subordinates to ever get an apology from her. "I thought I was going to have to rely on your muscle, and you know how I hate to do that."

"Well, gives me an excuse to keep up the tennis." They both know he spends more time on the golf course lately, and the nineteenth hole at that. "Did your blonde spitfire get arrested in the end? It looked pretty close to assault from where I was standing."

"No, in their infinite wisdom, management waived her into surgery. I assume someone, somewhere has checked her credentials. Don't worry, though, I told her she doesn't stand a chance of the job while you're in the frame."

"I don't know about that." He scrubs a large hand over his face, ruffling his neat hair and making a scratching sound across his designer stubble. "I've had enemas more pleasant than that round of questioning."

"Vivid, thank you. Still, I insist on buying the first bottle of bubbly when you're appointed."

"Now, come along, Veronica. No use putting the cart before the horse." He leans forward, flicking idly at the files on her desk.

"I trained you myself, Peter. There's no better endorsement, remember?"

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“Did Edie get off to work all right?”

He’s changing the subject. *Uh-oh*. Veronica hides a grimace at the thought of him saying something stupid to blow the whole interview. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be without precedent. “She did. We’re having lunch later in the week, if you want to tag along.”

“And interrupt you both talking about me?” Peter says, with a lazy grin. “Unlikely, boss.”

“Not for long,” Veronica wonders again at whether he’s blown his big chance, with a little less confidence this time. “We’ll officially be peers when you get this.”

“You know sometimes,” Peter says, apropos of nothing, “I wonder if this isn’t all some grand plan, to have your people in place so you can take over the world.”

“Is that what you wonder?” Veronica teases, not giving away how close it is to her long game. “Just get the damn job, Peter.”

“Yes, sir.” He stands to leave, ready to go about his day again. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a crop of foundation-year doctors to traumatise into being better at medicine.”

“I’ll see you out there in a while.”

Checking her watch, Veronica sighs that the face is out of sight again. Tugging on the thin gold strap to pull it back into place, she turns to the emails she can ignore no longer. If they’re going to get back to full service by next week, it’s going to take some wrangling and ingenuity on her part.

It must be done, and it will be.

The sudden burst of optimism is so unexpected she considers checking whether Lea spiked her latte.

“Let’s see what Travers wants,” she says to her now-empty office with a groan. She’s barely five words in before realising her boss wants to offload some work onto her. Typical. That said, picking up another committee place will look good when she’s going for his job in the relatively near future.

And as she predicted, he appears in the doorway before she can get around to clicking on ‘reply’. He must have been lying in wait somewhere nearby, because she’s never seen him break into a run. The executive block isn’t far, but as with most places on this hospital campus, “not far” can still be quite a hike. That’s not counting their two other sites, the smaller

community hospital farther west, and the terribly impressive university that technically owns the whole Trust now.

If Veronica still struggles to keep up with the organisational structure, she can't imagine how unfathomable it is to outsiders. Except Major Taylor, who doesn't even look for rules in the first place, before blithely breaking them.

How does that woman keep sneaking back into Veronica's thoughts? She won't give credence to Edie's earlier teasing, even if it has been rather a while since she dated anyone for more than a string of rescheduled dinners, mediocre wine, and the odd ill-advised play somewhere that prided itself more on being trendy than on hiring people who could act.

"Veronica?"

In her distraction, she realises that she hasn't heard a word he said. "Yes, Wesley," she answers blindly, hoping that's the right choice. Given how he beams at her, it seems to be.

Swiping at his nose with a plain cotton hanky, he picks up from wherever he left off. "Now, we won't let the committee cut into—oh, that's good, *cut* into—your operating windows. I'll make sure it's only the boring admin this interferes with. Scout's honour and all that. Dib dib."

Veronica gives a tight smile, glad her stapler is out of her line of vision, or she might be tempted to staple his gaudy school tie to his forehead.

"Just let Marjorie know when there are dates—she runs my calendar."

"Of course. I hear we had a bit of excitement this morning with one of the admissions from A&E?" He's fishing, and clearly knows exactly what happened already, judging by his smug expression.

"All handled, I understand. Though more Jean's issue than mine, if you need anything for the insurance."

"Oh, we've spoken. Seems Major Taylor has impressed the panel and the staff today."

Veronica snorts. She's staff, and certainly unimpressed.

"I think we have steadier pairs of hands in waiting, Wesley. Don't you?"

"Ah. Well, in theory." He swipes at his nose again, grumbling to himself. "Let the chips fall where they may, et cetera." Travers is the only person Veronica's ever met who actually sounds it out like two separate Latin words.

"Yes, let's." She turns back to her coffee and the screen. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must crack on."

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MAJOR SURGERY

BY LOLA KEELEY

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