The Many 'What's of Serena Campbell

by kooili

Summary

“What?”

A simple syllable signifying a question.

Except when it is uttered by one Serena Campbell. The tone and inflection of her voice bestow upon it myriad meanings that most people couldn’t manage in an entire thesis with footnotes and appendices included.


aka “5 times Serena Campbell said ‘what.’”

Notes

Anyone else's ovaries explode in gay delight whenever Catherine Russell says the word 'what'? No? Just me?
Anger

There are unquestionable physical characteristics of science - physics, chemistry and biology - that all follow predictable albeit often complicated rules that always hold true. Morven is more familiar than most with this universal fact given her training and her profession. She is certain though, that neither Newton nor any of his esteemed colleagues would be able to explain the phenomenon she is witnessing.

A fully grown six foot man being reduced to three inches tall by a five foot four woman.

The victim in question is one of the new F1s from Keller. He’s tall with a mop of curly red hair and had strolled out of the lift thirty seconds ago looking for a Ms Campbell. Morven picked up the air of enthusiasm and possibly a hint of arrogance - not unusual for a bright, shiny new doctor ready to take on the world. She had pointed him in the right direction and he’d sauntered up to her, hands in his scrub pockets.

First mistake.

His second is to attempt a joke about how AAU is like a holding pen for the patients while they deal with the real surgery up on Keller. It's like watching a train wreck and Morven cringes knowing what will follow, but she still can’t help looking.

“I suppose we can’t all be the leading act, eh? Someone’s got to do the donkey wo-”

“What?”

The F1 stops speaking, mid-sentence. He looks slightly confused but perhaps his natural survival instinct is kicking in. After all, Morven rationalises, it doesn’t take a medical degree to recognize when to duck and seek cover.

Morven sneaks another quick peek from her position behind the nurses’ station before dropping her gaze quickly back onto her work because no one is exempt from the consequences when Serena chooses to use this particular tone.

“So, Dr...” Serena flicks her eyes at the plastic tag dangling off the edge of the maroon scrub top, “...Morris, I take it that’s why you’ve chosen to wait a whole hour to find your way down to AAU? Even though I specifically requested that the patient was to be taken up to Keller immediately.”

He makes his third mistake with his next words. “But, Ms Campbell, I thought-”

The look on Serena’s face freezes him immediately. Morven considers calling down to the ED for a gurney to save time.

“You thought?” Clearly she isn’t of the opinion that his pay grade includes an entitlement for him to think in this particular situation. Or, judging by her opinion of him and his comments, any situation at all.

The poor man’s face is practically the colour of whitewash and he shrinks a little further, stammering limply. “It’s been busy and this is only my second day…”

A sculpted eyebrow quirks and he clamps his mouth shut immediately, deciding it’s the wisest thing he can do if he wants to have a third day in Holby City.
As entertaining as it is to rubberneck, an accident of an embarrassing nature is imminent in the middle of the ward without some active intervention and Morven doesn’t want to be the one left with mopping up random body parts and fluids. She sighs, takes a deep breath and pushes herself up from her seat. Flicking through the pile of folders on the desk, she finds and picks up the right one from the top of a pile. This will be her good deed for the day.

“Ms Campbell?”

Serena turns at the sound of her name, releasing the hapless F1 from her glare.

“Yes, Dr Digby?”

“The ED called up about this patient and they weren’t sure if she should be transferred here or straight to Darwin.” Morven holds the folder up in her hand and is rewarded instantly with a look of immense gratitude and relief from the young man.

Serena nods, her ire distracted as she starts flicking through the folder the moment Morven hands it over. Her practiced eyes skim through the pages and find the appropriate one in a matter of seconds. Her expression lightens momentarily when she reaches the information she’s looking for only to harden again when she finally speaks. “When did they send this up?”

“Only just.” Morven winces at the partial truth. The folder has been sitting on the desk for the past twenty minutes but she hadn’t thought it wise to interrupt Serena when she was on a warpath. Besides, the symptoms are clearly ones of a possible gastric ulcer rather than a cardiac arrest.

“Ummm, Ms Campbell…if there’s nothing else, I’ll take the patient up right now.” The young doctor seems to have recovered the power of speech as his face gradually returns to a vaguely healthy pallor.

Serena nods and waves him away, distracted by the possibility of a new outlet for her wrath.

“You would think that they’d have three working brain cells between the lot of them. They need to send this patient straight up before the ulcer perforates,” she mutters as she strides towards the nearest phone.

“Ah, it’s all right, Ms Campbell. I’ll let them know,” Morven intervenes quickly before her little ruse is discovered. “I’m sure you’ve got more important things to deal with.”

Serena pauses and looks Morven straight in the eyes.

“Do I?”

It’s only because she has had so much practice that the young woman manages to keep a bright smile on her face.

“I’m sure there’s a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll that are more deserving of your attention right now, so why don’t you just leave this with me?”

Morven has to stop herself from doing a fistpump when Serena’s face softens and rewards her with a faint smile. “Yes, I suppose I mustn’t keep them waiting. Tell the ED to send the patient up straightaway.”

Morven nods and breathes a huge sigh of relief when Serena finally turns and heads towards the office. Perhaps the laws of physics can still hold true, she ponders. They just have to pause occasionally for the sheer unflinching force that is Serena Campbell.
Panic

Chapter Notes

It turns out lots of people have noticed the power of the ‘what’. My wife made a video of five whats and it turns out that there are even more than that, as neuewayve pointed out in this genius video, featuring added Bernie!

The consultants’ office is quiet save for the soft rustle of paper in folders as hands thumb through them, searching for the appropriate pages. Bernie finally finds what she’s looking for and parts the folder at the page. She scribbles a vague approximation of her initials in the appointed space and flips the folder over with a sigh.

Serena lifts her eyes from her own endeavours and smiles. Neither of them likes paperwork, but Bernie’s avoidance of it surpasses even hers. The smile grows into the tiniest chuckle. Bernie looks completely miserable as she picks up next folder from the teetering pile in front of her.

“What’s so funny?”

Serena drops her pen and leans back to admire the sight before her. No point in hiding now that she’s been caught.

“You are.”

Bernie attempts to lift an eyebrow but only manages to look like she’s frowning lopsidedly, not unlike a cartoon villain. The imagery only serves to make Serena chuckle louder.

“That’s a fine way to speak to your partner,” Bernie huffs.

“Just stating the facts, Ms Wolfe.”

Bernie pushes herself away from the desk and crosses her arms. “Care to elucidate, Ms Campbell?”

“I’ve seen abandoned labrador puppies looking less doleful.”

“Is that right?” Bernie sits a little straighter.

“Just stating the facts, Ms Wolfe.”

Bernie stretches and gets up onto her feet. “And you think that’s an appropriate simile to apply to a fellow consultant, a colleague and an equal,” she takes a step towards Serena’s half of the office before finishing her sentence, “in every way?”

Serena tents her fingers and leans her elbows on the desk. “And why wouldn’t it be?”

Bernie slides up against Serena’s desk and settles onto it, displacing the folders previously occupying the space. “It would be rather awkward if we fell out, don’t you think?”

Serena hums in agreement as she lifts herself up from her chair. “Might make it difficult sharing the same office.”
Bernie tilts her chin thoughtfully, shifting herself a little further forward. “Or working together on the same ward.” She lifts a hand and reaches out towards Serena’s cheek. Her thumb brushes the angle of her jaw and Serena shivers. She sees Bernie’s eyes darken as she mirrors the action.

“We may even have to keep our interaction confined to theatre.” Serena’s voice is at its lowest register and Bernie knows she’s well and truly beaten.

Their lips and bodies clash urgently and neither of them is particularly bothered that the stack of folders is now scattered unceremoniously on the floor.

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Raf lifts his head at the sound. “Did you hear that?”

Fletch frowns. “Hear what?”

A slightly louder clatter answers his question and they scan the ward simultaneously. A quick look confirms that nothing is out of place on the ward and that isn’t surprising. It’s near end of shift, most of the obs are done and the three patients under their care are settling in for the night. And besides, whatever it is seems to have stopped and Fletch takes the opportunity to take a break.

“Coffee, mate?”

Raf nods and focuses his attention back on the charts he’s working on. They aren’t going to complete themselves and he’s barely even started.

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Serena winces as she shifts herself away from the hard angles digging into her back. The endorphins coursing through her body are fading by now and she tries to remember why she thought this was a good idea.

The hand attached to the arm wrapped around the bare skin of her waist starts drifting up and down her spine again, rekindling a familiar thrum, and her memory returns.

Oh yes.

“I take it that I’m forgiven?” Serena purrs.

Bernie places a kiss on the tip of Serena’s nose before answering. “You’ve presented an interesting case but I might need more convincing.” Bernie leans forward, ready to take the initiative.

Serena meets her for a lip-searing kiss before pushing herself upright. “I’d be more than happy to oblige but maybe we should take this somewhere more private? Jason’s not back till Thursday…”

It’s not true - he’s not even due to be out tonight - but the phrase has become a handy code by now. Bernie flashes her a lascivious grin and needs no further encouragement. She is up on her feet in a matter of seconds. Her right arm finds and threads through the sleeve of the shirt hanging off her other shoulder and fingers frantically seek out the right buttons for each hole.

Serena is torn between a mixture of amusement and desire at the sight. “Eager, are we? Well, you’d better hand me my top if we’re going anywhere.”

Bernie shoots her a glare but the smile in her eyes gives her away. She finds what she’s looking for crumpled under the desk and shakes it loose in an attempt to straighten the fabric out.
Serena is up on her feet by now and reaches out for her blouse when she notices the frozen look on Bernie’s face.

“Bernie?”

Serena frowns when Bernie doesn’t respond. Her face is indecipherable and Serena almost swears there is the slightest hint of Bernie holding something back. She gets her answer seconds later when the blonde finally holds her blouse aloft. Her eyes narrow and then widen almost instantly.

“I’m sorry, Serena, I don’t know how… I mean, I didn’t think I pulled that hard but…”

The look on Serena’s face is quickly transforming from disbelief into shock.

“I’ll buy you a new one?” Bernie offers apologetically.

Serena grabs the fabric from Bernie’s grasp but it’s instantly obvious that whatever’s left isn’t salvageable.

“And what am I supposed to wear in the meantime?” Serena hisses, panic rising in her voice.

Bernie considers offering Serena a stapler and a roll of tape but decides it would sabotage her plans for the rest of the night.

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Raf pauses tentatively in front of the office door. The blinds are angled shut but he can hear the sounds of movement so he knows that either Serena or Bernie is still in. He hears a soft thunk and a muffled voice - Serena’s he thinks - and knocks on the door.

“Serena?”

He’s about to knock again when the door open and Bernie is standing front and centre filling the door frame with an odd smile on her face.

“Did you need something, Raf?”

“Results from Mr Collins’ tests. The potassium count is a little off and I wanted a second opinion.”

Bernie takes the tablet from his hand and starts scrolling down the screen. Raf peeks over her shoulder and sees Serena hunched over her desk, engrossed by the glow of the computer screen in front of her. She must be feeling the chill because she has a grey Holby City hoodie on, with the drawstrings taut so that the top is pulled right up under her chin.

“Feeling a little under the weather, Serena?”

His answer is a vague nod as Serena’s eyes stay plastered to the screen.

Bernie hands the tablet back annotated with her suggestions and practically shoves it into his hands.

“Anything else Mr di Lucca?”

“No. Thanks Bernie. And feel better soon, Serena.”

He gets a hint of a smile this time and is about to pull the door shut again when something on the floor by Bernie’s foot catches his eyes. He bends over and picks up the flat white disc, turning it over for closer scrutiny.
“Either of you lost a button?”

Bernie’s face is inscrutable but Raf swears she’s either trying very hard not to laugh or is about to have a cardiac arrest. She manages a mumbled thanks before she snatches the button from Raf’s fingers and all but slams the door in his face.

As he makes his way towards Mr Collins in bay three, he’s certain he hears another sound coming from the office. Unless his ears are deceiving him, this one is somewhat reminiscent of a goose honk.
Serena breathes a large sigh as she lathers her hands methodically. It is by sheer muscle memory that she follows through each of the recommended motions because her entire body is numb from fatigue. She manages a small smile because it’s the best kind of fatigue. *Well,* she thinks, smirking. Maybe the second best. Six hours in theatre doing battle against the odds. There was blood everywhere - but when wasn’t there, in her line of work - and for a brief, dark moment, it was like trying to cut off the head of the Lernaean Hydra every time she tied off a leaking vessel.

Her smile widens. She’s lost too many battles in the past but not today. Today she won. Not by using brute force. No, she used her best weapons, coaxing and cajoling with delicate touches until every last wound was silenced.

She shakes the droplets of water off her arms for the final time before pushing the lever of the tap shut and placing a well-earned mental notch in her list of victories against death.

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AAU is thrumming with activity by the time she changes and pushes through the double doors. A quick glance around the ward reassures her that everything is under control and Serena ponders if she has time for a detour to Pulses - surely she’s earned the luxury of a coffee and a medicinal pain au chocolat.

“Serena.” An all too familiar voice stops her in her tracks.

“Hello stranger.” Serena smiles, turning towards the sound of her name. The look on Bernie’s face dampens her smile. “Long day?”

Bernie draws a shaky breath and opens her mouth to answer but the words are sticking in her throat.

“Bernie?”

The sound of her name seems to focus her attention and finally their eyes meet.

“What’s wrong?” It’s a question but Serena’s tone brooks no room for anything other than an honest answer.

Bernie places a hand on Serena’s shoulder, unsure if it is for Serena’s benefit or her own. What she doesn’t expect is her resolve draining away like air through a punctured tyre the moment Serena’s hand touches hers.

“Neuro have already done some preliminary tests and they don’t think there’s anything to worry about. I’ve ordered a head CT and an MRI and she’s stable.”

Serena stares at Bernie like she’s speaking a foreign language and it’s only then that Bernie realises she’s babbling.

“Are you okay?”

All the scenarios she had run through her head in the past hour, all the words and speeches she had prepared fall apart at Serena’s concern. Bernie staggers and grips Serena’s shoulder a little tighter.

“The…uhmm, patient I was treating in the trauma bay.”
Serena frowns and Bernie tries so very hard to be strong.

“It’s… Serena, it’s Elinor.”

Bernie feels the muscles in Serena’s shoulder tense as the look on her face transforms from confusion to shock.

“What?”

Serena feels her legs weaken under her and it’s only Bernie’s grip keeping her vertical.

“She came in an hour ago. Police found her passed out in an alley behind a club. Some evidence of facial trauma, that’s why they brought her straight up here. I don’t think she’ll need surgery, but-”

“What!” The remnants of shock have now faded and are rapidly being replaced by raw fear.

“Serena, I’ve got this. She’ll be-”

Bernie is unprepared for Serena’s reaction when it comes. “And you didn’t think to tell me earlier?”

Bernie blinks and staggers back a step. “I…”

“Why didn’t you page me immediately? She’s my daughter, Bernie. I should have been told!”

Serena is angry and afraid and Bernie knows what she needs to do. She pulls her hand away and takes another step back so that she can look Serena in the eyes.

“You couldn’t have treated her and you were saving a life.” Her voice has changed; she’s Ms Wolfe now, not Bernie.

“That’s not the point! You should have-” Serena snaps back.

Bernie takes a shot in the dark, hoping it will pay off. “Do you trust me?”

Serena freezes and their eyes meet again. Bernie doesn’t realise that she’s been holding her breath until Serena nods and air fills her lungs once more.

“Where is she?”

“Still in the trauma bay. She’s stable for now and we’re waiting for a slot in CT.”

Serena pulls herself away Bernie’s grasp and strides towards the bay. She knows she trusts Bernie when she tells her that Elinor has everything she needs. She would trust Bernie with her life. Why then is it that she still has a gnawing feeling in her stomach?

The steady beep of monitors is reassuring. Serena pushes her way through the plastic strips and takes a deep breath in preparation for the worst.

The slim figure on the gurney shifts and grunts. Serena takes a step closer and blinks. Her brows crease as she stares a little longer and she blinks again. Her legs have decided it’s time to stop working and she stumbles backwards.

“This isn’t Elinor.” She thinks she might die of relief.

Bernie is there in an instant and her arms support Serena effortlessly.
“Are you sure? The paramedics found a purse and phone. That’s how they identified her as Elinor.”

Serena bestows on her a withering look. “Of course I’m sure,” she snaps.

She pulls her phone from a pocket and dials the appropriate number. There is a pause before a soft hum sounds in the corner where a bag and soiled clothing lie crumpled. Bernie takes the initiative and locates the source in a matter of seconds. She hands it over to Serena who recognises her own number flashing on the screen. Bernie gives a look that says ‘see-what-I-mean?’ and Serena is momentarily puzzled although she shouldn’t be. She knows what her daughter looks like and this - she spares another glance for the young woman on the gurney - isn’t Elinor. In fact...

She takes a step closer and scrutinises the girl’s face. It’s a little worse for wear with a large bruise colouring a cheek and the remnants of makeup smeared haphazardly, but it is familiar.

“This is Gabby.”

Bernie frowns. “Who?”

“Elinor’s friend from school. They’re housemates. She fetched up here once on an ecstasy trip with an ectopic pregnancy.”

Bernie notices Serena’s eyes darken slightly despite the clear relief written all over her face. “I’m sure Elinor’s fine. Gabby must have picked up her bag by mistake. I suppose the paramedics didn’t look at the photo on the ID too closely.”

Serena’s hand is trembling slightly as she scrolls through her phone and finds the number she’s looking for - Elinor’s landline. Bernie stays close, a hand on Serena’s shoulder, and is relieved when Serena doesn’t pull away as she lifts the phone to her ear.

The phone seems to ring interminably, but at last Elinor picks up, growling a “what?” into the phone that could rival her mother’s best. Serena almost shakes with relief. “Elinor darling, are you all right? Yes, I know it’s early…they found Gabby passed out and she had your bag, they told me-” She’s interrupted by a curt noise, something like a question. “No, nothing serious, she’ll be fine. I was just worried that you were-”

Again, she’s interrupted. Bernie can’t make out the words but Elinor’s tone is grumpy.

“All right love, you hop in the shower. I’ll see you soon. Bye.”

Serena’s farewell is spoken to the dial tone. Elinor has already hung up.

“She coming in?” Bernie slides her hand across the top of Serena’s back to her other shoulder and feels Serena relax against her arm instantly.

Serena nods and grunts. “More concerned about her passed out drunk friend than the mother she frightened the life out of.”

Bernie lowers the arm down to her waist and pulls her a little closer. “Well,” she says. “Lucky you already have someone here for whom you are the number one priority.”

Serena’s face softens as she leans into Bernie’s side. She feels on the edge of tears; the remnants of the cold front of fear crashing against the warm front of relief and threatening to unleash a storm. “I’m sorry I was sharp with you earlier,” she sniffs.

Bernie just smiles. “When was this?” she says innocently. “I don’t remember anything like that.”
Serena turns and buries her face in the crook of Bernie’s neck and just breathes for a long moment. When Bernie thinks her partner’s calmed down enough, she presses a kiss to her temple. “I think sugar and caffeine are called for.”

Serena feels the words more than hears them, a soft rumble against her chest. She looks up, eyes bright.

“Yes,” she agrees, and takes Bernie’s hand. “Let’s go.”
Frustration

“Jason won’t be home till after eleven tonight.”

Serena’s tone is conversational but she knows that Bernie has picked up her meaning from the way her lips twitch and her ears turn red. It’s as if she’s embarrassed by what Serena’s proposing even though they’ve done it enough times. Well, to be fair, there isn’t really such a thing as enough is there?

Serena enjoys sex.

Quickies in the morning before they need to go to work. Making love slowly and languorously. Raw, sweaty, unadulterated, vigorous passion. She loves it all and it isn’t in her nature to be coy about any of it. Serena knows that Bernie enjoys it as much - and occasionally, she’s certain, even more - but she doesn’t talk freely about it the way Serena does. Bernie prefers to keep it all tucked away under that stoic British reserve and let her actions speak for themselves.

Not that Serena has any complaints. Far from it. She is, after all, much more of an action woman herself in that department. Even so, Bernie still manages to catch her off guard in the best possible way when she least expects it. Her lips curl at the memory of the last time she did - two nights ago to be precise - flashes vividly through her mind. No, Serena muses as she shifts in reflex, not complaining at all. It just means that she gets to be the more vocal half of their relationship and take the lead.

Bernie clears her throat and closes the folder she was reading before abandoning it on the top of a growing pile. The nurses’ station is in full view of the ward but no one else is there and the relative privacy means she is brave enough to reply.

“I clock off in ten.”

Serena smiles at the redundant statement. She knows exactly when Bernie’s shift ends, having done the rota in the first place.

Bernie lets her hand drift across the desk and sneaks a touch of Serena’s skin. “I’ll stop by the shops on the way home,” she murmurs, squeezing Serena’s hand before moving away.

Serena watches Bernie as she heads towards the locker room. She checks the clock on the wall and sighs deeply. It’s going to be a very long sixty minutes until the end of her shift.

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“Bernie?” Serena pulls her scarf from round her neck and drops it down in its usual spot. She kicks her shoes off and pads towards the living room. The door is slightly ajar and there is the hint of a familiar smell which grows stronger as she pushes the door open.

“Ber…” Serena freezes the moment she enters the room.

Oh, wow.

The coffee table, which usually sits in front of the sofa, is tucked away in a corner by the wall. In its place is a large tartan blanket and matching throw pillows. A wicker basket sits within arm’s reach and Serena recognises a bottle of her favourite Shiraz peeking out the top of it.
Serena takes a deep breath and smiles. Her favourite scented candles. Bernie is obviously going all out tonight. She lowers herself onto the sofa and lets loose a satisfied sigh.

A soft clatter stiffens her posture and Bernie appears a moment later. She freezes when she sees Serena but only because she is caught off guard.

“You’re home.”

“Yes. And from the looks of it, you’ve been busy.”

Bernie sets down the platter of fruit she’s holding and smiles nervously. “Is this okay?”

“Oh, darling.” Serena is on her feet and has her arms wrapped around Bernie’s waist in a matter of seconds. “It’s wonderful.” She presses a light kiss on her lips as she laces their fingers together. “You’re wonderful.”

The colour rises in Bernie’s cheeks and Serena thinks there isn’t a more beautiful sight on the entire earth. “I thought we could have a picnic dinner and then...take advantage of having the living room all to ourselves.”

A hand traces down Serena’s back and pauses at her waist before fingers splay and massage the rounded contours waiting just below.

Serena gasps. Bernie’s always been reticent about slightly more exotic locations and - for her - the living room where Jason watches his quiz shows and historical documentaries definitely qualifies. “What did you have in mind?”

Bernie answers by pulling their bodies flush for a longer kiss and Serena soon feels her legs give way as she is gently lowered onto the blanket.

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“We should do this more often,” Serena hums as she pops the last piece of fruit into her mouth.

Bernie’s chest rumbles with a chuckle that Serena feels as well as hears. She snuggles in and buries her face a little closer into the crook of Bernie’s neck.

“I’m glad you approve Ms Campbell,” Bernie murmurs.

“What’s not to approve? I just wish I’d known sooner.”

Bernie tilts her head a little. “Known what?”

“That you have it in you to be such a romantic.”

Serena’s eyes brighten at the pink rising in her partner’s cheeks. Bernie smiles, shyly. “Wouldn’t do to give all my secrets away.”

“A woman of mystery. This is more than I could have hoped for.” Serena nudges the plackets of her shirt apart and places a kiss on Bernie’s sternum. Bernie squirms in response and Serena takes this as approval. Her lips meet the heated skin again, only this time she doesn’t pull away until she gets the soft grunt of pleasure she was looking for.

“Really?” Bernie croaks, her ability to speak not quite back to full working order.

“Oh yes. It’s much more...” Serena toys with the top button of Bernie’s shirt before slipping it past
its hole, “...fun...” She pauses before moving on to the next button and then the one after that, “...when I get to unwrap the present.”

Her hand makes short work of the remaining buttons and she stares unabashed at the glory that is Bernie’s chest.

“God...” Bernie gasps.

“No, darling,” Serena teases, “just me.” Her thumb skims over the soft satin-clad swell before peeling it back. She is about to push the offending barrier away all together when she thinks hears a sound.

A soft thud followed by the jangling clink of keys.

Bernie moans, her back arched, chest thrust towards Serena.

It’s probably her imagination. Serena blots the distraction out of her mind and sets back to work.

She hears it again. It’s louder and it’s definitely not her imagination this time.

“Auntie Serena?”

Her eyes widen. “Yes, Jason?” Serena stops. Her lips are mere millimetres away from her goal.

“They cancelled the showing tonight. The projector broke and the cinema offered either a refund or a ticket for another night. I took the refund.”

“What?” She clears her throat and answers with the single syllable. She thinks she just about manages not to sound bereft, though there’s a definite edge in her tone she hopes he’ll take for surprise. God dammit, should have saved the food for afterwards.

“Yes. Alan asked if I wanted to stay with him for dinner but I said we have portions of cottage pie frozen for emergency situations like this so I decided to come home. Are you in the living room?”

No, no, no.

She stares at Bernie wild eyed and they push apart simultaneously. Bernie scrabbles into a sitting position and pulls the open edges of her shirt together. Her fingers work quickly, searching frantically for the right buttons to match each hole as Jason’s voice grows louder. She secures the last button just as the door swings open.

He frowns at the sight of the two women sitting on the floor. He surveys the empty platter and wine glasses with a thoughtful look.

“I know what you’ve been doing.”

Bernie and Serena exchange nervous glances before Serena turns back to Jason.

“You do?”

“Yes,” he answers, full of confidence. “You shouldn’t eat on the floor. That’s what tables are for.”
“I got you a sandwich. Egg and cress.” Serena smiles as she drops the brown paper bag on Bernie’s desk.

“Thanks,” Bernie mumbles distractedly, her eyes glued on the screen of her phone.

“Everything all right?” Serena cranes her neck for a peek but Bernie nods hurriedly and drops her phone face down on the desk just before she gets a glimpse.

“Bernie?”

Bernie smiles as their eyes meet but her gaze wavers and darts away after the briefest moment. If Serena didn’t know better, she would swear that Bernie was trying very hard to avoid looking at her and is suddenly and disproportionately excited by the concept of lunch.

“I could eat a horse.” Bernie reaches for and tears into the bag, retrieving its contents. “Do you want half?”

Serena’s smile wavers a fraction as she shakes her head. Bernie starts talking about her next surgery but Serena only catches the odd word here and there. Her eyes stay fixed on the back of Bernie’s phone as the tiniest lump starts forming in her stomach.

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Serena shakes her head in an attempt to refocus her thoughts. She has been staring at the same page for the past five minutes but it might as well be written in Greek.

_Come on, Serena, concentrate._

She tries again, from the top of the page but her concentration slips before she finishes the first paragraph. Why is she even bothering to pretend that she’s interested in morbidity figures when her attention is clearly preoccupied elsewhere? Her eyes slide across her desk and on to Bernie’s only to fix squarely on the back of that blasted phone. And right on cue, as if to mock her, it chirps and vibrates yet again. Fourth time in the past hour. Not that Serena has been counting. No, not at all.

Serena sighs. Perhaps some coffee would help. At the very least it would provide the distraction her wandering thoughts could do with for the next thirty minutes until she is due in theatre. She flips the folder shut and is about to push herself out of her chair when she sees a familiar blonde head bobbing towards the office. Serena settles back into her seat, deciding that she’d prefer the distraction of spending time with Bernie over coffee any day of the week.

“Hello stranger.”

Bernie looks surprised and frowns slightly at her presence in their office. “I thought you’d be wrist-deep in an abdominal aortic aneurysm repair by now.”
Her tone is a little short and Serena’s mood wilts slightly. “I will be in half an hour. Theatre’s running behind.” Serena stops herself from blinking because she is almost certain her face would betray her disappointment if she did.

“Uhm, right.” Bernie’s eyes hold her gaze for a moment before eventually giving in and falling onto her phone. She picks it up and drops it straight into the pocket of her scrub top without looking at the screen, even though it’s obvious to Serena that she’s desperate to. The silence between them is palpable and Serena decides to end the awkwardness for both their sakes.

“I’d better go get changed.” She keeps her tone as bright she can, biting back the question she really wants to ask and makes for the door. Bernie nods, settling into her chair and swiveling round so that her back is now turned towards the door. And Serena. There can be only one logical reason for Bernie’s behaviour, Serena concludes, and the lump in her stomach grows two sizes instantly.

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“Maybe I’m just kidding myself,” Serena mutters dejectedly.

Fletch sighs and opens his mouth to give the obvious response for what seems like the hundredth time. He pauses, deciding that he needs to take a different tack because what he’s been saying so far obviously isn’t working.

“You know what? Maybe you’re right.”

Serena pauses midway through scrubbing her hands and looks at him, brows furrowed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’ve been telling you for the last three hours that it’s all in your head and it isn’t working, so, you win. I agree with you.”

Serena would smack him on shoulder if not for the fact that her hands are dripping wet. She settles for her deadliest glare instead.

“Fletch, I’m serious.”

“So am I. Look…” He dries his hands off and waits until Serena does the same and gives him her full attention. “Why are you doing this to yourself? She’s daft about you and you know it.”

Serena sighs. “I know, but she’s been so distracted lately and…” Serena can’t bring herself to finish the sentence because she knows how childish it makes her sound.

“You’re worried because she has form?” Fletch offers.

Trust him not to mince his words.

Serena nods. “She’s hiding something from me, Fletch. I just know it.”

“So the first conclusion you come up with is that she’s cheating on you. After all the two of you have been through.” Fletch shakes his head, chuckling. “You don’t do anything in half measures do you?”

A quirk of her eyebrow invites him to elaborate.

“Stop catastrophising and talk to her. Ask her what’s the distraction is.”

Serena stares at him as if he’s suddenly sprouted an extra head. “Just like that?”
He nods and his expression softens. “Talk to her, Serena. Before you go stark raving mad and we have to section you.”

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By the time she returns to the ward, Serena has decided that Fletch’s idea isn’t as ludicrous as it seems. Yes, she is dreading the possibility that Bernie will confirm her worst fears but even so, she needs to know.

Bernie is nowhere to be seen on the ward and, as Serena enters their office, a soft chirp from Bernie’s desk catches her attention. The screen lights up and Serena knows she shouldn’t but she allows her eyes to slide onto it before she can stop herself.

*Yes, it’s been too long darling. Can’t wait to see you tonight x.*

She somehow manages to make her way into her chair before her legs give out from under her. It is a miracle of medicine because Serena is certain that her heart has evacuated her chest via a painful ripping motion. She must still be numb from the shock because she doesn’t realise that Bernie’s in the room until she hears the sound of her voice.

“Serena. Are you all right?” Bernie looks puzzled, concerned.

“I…” The phone chirps again and Bernie’s attention is pulled away instantly. Serena feels another stab of pain when the corners of Bernie’s eyes crinkle in a smile as she reads the message. Her eyelids flutter shut for an instant and, in a moment of clarity, she knows that Fletch is right but this office is not the appropriate place for that conversation.

Serena Campbell is a proud woman and she digs deep into her years of practice, decades of refusing to be humiliated in spite of the circumstances, and manages a convincing smile. “Are you ready to go? We can stop by Albie’s for a drink if you like.”

*Not to mention the Dutch courage I desperately need.*

Bernie clears her throat nervously before answering. “I can’t. I’m meeting an old Army friend. I’ll see you at home later?”

There isn’t an offer to elaborate and Serena knows she needs to leave the room. Her facade is within a hair’s breadth of cracking and she is adamant it can’t. Not here and not like this.

“Bernie, I…” Serena pauses at the door. The blonde head turns and her expression is unreadable.

“Yes?”

Serena changes her mind and decides that clingy sentiments at this point would be a low or perhaps futile blow on her part. She shakes her head. “See you at home.”

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Serena Campbell never thought she’d ever be doing this ever again. She swore, after her divorce from Edward, that she would never allow herself to be caught out and have her heart broken by the twin demons of jealousy and infidelity.

And yet here she is - sitting on her sofa in the dark making a mental list of who Bernie might be with right this second. She takes a sip of her wine and sighs. Someone younger perhaps. Her mind drifts to the obvious name on the top of her list - someone like Alex Dawson.
The jealous knot nearly chokes her as she pictures Alex with her toned figure and firm skin unravaged by time. Sharp definition instead of soft swells. A body that, unlike hers, hasn’t chosen overtime over exercise far too often over the years. She squeezes her eyes shut and tries not to imagine Alex’s smile. Alex’s hands touching Bernie. Alex’s lips…

There is a thud on the front door followed by the scrape of metal in the keyhole. The solid thunk that follows as the door swings open breaks her from further mental torment. Serena sits up a little straighter and crosses her arms over her chest, resisting the urge to twiddle with her pendant. Bernie teases her about how she’ll wear the patterns on it smooth one day if she keeps up that little habit every time she’s worried or nervous. She takes a deep breath when she hears the rustle of fabric as Bernie removes her coat. It is finally followed by the sound of shoes being removed and kicked aside.

It’s now or never.

“Bernie?”

The door to the living room cracks open and the blonde slips in.

“You’re still up?”

Serena nods. “We need to talk.”

Bernie’s brow creases and she lowers herself onto the armrest of the sofa. “What’s wrong?” She places a hand on Serena’s shoulder and her brittle resolve cracks.

“I…we’ve always been honest with each other, right?”

Bernie’s answer is instant and sure. “Always.”

“And I promised myself that I would never regret speaking my mind. No matter how hard the answer is.”

“Serena, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?” Bernie slides off the armrest, tucking her knees under her. ”Sweetheart?” She reaches for Serena’s hands and pulls them into her own.

Serena has to blink back the tears pricking the corner of her eyes. “I need to know, Bernie.”

“Anything.”

Serena is sure her face is deadly pale by now. “Is there someone else?”

Whoever said that there is catharsis in pain obviously has no bloody clue because she has never felt such agony.

Bernie’s eyes narrow in confusion. “What are you talking about?” Her hands are gripping Serena’s so tightly, as if Serena might disappear if she doesn’t.

“I, uhmm… I saw the text. Earlier.”

The penny drops and Bernie’s face is suddenly an odd mixture of pink embarrassment and relief. “Oh god, darling, did you think…oh, sweetheart.” Bernie slides her arms round Serena’s waist and pulls her down for a kiss.
The weight of her doubts, fears and jealousy begins to dissipate the moment their lips meet and her ability to speak starts to return. “I don’t understand. The texts, you’ve been distracted and avoiding me for the past week?”

The flush on Bernie’s face deepens. “I knew I’d be rubbish at keeping secrets,” she says. “That’s why I’ve been avoiding you. I didn’t trust myself not to ruin my plan.”

“Plan?” It’s Serena’s turn to look confused.

Bernie takes a deep breath and pushes herself up on her knees while she roots in her pockets before finally pulling a box out of the right one. “I was meeting someone tonight.”

Serena thinks that she is on the edge of the big reveal. Otherwise, this must be a very convoluted Bernie way of breaking up with her.

“My mum.”

“Your mum?”

Bernie nods. Her face is suddenly very nervous. “She had something for me - it was my grandmother’s - and I didn’t want you to find out before…well, it’s not exactly what I planned, but…” She takes a deep breath and produces the box, now open, and holds it up between them. “Serena Wendy Campbell, will you do me the honour of being my wife?”

Serena stares at Bernie, then at the ruby red stones studding the gold band nestled in black velvet, and then back to Bernie. Her heart soars, and the euphoria catches her off guard. It is a long way to come from the depths of despair, after all.

“What...?”

Bernie places the box in Serena’s trembling hands. Serena’s expression says it all and Bernie is giddy enough with joy herself to tease. “I think the more traditional answer is yes, darling.”

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