

The lady wot lunched a little too much

~ Chapter 2 ~

'So that's the lounge, John. Shall we, uh, go upstairs?'

Turning and setting her palm on the marble lion's head at the foot of the banister, Abby let her smile droop into a weary sneer.

Partly it was the prospect of the climb. When you layered skirts and shapewear as tightly as Abby did, stairs were never a welcome sight, but Ethel House took the piss - three floors separated by two huge, curving staircases as high as Rapunzel's tower with steps so steep they surely violated every EU safety directive ever passed.

Mostly though, the fatigue in Abby's features was caused by her companion.

Predictably enough, John Kipling had turned out to be a disappointment - and a bit of a weirdo to boot. Abby was no prude. In her decade of adulthood she'd been leered at by countless lotharios and wolf-whistled by every builder this side of the Severn. It was the main reason her ego was nearly as big as her backside. So accustomed was she to male attention that, despite her immense vanity, she rarely even noticed it any more. She simply took it for granted that all men found her irresistibly sexy.

Still, this guy's perving was impossible to miss. In pretty much every mirror they'd passed Abby could see him close behind her: chin dipped, eyeballs swinging like pendulums as they followed her arse. Then there was that schoolboy smirk in response to her mildly flirtatious "Shall we go upstairs?". Not to mention his several gurgling attempts to start a conversation (and blatantly allude to how rich he was).

Abby glanced back and managed to muster a coy smile as the bulging eyes behind shot up guiltily from her backside. His nervousness had surprised her a little, because as well as being seriously rich he wasn't actually *that* bad looking. Receding a fair bit for his age and wearing a shirt that bagged up clumsily around his skinny shoulders. But plenty of millionaires had no fashion sense. Really, he was just the kind of infatuated, eager-to-please rich kid she'd have pounced on a few years ago: an easy ticket to designer clothes, fancy restaurants and luxury holidays.

But the mature twenty-seven year old Abby Prescott knew she could do better. John Kipling would have needed to roll up in an Aventador to arouse even a flicker of genuine interest.

Still, he was a potential buyer - and a reasonable prospect, given the signs so far. You could never be sure, of course. A natural manipulator, Abby had been soft-bullying people into buying and selling houses for over five years, relishing the various challenges different sorts of clients posed, honing her approach and building an impressive record. Sleeping with the

boss had gotten her a pile of perks and presents, but it was Abby's considerable talent for sales that had made her the youngest branch manager in the company's history.

And she'd been in the game long enough to know that ultimately it all came down to money. So many potential buyers talked a game their wallets couldn't play - especially those eager to impress her, like this Kipling kid. It didn't mean he had a cool £2.6m at his disposal, and she knew the owners would barely budge on the price, even with her powers of persuasion. Convincing this wealthy weirdo that he *wanted* to buy wasn't the problem - indeed, Abby almost wished that part was more of a challenge.

She could not, however, say the same for this staircase.

Passing the large Georgian portrait halfway up, the raven-haired sales queen failed to suppress a grunt. She was sure the owners were secretly adding ten or fifteen steps between each viewing. The climb seemed much harder than she remembered, and it had only been - what - a week ago?

It'll take at least two bottles of Le Bistro's finest to get over this, she huffed to herself, gripping the banister and hauling a heavy leg up onto the next step. *Maybe a slice of that lemon buttermilk pie before the starters. I'll easily have burned off the calories.*

Spurred on by the prospect of an exquisite meal, Abby struggled on towards the summit, dragging one leg after the other. The sound of her companion panting like a jaded Labrador behind her was some reassurance. If that skinny freak was having trouble with the stairs, who wouldn't?

Sure enough, three steps behind, John Kipling was indeed panting heavily.

But not because he was tired.

No, John Kipling - aka Peter Morris - was panting because he was breathless with lust.

For ten years - *ten years* - he'd drooled over Abby Prescott's tremendous buttocks from afar. And now here they were, just inches in front of his nose. And they were every bit as bulbously majestic as he'd imagined, wobbling like a pair of giant overfilled water balloons as the hefty hottie wheezed her way up a long but gentle flight of stairs. It was fantasy come true.

And to think he'd very nearly cancelled the booking this morning! The moment he'd clicked to confirm the viewing time, a sudden anxiety had engulfed him, his brain racing through all the possible disasters if he got caught out - arrest, imprisonment, being outed as an impersonator on Twitter. What would the real John Kipling say? Christ, what would his mum say?!

Thankfully, two hours of mindless bank statement analysis had given him time to must courage and plan out his ruse.

So far, it was going better than he could possibly have hoped. Rolling up to Ethel House in a dirt-rimmed Peugeot 302 clearly wouldn't do, so Peter had arrived early and parked the

decrepit thing half a mile away, in the shade of the giant oaks that gazed down over the southernmost wall of Ethel's extensive grounds. Then he'd strolled round to wait at the mansion's gated front. His work shirts were his best anyway, and, as it was Monday, his shoes had been well-polished by his mum that morning, making them look - hopefully - more expensive than the £70 he'd forked out for them. When Abby pulled up twenty minutes later, he'd explained (in what he reckoned was a pretty suave offhand manner, given his hammering heart) that his "damned chauffeur" had gotten the time wrong and buzzed off in the Bentley before he'd realised. She seemed to buy it, and, seeing from her reaction that she'd googled John Kipling and been expecting a man of seventy, Peter had swiftly gone on to introduce himself as John Kipling Junior. A step down from being the actual owner of a vastly profitable chain of accountancy firms, of course, but said owner's son and heir, with wealth enough to afford a multi-million pound property, would surely be impressive enough. Even for Abby Prescott.

Who was everything he'd dreamed of and more.

Much more, in fact. From the moment she'd gripped the doorframe of her gleaming blue BMW and hauled herself out by her manicured fingers, it was clear to a goggling Peter that his fantasies about Abby's added poundage hadn't been far off the mark. She was wearing the damn coat, but unbuttoned so that it billowed wide in a chill breeze that swept her oil-dark hair behind her shoulders and plastered her white blouse to her curved abdomen and remarkable bosom, both of which bobbed tightly as she advanced across the vast drive. Her long legs swung forth imperiously from beneath a short pleated skirt and shuddered meatily from the knee upwards as her shallow heels clicked against the patterned concrete. With each lengthy stride the inadequate garment fluttered saucily in the breeze, revealing upper thighs so delectably plump that they seemed to bulge forwards as well as out to the sides.

But in Peter's expert opinion there was no better viewing angle on earth than the one he was enjoying now. Shoulders hunching as she leaned forward into the climb, Abby's splendid bottom jutted out haughtily before his eyes as she huffed and puffed her way up the stairs, her pleated skirt hanging over the edge like an inadequate tablecloth, bouncing against the bulky buttocks that rocked and swayed beneath. Bending his knees slightly and keeping several steps behind, Peter had an orgasmic view of the teasing creases at the top of Abby's fleshy thighs, her lavish buttocks rising and dropping with a rhythmic wobble, one then the other, as the ponderous goddess continued her wheezing ascent.

He sucked the drool back into his mouth. It was like walking behind his very own Kim Kardashian - if Kim Kardashian gave up exercise for a year and stuck to a strict diet of hamburgers, that is. She seemed pretty keen on him too, despite the perpetually sleepy expression, explaining how the house really needed "an owner of means and stature", inviting him upstairs with those bedroom-ready eyes, and smiling even when she'd caught him staring at her arse a few moments ago.

Well she does think I'm a millionaire. Scrawny chest inflating with unfamiliar confidence, Peter took the next two steps at once and squatted to the point where he was practically kneeling on the stairs, his beaky nose almost brushing the skirt that barely covered his guide's divine derriere. Damn that was one hell of an arse! At a distance, he'd judged Abby to be quite lean around the middle, but up close he could see that it was an illusion created by her natural curviness and monster caboose. No wonder she was struggling so much with the stairs, towing all that freight! Those quivering thighs and chubby calves clearly weren't designed for transporting such a prodigious load up any sort of incline.

As Abby slowed further, reaching out her plump arms to grip the banister on both sides, Peter began to fantasise feverishly. He pictured the bulky diva groaning to a halt a dozen steps below the summit, panting heavily and declaring herself utterly unable to continue without assistance - whereupon he would chivalrously roll up his sleeves and sink his hands into her meaty ass cheeks, all the way up to his wrists, gallantly pushing his out-of-shape princess up the final few steps, whereupon she'd coo in adoring gratitude and reward him generously in the nearest bedroom.

Peter shuddered in giddy lust. There was just something so decadent, so luxurious, so downright sexy about a preening, pampered rich girl who'd become too plump to climb a simple flight of stairs.

'Don't worry about the *uurf* creaking-' Abby's close voice startled him back to reality. 'It's just *huff* a feature of. Authentic. Eighteenth century... Oak,' she continued, gulping oxygen after each word.

I suppose people in the eighteenth century were a lot lighter, thought Peter with a lascivious smirk. Whether he'd unconsciously moved closer in his daydreaming or Abby had slowed further, he found that he was now close enough to reach forward and touch her hair - or better yet smack her arse. The smell of lavender was intoxicating - overwhelming. Or was it Jasmine? Who cared. Oh how he longer to wrap his arms around her thick waist, to feel her own hands close acceptingly over his as they rested on the plush curve of her belly, to lean forward, brushing his cheek against her hair as she turned for a kiss. He felt himself begin to stiffen.

All Abby felt was a stale panting against the back of her hair. At any other time it would've been creepy, but at the moment she was just grateful for anything that cooled her down.

But even with the cooling effect of Peter's sour breath, the poor girl was puffing like a bellows by the time they reached the landing. A tinge of ruby deepened the rouge on her beautiful cheeks and a sparkle of dampness ran across her rich hairline.

'Heating's in - *uff* - full working order,' she huffed, fanning her flushed cheeks with a delicate hand and hoping she didn't look as exhausted as she felt.

The semi-boner her companion was trying to hide by leaning forward suggested that he wasn't put off. And when she'd recovered enough breath to suggest that they head to the

master bedroom, a noise emerged from his mouth like someone gargling acid, his face distorting like a cartoon character who was trying to stop his head from exploding.

Honeyed lamb, she told herself, forcing a smile back onto her lips and then turning to lead the way. *With rosemary dressing*. She glanced round and found that he had resumed gawking at her butt.

And an extra helping of those syrup-fried pomme frites.

'Now this -' Abby paused for effect, drawing herself up and placing her palm on the heavy oak door '- this is my favourite room in the house.' Pushing the door open with a venerable creak, she ushered Peter in.

It was certainly impressive, in an old-fashioned sort of way. A king-sized four-poster bed rested against the wall, with sheets of regal violet and bedposts carved into elegant leafy patterns, 'Hand crafted circa 1910 and likely to fetch eight grand at auction, if not to your taste,' Abby commented casually as Peter's eyes passed over it with an apprehensive look. A high ceiling gave the room an even greater sense of grandeur and size, and a newer door led to a recently installed modern en-suite with a 'floor of imported Egyptian marble, laid five years ago'. The French-style window opening onto a balcony yielded a stunning view of trees and hilltops, 'particularly beautiful in the morning,' with the acreage beyond 'belonging solely to the owner Ethel House and with planning approval for a large pool or tennis court.'

As Abby smoothly concluded what she called her 'bedroom pitch', Peter was gazing out of the window in awe. She glanced down and smiled. The outline of his hand in his suit pants pocket was clasping his wallet.

That's why I'm paid the big bucks, she thought to herself. A little sex appeal helped, of course, but really it wasn't about shamelessly flirting and touching clients' arms (as silly, giggling Gemma did) or piling cliched superlatives on every feature (Holly's forte) as if reciting from a sales manual.

No. Real salesmanship was about making the buyer trust you - making him feel like he was getting an informed and impartial opinion, stating everything in a cool, factual manner, as one expert to another, even pointing out the odd minor flaw here and there, slowly building up the buyer's confidence in himself and in you. With her naturally aloof air, it was a technique Abby had quickly perfected. If the man had the money, she could almost guarantee he'd part with it.

And now it was time to move in for the kill.

Abby padded slowly across the room, her heels muffled by the plush carpet. She paused, looking carefully at the carved bedpost, running her fingers around the curves of its embossed leaf pattern as if examining it for flaws.

Peter, meanwhile, was running his eyes around the curves and contours of Abby's side profile, marvelling at how her large boobs and pooching belly failed to balance out the

flimsily veiled rump that rounded so enormously out back. She'd recovered after climbing the stairs, but a slightly hurried rise and fall of her considerable bosom suggested that the bulky branch manager was still feeling something of a hangover from what must, for someone of such pampered plumpness, have been some pretty intense cardio. He could even make out the slightest circle of sweat spreading out just beneath her plump upper arm.

Mind taking over again, Peter imagined Abby turning up at the weekly circuit he sometimes attended at his gym, her bulbous curves squeezed into stylish sports Lycra, top-of-the-range trainers thudding against the floor as she wobbled her way through star jumps: cheeks flushed, sweat pouring, those huge buttocks rippling as they clapped together with each feeble jump - her meaty thighs quivering with each landing as she puffed her way slowly through three squat jumps before collapsing onto her back in exhaustion.

'Truthfully, the house does need some TLC,' Abby hummed. Ignoring the alien stare in her companion's eyes, she gently tightened the noose of her sales pitch. 'But not many people can afford a property like this. It's a niche market, of course,' she continued, stoking his ego where most would have binged about how much interest they had. 'The sellers are moving abroad in two weeks -' she paused to let the hidden incitement to act quickly sink in '- but they may accept an offer of two point five, maybe even two point four five to get things sorted before then.'

For one crazy, insane moment Peter, still squeezing his wallet, found his mouth opening to offer the full asking price and ask where to sign. He wanted her. He wanted the house. Maddened by lust for his guide's glorious abundance and bewitched by her smooth sales pitch, he could barely distinguish between the two.

Abby wasn't about to come to his rescue.

'I'll call the seller now,' she said, tapping casually on her phone's screen. 'See if they'll drop to two five fifty.'

'Ummm...I...well...' Peter blustered feebly.

Abby shook her head with a chuckle. 'Okay, okay - we'll *try* two five,' she said. 'I do admire a man who chances his arm.'

'You do? Uhh... wait. I mean... hold on!'

Abby looked up at him, finger poised over the big green call button.

'Properties like this don't come along very often John,' she said.

'Well... Uhh..' Peter felt his hand straying to the back of his neck. 'I'll have to check with my fath- I mean, er, financial adviser, you know. Make sure the money's in the correct accounts.' He finished, straightened himself up in what he hoped was a businesslike manner.

Abby slipped her phone away with a sad sigh. Her stomach rumbled softly.

'Let's discuss this over some lunch.'

'In-coming!'

With a speed and precision born of frequent practice, Gemma whipped open the top drawer and slid the large box of chocolates down into it, slamming it shut. Her other hand was already herding chocolate crumbs to the edge of her desk and sending them tumbling down into the bin between her legs. Quickly scanning around for any further traces of evidence she pushed the bin back into its usual position with her toe and reached for her mouse. One swift click and eight tabs of Daily Mail gossip column vanished, leaving only Outlook and a half-typed description of a kitchen sitting innocently on her screen.

She needn't have bothered. When Abby entered the room a few moments later, it was clear that every ounce of the buxom branch manager's attention was dedicated to a matter of far greater importance.

That of putting one foot successfully in front of the other.

Gemma and Holly exchanged eyebrows. They were used to their boss returning from lunch looking a little sluggish. Who wouldn't, after free Michelin-starred lunch and unlimited wine of the finest vintage?

But this was something else.

Puff-cheeked, eyelids drooping, and with a tinge of ruby to her porcelain forehead, Abby looked ready to topple sideways at any moment - and almost certainly would have, were it not for the balancing effect of her abundant hips. And though she maintained that air of high-chinned aloofness, her eyes betrayed her. Unusually heavy, they were fixed on the wall ahead with the over-casual gaze of a girl who's sober enough to know she's drunk, but drunk enough to think she can look sober.

Any lingering doubt was completely dispelled when Abby proceeded to drape her prized mink coat over the communal hat stand, before proceeding wordlessly through the room with barely a grunt of acknowledgement to her subordinates.

'Late viewing must've made her thirsty,' said Holly with a smirk, once Abby's office door had safely closed behind her bulbous back-end. There was no need for WhatsApp this time; they could already hear her snoring through the door.

Gemma chuckled. 'Did you hear belly sloshing as she walked past? Oof. Must've been a heavy one!'

'Yeah, good job you didn't leave those choccies out. She'd've had those for sure.'

Pulling open her drawer and extracting a hazelnut swirl, Gemma smiled triumphantly and popped it between her plump lips.

She'd earned it, after all - having fluttered, flirted and bounced her plump bosom all the way to a big sale earlier that afternoon. Not only had Kieran Blake bought a £486k detached at the asking price, he'd smarmed into the office not long after the viewing finished with a big grin and an even bigger box of Premium Collection Thornton's chocolates to thank his guide for

'being so helpful'. This delighted Gemma no end, of course, especially after Holly's little aside earlier about her absence from the gym. After all, she couldn't possibly be getting fat if a man as handsome as Kieran Blake was plying her with expensive treats.

And so, in the absence of their boss, and feeling rather lumpish after their lunchtime pasties (somehow they always ordered more than usual when Abby was at Le Bistro) the two pretty estate agents had eschewed work and passed the afternoon gossiping lazily and grazing on the double-layer box of premium chocolates.

A box from which Gemma now picked out a champagne truffle.

'Hey, sharing is caring!'

Smiling Gem stood up and tossed the box onto Holly's desk. 'I'll make the tea,' she chirped, bouncing off towards the kitchen. When she reached the corridor she snuck a glance back, grinning as her colleague slyly lifted up the first layer and snaffled two orange truffles from the one beneath, shoving both into her mouth at once.

Careful chubbybuns, or you'll be squeezing into Abby's hand-me-downs by Christmas. Humming to herself Gemma picked up her pace towards the kitchen. At a recent party Holly's husband had warned Gem against leaving his hot high-maintenance wife alone with chocolate, and she suspected he was only half joking. She needed to get back before they were all gone!

Sure enough, the moment Gemma disappeared down the corridor Holly took full advantage. In her mind, the blonde was already two chocolates ahead, so it was only right that she evened things up. Jaw still working on the truffles, the greedy girl added a vanilla velvet to the limited space on her tongue, just to see what the combination of flavours was like. It was good. Good enough to justify popping in another. *I'm only saving Gem her from herself* Holly reasoned as she reached for a raspberry canache, trying to rationalise her descent into full chocolate monster mode. *I'm doing Tough Mudder training with David tonight, probably, so a little extra energy will help.* In went an amaretto truffle. *Gem will only plant her chubby ass in front of the TV and-*

Holly froze, fingers poised above a caramel meltaway. Her gaze was glued to the box of chocolates, but out of the corner of her eyes she could see the faint outline of what could only be a pair of trousers... Right in front of her.

But that was impossible. There hadn't been a buzz. Unless-

Holly groaned internally. *Abby! That drunk fatass had forgotten to close the door!*

'Hi - uh - I mean, hello there,' said a male voice from above the trousers, its tone undergoing a strange deepening midway through the statement. Holly wondered how long he'd been standing there. 'Sorry to - ah - barge in, you know. The door was open.'

Well duuh, thought Holly. But what could she do.

'Uff, yesh, herrowf,' she looked up tentatively, reaching for a tissue to dab the caramel from her smile and provide enough cover for her to gulp down her mouthful of half-chewed chocolates. 'Cafn I *gulp* help you?'

She looked the visitor up and down.

'I'm afraid - *hurp* - 'scuse me, we don't have any graduate vacancies at the moment.'

The man, who had hitherto been considering her with an expression of dazed oblivion, blinked and frowned.

'Huh? Oh... No. I'm not. I mean...'

He paused, drawing his chin up. His tone deepened again.

'The name's Kipling. John Kipling.'

Peter felt his cheeks flush as the porky girl's eyes shifted down and to the side, clearly trying to hide her giggles at his blunder. It wasn't his fault! He'd expected to stride into the office and accost some glasses-wearing Moneypenny, not to walk in on an overstuffed stunner leaning forward in her chair with fat office bum swelling upwards as she troughed her way through a huge box of chocolates with such intent greediness that she hadn't even noticed him come in. Even Bond himself would have struggled for words.

And the day had been going so well. After finishing the viewing he'd felt like the king of the earth. Bizarre as it first seemed, there was no doubt that Abby Prescott, the object of his bedroom fantasies for over ten years, had the hots for Peter Morris - or John Kipling, really, but that was attention to detail.

She'd caught him off guard with that sales pitch and sexy side profile, leaving him gawping like a fish. But after a couple of hours in an empty office he'd recovered, resolving to nip to Thornton's and buy their most expensive chocolates, then pop across to New Century that minute and ask her out there and then.

That had been the plan, at least. While buying the chocolates, Peter had come to the conclusion that perhaps just asking for a follow-up viewing would do for now. You know, soften her up a little more before asking for a date. By the time he'd walked through the New Century door he'd half-wondered if just handing over the chocolates and thanking her might be best. Give her time to enjoy his present. Women were always more acquiescent with a belly full of truffles, weren't they? He'd get another glimpse of that decadent derriere, and he could call later about the second viewing.

'Is Abby Prescott in?' he got the words out eventually, adding, a little irritably, 'She showed me around Ethel House this afternoon. I'm considering making an offer, but I wanted to confirm a second viewing - and to give her these.' He placed the gold chocolate box down on the table next to a near identical one that Holly had been decimating.

'In person,' he added, eyes flitting between the empty box and Holly's plump middle.

'That really depends on your perspective.'

For the second time since entering the office, Peter started. The chocolate monster had opened her mouth to reply, but the words seemed to have come from over his left shoulder, and had been uttered in a voice much lighter than the slightly husky one she'd used earlier. He turned towards the sound, and could do nothing to prevent his eyes from bulging like dinner plates.

An equally overfed, equally sexy, perhaps even higher maintenance and considerably blonder girl was leaning against the doorframe, chubby fingers resting casually on a curvaceous hip. If anything, this one's clothes were even tighter than her colleague's. Peter's eyes were drawn like a magnet to a tiny tanned triangle of smooth exposed skin beneath the bottom button of blondie's blouse, which, thanks to the curve of a tummy that had clearly received its share of Thornton's finest, was barely staying tucked into her painted-on skirt.

Bloody hell, he thought, blinking in disbelief, *What do they feed the women in this place? ... Other than chocolates, of course.*

'Abby is in,' went on blondie, now eyeing him thoughtfully. 'But... she's also out, in a sense, and...'

The girl trailed off with a frown. She tilted her head.

'Peter?'

Holly knew he was an important client, but she couldn't resist. 'Aha, no Gemma, I think you'll find you're mistaken. This is Kipling - John Kipling. He was-'

'I know who he is,' Gemma cut in, suspicion in her eyes. 'He's Peter Morris. He was in the year above me at school. I, er, used to have a crush on him.'

She said this in the tone of one mildly puzzled by her own youthful folly rather than one feeling a resurgence of lust, but it was enough to break Peter out of the grip of the terror at the rapid unravelling of his ruse. He frowned at her for a moment.

'Wait...!' He gawped in shock as recognition dawned. 'Geeky Ge- uh, I mean, Gemma Patterson?' His eyes dropped to her blouse-busting tits. 'Wow, you've grown. Taller, I mean.'

The diminutive blonde scowled, hands planting firmly on her generous hips.

'Why are you pretending to be someone else?'

Peter could feel the sweat gathering at his forehead. 'I uh, well John Kipling is actually my uncle and uh...'

He trailed off at the rise of Gemma's disbelieving eyebrow.

'C'mon Peter, it doesn't take a genius to figure it out. She tilted her head knowingly.

Peter's shoulders slumped. She wasn't as blonde as she looked, this one. Probably she remembered how lusted-after Abby was at school and put two and two together. He was still struggling to come to terms with how Geeky Gemma had transformed into such a stunning little bosomy blonde. And to think, she'd once fancied him! What a pathetic sight he must make now: impersonating a millionaire just to impress a girl.

'Thought you'd snag a couple of free lunches at *Le Bistro*, huh?' continued the geek-turned-goddess. 'I bet you overheard-'

'Okay, okay!' Peter raised his palms submissively, still avoiding her gaze. There wasn't much point denying it. He might as well fess up. 'Fine. Look, I just really fanc-'

Something clicked in his mind. He looked up in puzzlement.

'Wait... Free lunch?'

The blonde rolled her eyes. 'It's a little late to play dumb now "John".' But despite her annoyance, Gemma was a kind-hearted soul, and still felt a little sympathy for her lacklustre crush. *Former* crush. 'Look,' she sighed, 'I'm sure the food was amazing but you really can't go around impersonating a buyer like that. It's not-'

'But I haven't even had lunch!' yammered Peter.

Gemma sighed. There was just no helping some people. Struck by sudden inspiration she walked over to the hat stand and ruffled in the pocket of Abby's splendid mink coat, soon producing a small piece of paper. Eyes fixed on Peter, she unfurled it with the air of a prosecuting barrister revealing conclusive evidence of murder.

'Black truffle *Melanosporum* with artichoke risotto,' she read out, flicking her eyes up accusingly at Peter. 'Roast saddle of lamb. Reserve vanilla and smoked chocolate ice cream.' Gemma refolded the receipt. 'Ring any bells?'

To her surprise, the condemned lunch-thief was goggling at her wildly.

'Seriously,' he pleaded. 'I swear - I went straight back to work.' He pointed over the street. 'My office is just over there.' There was no use trying to hide its location: she'd find out easily enough. He dropped his finger and looked at his feet with a beaten sigh.

'I can show you the CCTV to prove it.'

After a few moments of considering his toes, Peter chanced to raise his head again.

The two impressively plump and pretty girls were staring at each other in silence.

Eventually Gemma spoke.

'But if he didn't-'

'Then who-' added Holly.

Their eyes seemed to widen in unison. As one, the two tubby estate agents turned their heads slowly towards the corridor. For a few moments the room was silent, save for the muffled snores emanating from the branch manager's office.

Gemma turned to Holly and opened her mouth. Then, as if having second thoughts, she shut it. And then opened it again. After several repetitions of this fish-like cycle she finally recovered the power of speech, her voice emerging in a hoarse whisper.

'Sh-surely not... '

**

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