

## The lady wot lunched a little too much

### ~ Chapter 5 ~

It took several minutes of insistent beeping, but at last the bedsheets began to stir. Slowly, reluctantly, like a python emerging from its cave, a plump arm slithered out from beneath the cream-gold Eiderdown duvet.

Once, twice, thrice the fist thudded lazily on the bedside table. On the fourth attempt it landed perilously close to a velvet box, causing three fat Swiss truffles to somersault in their compartments. On the fifth it found its mark, mashing the alarm clock's snooze button with a satisfying *clack*.

Moving like an arcade claw machine, the hand retracted, stopped, shunted sideways, and then dropped, successfully closing around all three truffles. As it retreated towards the bed, an eye struggled open, peering through a glossy jungle of jet-black hair at the clock's gradually unblurring green numbers.

07:43

With a groan that echoed through the bedsprings, Abby Prescott rolled onto her back. Like a needy lover, the cashmere mattress pulled her deeper into its cosy embrace, while the fluffy goose down pillows whispered a soothing sigh as they moulded around her aching head.

No, Abby decided, cramming two of the truffles into her mouth with a grunt, she wasn't getting up yet. Gemma and Holly would just have to cope without her for a few hours. Besides, she'd worked late yesterday. That surely entitled her to a lie in.

A prim smile twitched at the corners of the young executive's lips. Usually Abby delegated evening viewings to one of her underlings, but when a last-minute email had come in requesting an urgent tour of Ethel House... well, what could she do? As branch manager, she had responsibilities. Sometimes you had to go the extra mile.

Or, in this case, the extra meal.

Abby purred sleepily as the rich chocolate melted across her tongue. The potential buyer had been a waste of space, but dinner afterwards had made up for it. There hadn't been any space wasted in Abby's stomach, that was for sure. Every square inch had been crammed with cantaloupe, crayfish and *filet mignon* that melted on the tongue. Not to mention those delightful truffle-garnished veal sweetbreads, six impossibly juicy Iberian pork loins, a mound of butter-soaked sauteed potatoes and a stack of delicious lobster brioche. Indeed, by the time she'd polished off her spiced plum pudding, Abby had been so full and food-dazed that she'd needed help getting up. She'd even forgotten her initial sour mood at there being no Ortolans left.

Although it would have been a bit rich to have complained, even by Abby's standards. The main reason there were none left was that she'd eaten four at lunch.

Stretching her legs, the glamorous young estate agent sighed a long, contented sigh, sinking into the soft mattress like a submarine letting out air. Interest in Ethel House had boomed recently - mainly thanks to Gemma's uncharacteristically clever Instagram marketing campaign. But yesterday was the first time they'd had two viewings in a single day.

Abby's chocolate-stuffed cheeks rose smugly. Gemma, her ditziness reasserting itself, had clearly hoped that her little Instagram stunt meant she'd be allowed to conduct the second one. The pout on her piggy blonde face when Abby had quashed this pipe dream had been almost as delicious as the food itself.

Almost.

As her teeth sank into her third truffle, Abby's fingers travelled idly across her stomach. Or, more accurately, *over* her stomach, their journey involving, to her drowsy surprise, almost as much up as across - and no shortage of either, with her well-manicured pinky making a sudden and surprisingly steep drop into the pothole of her bellybutton at the summit.

*But that's normal when you've eaten really good food*, Abby reasoned, reassured by the springiness of the flesh beneath her prodding fingertips. *It keeps you full for longer.* Swallowing chocolate, she patted her bulging paunch with both hands, convinced that its roundness simply reflected the superior quality of her meal. *Anyway, it's not like I ate more than usual; I just had lunch and dinner at the same place for once. And it's better to fill up at meals than to snack all the time like Gemma and Holly.*

Even so, Abby made a subconscious decision to return to spinning class next week; maybe even squeeze in a gym visit or two. And she'd definitely be going a little easier on the wine from now on, if only for the sake of her head. That had been Claude's fault. Constantly refilling her glass. Insisting on a different vintage with each course. Typical Frenchman, trying to get her drunk. The thought made Abby smile. The poor fool was so hopelessly in love with her that he'd visibly sweat and twitch with excitement whenever she walked in. Fortunately he was a typical Frenchman when it came to sex too, which made up for it. Once you got over the oily moustache.

Abby yawned. The memory of another exhausting after-meal romp, conspiring with the warm massaging effect of her fingers on the bare dome of her belly, was causing her eyelids to droop, and soon the ample estate agent had drifted back into slumberland, her mind a-swirl with delicious memories of tender meat, drizzling sauces and a Frenchman's talented fingertips.

But not everyone in Abby's house had a bellyful of Le Bistro's finest to see them through the morning. And shortly after she'd resumed snoring, her bedroom door edged open, brushing against the carpet.

There followed a padding of feet, a ruffle of bedsheets, and then -

'Mmmmm' Abby moaned in her sleep-haze as a flurry of soft kisses dabbled their way up her neck. 'Ryan...' she purred, squirming and clenching her thighs. 'Mmm... make me some pancakes, will you? ...with bacon.' Her nose wrinkled as the kisses reached her cheek. 'Ugh, and brush your teeth...'

'...Ryan?'

.....Claude?'

Blinking groggily awake, Abby found her crusty field of vision filled by a sniffing black snout and an enormous pink tongue. A tongue which at that moment bestowed upon her a lick so affectionate that it nearly stripped the skin off the underside of her nose.

The sleepy estate agent let out a very different kind of moan.

'Co-co!' she grunted, trying to twist away. 'Ugh - I should never have let you sleep on the bed. Get down.'

Thoroughly unchastened by this lethargic command, and delighted to have finally roused the filler of her food and water bowls, the beige pug pup wagged her tail and did a quick victory turn on the mattress. Coming full circle, she tilted her head.

Her mistress sighed. 'Yes, I know... I know it's time for breakfast. I-' Abby frowned as a faint burble rolled across her stomach. She realised she was getting a little peckish herself. *If only I could train Coco to bring me a snack from the fridge*, she mused, gulping the saliva that had pooled beneath her tongue at the thought. *Or to fetch a bag of those deliciously soft fresh donuts from the shop down the road. Or-*

A gurgling tremor from beneath the duvet caused Coco to yelp and leap backwards.

'Shhhhh!' Abby hissed, pressing the edges of the pillow against her ears, as her startled puppy barked suspiciously at the satin-draped mound whence the noise had erupted. 'All right, calm down - I'll feed you,' she conceded with a yawn, addressing either her barking dog or her own still-grumbling belly. 'Just... just give me a few... minutes... I'll... I'll...'

With the slightest of whines, Coco watched a familiar process unfold. The slow flutter of her mistress's eyelashes, the gentle grunting, the lips smacking together and then lolling open. Fortunately nature had endowed the young pug with forbearance. Even more fortunately, she'd discovered an especially comfortable place to wait out her mistress's sudden snoozes. And so, having administered a futile nudge to Abby's plump cheek, which only caused her to start snoring again, the patient puppy padded a few steps down the bed, bent her hind legs and made a deft little jump.

Abby let out a chocolatey burp, but there was enough duvet between paws and skin to prevent her from waking. In fact, as Coco adjusted her footing on the smooshing, dipping terrain - like an athlete balancing on a Bosu ball - the massaging effect sent her lazy mistress even deeper into dreamland. Abby found herself reclining on a giant buttery slab of filet mignon, her heel gliding through a lake of gravy. Above her a host of angels circled in a clear blue sky, pouring chocolate sauce and maple syrup from huge marble vases into her lolling

mouth. Two further angels lay either side of her, popping sugary treats between her lips, kneading and stroking her abdomen with hands softer than the clouds of heaven.

Perched upon several layers of cushioning, Coco was equally contented. Setting her chin between her paws, she closed her eyes, lulled to sleep atop the rhythmic rise and fall of her mistress's soft, slumbering paunch. She had just begun a kitten-chasing dream of her own when the first jolting notes of Bruno Mars' *That's What I Like* blasted up from the floor at high volume.

With an almighty yelp, the startled pug sprang into the air as if buoyed atop a geyser.

An eye-bulging belch erupted from Abby's lips and her back shot up like a railway signal as Coco landed squarely on her solar plexus. '*Ooof-Uuhhf!*' she puffed, feeling her belly compress and then re-inflate, springing the bewildered pug up into the air again like a trampoline. Kicking up the duvet with a windmill of legs, Coco barked all the way down the little doggy staircase beside the bed and tore across the room.

Holding her protesting middle with one hand and palming several lush raven locks from her pulsing forehead with the other, Abby scanned the room blearily. When she identified the source of the music, she gave a guttural growl.

*Ugh, couldn't those two idiots do anything for themselves?!* She glanced at her alarm clock. Not even 9am and already they were calling her. Blinking away sleep and mumbling about the need for replacement staff, Abby slung her legs heavily over the side of the bed and snatched up her phone.

'Yes,' she croaked. 'What do you want?'

The lazy chuckle on the other end of the line caused her to blanch.

'A good morning would have been nice,' said a voice that was emphatically neither Holly's nor Gemma's. 'But failing that, just you. I'll be there in ten.'

Abby gulped. 'R-Ryan?' she gargled, her face now even whiter than her bedsheets. 'Wh... What's...'

A shard of realisation pierced her grogginess. The awards do!

'Uhh. I mean yes... of course...' she said, trying to clear the toad-like croak from her throat. 'Actually, can you make it twenty?' she added, regaining some poise. 'I had to work very late last night.'

This time the chuckle annoyed her. 'All right. Get a wriggle on though. If you're not ready in twenty I'll take Holly instead. Ciao.'

Skimming her phone at the pillows, Abby flopped back with a heavy groan. As the warm mattress hugged her once more, she scrunched her eyes shut, trying to will away her beating headache. The Estate Agent of the Year Awards. Ugh. Why today, of all days? But what could she do? Yes, Ryan fancied the very stylish designer knickers off her, but it was several months since she'd been able to impose her influence on him in person; and there were limits to what even she could get away with where work was concerned.

Besides, exhausted and hungover as she was, Abby did *not* want to miss out on what was guaranteed to be a glamorous and highly Instagrammable event, with selfie opportunities galore that would turn her followers green with envy. And she had the perfect dress. Ryan had been joking about taking Holly of course, but still...

He *had* been joking.

Images of Holly posing beside Ryan's Porsche and posting boomerang videos of their clinking champagne glasses arose hideous and unbidden in Abby's brain. It was all the motivation she needed. Closing her eyes as proof against the coming pain, she dug her elbows into the bed and levered herself up.

Fifteen minutes and a soothing but frustratingly brief shower later, she was sliding open the mirrored door of her fitted wardrobe and unhooking the newest, sparkliest and most expensive garment in her armoury of designer dresses.

Despite her headache and annoyance at being rushed, Abby couldn't help smiling as she ran her manicured fingertips over the shimmering silk. It was indeed the perfect dress: a masterpiece of Versace gold, strikingly similar to the one worn by Kim Kardashian at the MET Gala. In fact the only real difference was that Abby's version was considerably shorter. *I'll be the belle of the ball in this*, she thought smugly. *Ryan might even regret buying it for me, with all the attention I'll be getting. Maybe I'll find someone better. That'd teach the little prick to joke about abandoning me for Holly.*

Abby bit her lip. She was already running late, and strictly speaking there was no reason to actually wear the dress for the journey down. But oh the looks she would get at the motorway services, swinging her long legs out of a Porsche in a gold Versace! Everyone would assume she was an actress, or at least a footballer's wife. It was just too good to resist. Flushed with vanity, she lifted her arms and slipped the glittering satin over her head.

Any other girl, particularly one who'd been eating as well as Abby had in recent months, might have registered concern at the amount of squeezing, squirming and smooshing required to roll the beautiful, slinky material down over the vast curve of her bosom. But Abby, still drunk on the thought of all the awe-struck gazes she was going to get, felt only pride at how round and voluptuous her tits looked, bouncing and jouncing like overripe melons in their glittering low-cut hammock.

*And they're not even my best feature*, she thought smugly as she inched the dress down over her midriff. Shifting her weight, Abby tugged at the material, wiggling from side to side. She blew out her cheeks. Christ, these Versaces were tight! The silk was gripping her skin like superglue; she could feel the squeeze in her lungs! No wonder Kim K needed an army of assistants to crowbar her into these things! Pausing for a quick breather, Abby slipped her fingers free (wincing as the hem snapped tight to her abdomen) and looked up from her heaving bosom to check her progress in the mirror.

'*What the-?!*'

Eyes bulging, the half-dressed beauty staggered backwards, flailing for the bedpost. She blinked several times, as if trying to dispel a mirage.

But what she saw was all too real. There in the mirror, beneath the twin bulges of her magnificent if somewhat squashed-in bosom, were two even bigger bulges - one a rich, shimmering gold, the other a shapewear beige - stacked one atop the other like overstuffed cushions.

Abby gaped. Her beautiful, perfect dress was bisecting her right across the bellybutton! She looked like she had two stomachs!

The blast of a car horn shocked the bewildered babe out of her trance. Her eyes darted to her phone, still nestled amidst the pillows. Three missed calls! Panic rising, Abby wiggled hurriedly over to the window, trying to ignore the sensation of her upper and lower stomach slapping together, and peeked out from behind the curtain.

Sure enough, there was Ryan's gleaming red Porsche.

'Shit!'

Staggering back to the mirror, Abby twisted her knees inwards, pushing and kneading and smushing her abdominal bulges for all she was worth, desperately trying to squeeze her fingertips under the skintight silk. 'Oh, it never did this in the fitting room!' she moaned out loud. *But that was over two months ago*, muttered a tiny voice in her head.

The horn blasted again, longer and more impatient.

'All right, I'm coming!'

But she wasn't. Whatever Abby did, however much she squeezed and kneaded and crammed and smushed, she just couldn't get any grip on the hem of her dress. It was buried too deep in the fleshy fold across her abdomen. She could neither roll the dress down over her stomach nor pull it back up over her head.

Gasping with exhaustion, Abby leaned forward, palms flat against the mirrored door, and glared at her own huffing, red-faced reflection. This was so unfair! The *one* evening she'd had dinner at Le Bistro, and it just *had* to be the one where she needed to get into a tight dress the next morning. She placed a hand on the spanx-cradled bulge of her lower belly, feeling it expand and contract with her breathing. Her mind flitted back to the previous evening - to Claude striding in with that massive plum pudding. Why had that idiot served her such a huge slice?! It could be hours before her stomach was back to its normal size! And by then Ryan would be halfway to Oxford, with Holly sitting next to him.

The thought made Abby growl. Holly! Why hadn't Holly reminded her that it was the awards do today?! That was her job! But wait... why *hadn't* Holly reminded her? With her head pounding again and her viciously tight dress stifling the flow of oxygen around her body, Abby's eyes and thoughts grew wild. Holly! That fat, devious slut! She'd deliberately not mentioned that the awards were today! She'd planned the whole thing! Knowing Abby would have to drink at the meal last night to keep up appearances, Holly had deliberately

forgotten to remind her about the awards do the next day, hoping she'd sleep through her alarm and Ryan would take *her* instead!

Abby almost roared at the injustice of it. How could she show her face in work again?! How could she show her face in *Chester* again?! She'd been telling her friends for months about how she'd be attending one of the most exclusive venues in the country and mingling with a roomful of millionaires. What would they say when they found out that Holly Moore, of all people, had tricked her and gone instead?! Abby could already hear the sniggers, see the taunting, grinning faces. Oh, this was turning into one great nightmare!

Raging, she took a wild swipe at the empty box of chocolates by her bed, gasping in horror as it struck the wall and landed face down on her prized mink coat, which in her drunken state last night she'd discarded on the bedroom floor.

Wait... her coat!

Abby's eyes swelled with hope. If she wore her coat, no one would know that she was half-dressed beneath. Then by the time they got to the motorway services her stomach would be flat again. She'd be able to sort her dress out properly. Fishing her phone from the pillows and tapping out a quick "Coming!" to Ryan, she stooped - wincing - and seized up the lifesaving mink.

The soft material felt strange against her Spanx, but as Abby checked herself over in the mirror she saw that her plan had worked. With her long coat buttoned up to its extravagant fur trim, there was no evidence of any...issues beneath. She'd just have to keep Ryan's wandering hands away from her on the first leg of the journey.

Adjusting her bosom, Abby smirked at her reflection. She'd give those hands free reign later on though - right when she was persuading Ryan that neither Holly nor Gemma deserved a bonus or pay rise this year.

Which reminded her...

Retrieving her phone from the bed, Abby tapped out a quick text as she hurried down the stairs, curtly reminding Holly that under no circumstances were any Ethel House viewings to be held in her absence. Then, pausing to catch her breath and primp her hair in the hall mirror, she sent a follow-up message, reminding Holly of the reason for that absence and stating that, as she'd be staying in a five-star hotel in Oxford tonight, she wouldn't be in work tomorrow either. Then she sent a copy of the message to Gemma, just in case she'd forgotten.

Closing the front door behind her, Abby gave her reflection a final check in the silver door knocker. It was the fifth and final mirror she admired herself in every morning, and though the smallest, it was perhaps her favourite. The angle and distortion always made her tits look incredible. And today, nestled in the fur trim of her mink coat, they looked better - and bigger - than ever.

Abby sighed, running light fingers down her heavy bosom. It was going to be a mission to keep Ryan's hands off her. Especially after a three month absence.

Sure enough, as she turned she saw that he was already hunched over the steering wheel of his beloved Porsche, staring at her through the side window.

Her lip curled smugly.

The man's jaw had dropped so far it was almost pressing the horn.

\*

Now, Gemma was quite accustomed to receiving early morning texts from her boss. 'Don't forget the milk' was the most common one, although Abby, never one to overexert herself, had recently begun shortening this simply to 'Milk'. 'We need sugar', also popular, had been similarly truncated to 'Sugar'. Likewise 'Biscuits' and 'Croissants', though more detailed messages (e.g. 'Chocolate cherry cream cheese Danish') were still possible on days when Abby's belly was rumbling in a more specific direction - or when she just wanted to be difficult.

This morning's text, however, was far more uplifting. If only for a single phrase buried within the detail.

'I won't be in today.'

*I won't be in today.* Five simple words that any boss can use to bring joy to her staff.

Granted, the reason for Abby's absence - that she was travelling by Porsche to a banquet in Oxford for the UK Estate Agent of the Year awards, where (according to her text) she'd enjoy a champagne reception followed by a five course banquet cooked by a celebrity chef - took the shine of things a bit. But when you focused on where Abby wouldn't be and not on where she was, it was still a positive.

And well-timed, too. A new nightclub, 'The Hive', had opened in Liverpool at the weekend, and Gemma had already been twice: on Friday with her friends and on Saturday with her sister. Neither had been what you'd call a quiet evening. She could remember almost nothing about Friday, and her hangover on Sunday was so bad that she'd had to cancel her scheduled brunch with Holly. An Abby-free office today provided the perfect opportunity to make up for lost time.

And to discuss Peter's plan.

*No*, Gemma corrected herself as she clicked towards the office, *our* plan. Hers, Peter's and Holly's. Two months had passed since Peter put forward his idea in the coffee house, in hushed secretive tones that were eagerly absorbed by his captive and caffeinated audience. And so far it had played out more perfectly than the trio of conspirators could have dreamed. The wheels were in motion. The grand finale was in sight, and there was no turning back.

However much Gemma might have liked to.

Passing through the small shopping village near her office, the blonde office barbie bit her lip. In truth, her conscience had been niggling at her since... well, since her sugar and caffeine



high wore off that very same evening. But the more things progressed, the louder the little voice in Gemma's head became. Were they really doing the right thing? Yes, Abby had proved herself a completely selfish bitch. And it wasn't like they hadn't given her chances to mend her ways. It had been Gemma's idea to set up that second Ethel House viewing yesterday, against Peter and Holly's better judgement, and she'd hoped - *really* hoped - that Abby would offer it to her. But no. The big greedyguts had just given her usual haughty sneer and waddled off to cram her already bulging belly with its second feast of the day, even though she still had the hiccups from the first and was on the verge of busting every seam of her Gucci blouse. Perhaps she had, in the end.

Yet despite Abby's behaviour, Gemma couldn't shake off the prickling guilt. Perhaps... perhaps they could find another way to teach Abby a lesson. Or even let the whole thing slide. Gemma's pretty forehead furrowed into a frown. She *really* needed to have that chat with Holly.

*And I will, so there's no point in dwelling on it now*, she told herself. Pushing the matter to the back of her mind, she searched for a positive to replace it with.

Fortunately one was readily available. For Abby's text wasn't the only one Gemma had received this morning. As she'd been brushing her teeth, her phone had buzzed with a far shorter, far more uplifting message from no less than Ryan Hughes himself, congratulating Gemma on the recent sale of 14 Compton Way. 'Nice job', this one had read, followed by a thumbs-up emoji. It was only a small gesture: Ryan wasn't about to promote her to branch manager or invite her to the awards do in Abby's place. But still, it was nice to feel appreciated. Especially with pay reviews just a few weeks away.

A few weeks, however, was a few weeks; and as she pushed open the glass doors of Costa to pick up her morning Machiato, Gemma decided that a more immediate reward was merited.

Namely that middlemost slice of chocolate gateau that was sitting so creamily, so temptingly in the glass display case.

The blonde beauty licked her lips. It was an especially big, especially chunky looking slice, with a thick layer of chocolate icing drooping over the top and a deep, bright beam of raspberry lancing through its fluffy middle. Gemma was a great believer in karma, and she felt sure the universe had sent this particular slice of cake especially for her. A reward for all her recent hard work and stressful soul-searching. Why else had it been the first thing she'd spotted on this specific morning in this specific Costa? And there was no queue! What more proof did she need?

Leaning over the display case in such an exaggerated fashion that the barista had to shuffle backwards to avoid being bumped by her boobs, Gemma let her bright blue eyes scan dreamily over the chalkboard menu on the wall. Fidgeting wistfully with her necklace, she sighed a deep and thoughtful sigh, tilting her head to one side.

It didn't hurt to give karma a little nudge, after all.

Not that it was necessary. Faced with the dizzying contradiction of those impossibly innocent eyes and sinfully overswollen tits, the young barista didn't stand a chance. Quite suddenly he found himself in a situation where a mastery of irregular Greek verbs was entirely useless; and by the time this Aphrodite in business attire had finished giving her order, in a voice as soft as dandelions blown over a sunlit field, his knees had gone as gooey as the enormous hunk of gateau he was desperately trying to shuffle onto the serving slice. Squatting lower for a better angle, he finally managed to dislodge it.

And in doing so, was treated to a prime view of its final destination.

For in her eagerness to push her bulbous boobs as far over the display cabinet as possible, Gemma had failed to realise that her equally bulbous tummy had no option but to press quite forcefully against the front of it. Still squatting, the barista gazed in awe at the tautly bulging combination of blouse and high-waisted black skirt, squished up against the glass like some obese white sea blob with a dark underbelly that had spotted a tasty snack on the other side of its tank. *Looks like Aphrodite's been going in a little heavy on the Ambrosia*, he thought as he stood up, his eyes once again reaching the level of those magnificently plump tits. Without realising what he was doing, he found himself sliding the serving slice back into the cabinet, wrapping a second slice of cake, and dropping it into the bag with the first.

Oblivious to the barista's thoughts, and taking great delight in the fact that her flirting had earned her a second slice of cake - and for no extra charge! - Gemma handed over her money and accepted the satisfyingly heavy bag. And with a beaming smile and a flutter of lashes, she was gone, leaving the lad dribbling into the till, gazing after her bouncing platinum-gold hair and the jaunty wobble of her departing bottom.

Thus it was a chuffed, contented and altogether very pleased with herself Gemma Patterson who pressed that same bottom against the door of New Century Properties (her hands being occupied with her macchiato and bag of goodies) and turned herself into the warmth of the office, where Holly wiped out all her good feelings with a single sentence.

'You're in the Daily Mail,' the brunette mumbled around a mouthful of hobnob.

*You're in the Daily Mail.* Five simple words guaranteed to ruin even the most promising morning.

For a moment Gemma frowned in confusion. Then realisation struck. The rosy joy fled from her cheeks so suddenly that her hands shot up as if to cover their nakedness. Her legs turned to spaghetti.

'Oh *no!*' she gasped, clutching for the edge of her desk and somehow managing to direct her falling rump into her chair, its padded leather echoing the fearful wheeze in her voice. 'I was so drunk! That new club - they were doing free shots!' Gemma's fretful fingers darted to her mouse, clicking impatiently as her computer booted up. Her mind spun with horrible images of herself comatose on a kerb, or puking into a gutter. *Had* she been sick? She couldn't even

remember! 'Oh, this isn't *funny* Holly!' Gemma scowled across the room at her friend, who was choking mirthfully on a hobnob. 'Send me the link!'

'Re - *churrk* - lax!' Holly thumped her chest, grimacing as the biscuit grazed her throat on its way down. 'Relax,' she repeated, though the softness of her tone was spiked with a slight chuckle. 'It's nothing like that. Here - *cough* - I've sent it.'

Despite Holly's reassurances, Gemma's beautiful blue eyes were tense with fear as they scanned the screen. She was so nervous she read the title out loud.

'Beautician dubbed the Botox Bernie Madoff ... who stole over one million pounds from staff and investors to embark on luxury 18 month holiday...' Gemma frowned, looking over at Holly. 'But what's this got to -'

'Keep reading,' Holly interrupted.

Still frowning, Gemma turned back to her screen. Her voice softened to a mumble as she continued to read, then rose again as she reached the end of the title: '... is jailed for two months. 31 year-old Dr Hayley Ward was convicted of withholding £160,000 in staff wages and siphoning £1.2million from her company's bank account. Ward and her boyfr-'

Gemma jolted bolt-upright in her seat. Her mouth gaped to the size of a tennis ball. 'Holly!' She stared at her friend across the room. 'That's *our* Hayley. I mean, it's Dr Hayley from Augmenta!'

'Mm-hmm,' Holly nodded slowly, biting casually into another hobnob. 'Keep reading.'

Gemma already was, leaning close to her screen. And the more she scrolled and read, the wider the gap between her pretty lips became, so that by the time she looked up again her mouth had opened to the size of a football.

'Well!' Gemma breathed the word out, leaning back in her chair. Still gazing at the monitor she took a bite of her first slice of cake, which her free hand had subconsciously been unwrapping. 'I wondered why we hadn't seen her in a while. All that money stolen from her staff! She makes Abby look like a model boss.'

Holly snorted into her cappuccino. 'She makes Abby look like a model full stop. See that last bikini pic?'

Perhaps for the first time ever, Gemma had been too enthralled by the contents of a Daily Mail article to pay much attention to the images. Anyway, she was only around halfway through. She scrolled quickly to the end, whereupon her mouth gaped to the size of a beach ball.

The photo, apparently lifted directly from Instagram, for it came complete with a sidebar of comments, showed Dr Hayley Ward standing proud and imperious on the prow of a white cruise ship, clad in a very provocative lavender-pink bikini. Her raised arms glistened with an overload of golden bracelets and her palms were upturned lazily, so that her fingers pointed back at the stunning blue horizon and crystal waters that stretched out behind her, as if she were an empress showing off the extent of her domain. The dazzling sun seemed to rest like a

fireball in her right hand, and her ravishing golden hair glimmered in its tropical glow, falling in a smooth sigh of curls down the swell of her bosom. Her flawless beautician's skin glowed with a gorgeous Caribbean tan.

Yet had it not been for the serene, slightly haughty smile (ever present on the posters that adorned the walls of the Augmenta Aesthetics clinic), and the smugly raised eyebrow that had so often loomed over Gemma as she sat in that plush white doctor's chair, she would not have believed that the bikini-clad beauty in the picture was the same woman.

Gone were the slender profile and sharp jaw that Gemma had often envied as Hayley leaned towards her, syringe in hand. Indeed, it almost looked as if the good doctor had injected her entire reserves of Botox into her own neck. The creasing bulges of fat that encased it were so thick and smooth that even the King's ransom of glittering necklaces just beneath couldn't distract from them. Further down, the change was even more extreme. Hayley's once-proud bosoms sagged like a pair of limp torpedoes, resting across a great sloping belly that bulged and strained against the cradle of silky lavender bikini straps that crisscrossed her torso just above the navel. As if out of a quite reasonable concern that these alone might be inadequate to constrain her vast tummy, the bloated beautician had accessorised her abdomen with a bright gold body chain that stretched extravagantly around her middle, looping just below her bellybutton and then rising up her thick flanks, where fleshy rolls of flab formed a natural groove that guided the chain around Hayley's wide sides. And swaddled though they were in thick wrappings of plump, tanned flesh, the arms that so confidently heralded the horizon looked skinny in comparison to Hayley's thunderous thighs and bumper rump, which to Gemma's eye seemed suspiciously smooth, given its size.

'Buff she waff so slim!' Gemma's shock was muffled somewhat by the amount of cake in her mouth. It seemed incredible that someone could gain so much weight in so little time. Then again, Holly had packed on plenty of pudge during her honeymoon cruise, and that had been just three weeks. According to the article, Dr Hayley had spent eighteen months evading the authorities, all the while partying, sunbathing and feasting sumptuously.

Scrolling her way back up the article, Gemma noticed that most of the pics were taken from the Instagram account of Hayley's boyfriend. She wondered if that was how the police tracked them down. Each was a snapshot of the pair's lavish holiday, complete with dates and locations. A bit dumb of him to post them on Instagram, really, but then apparently he'd only met Hayley by chance on the first leg of her holiday, and had no idea that she was funding their trip with stolen money. Which perhaps did make him a bit dumb after all.

One thing the pictures definitely did track was Hayley's weight gain. In the first bikini pic she looked just as Gemma would've imagined her to without clothes: curvy-slim without being skinny; a good match for the ultra-ripped model boyfriend who posed alongside her in front of the bathroom mirror in his swim shorts. Yet in the next image, dated just a month later, Hayley, though still stunning, was already looking softer, especially around the hips.

The one after that showed a very smug Hayley sitting on her lover's shoulders, cocktail raised to the sun, apparently oblivious to the prosperous looking potbelly that had developed around her lower abdomen and was pressing into the back of her hunky companion's head.

The trend continued from there. Hayley looking heftier and heftier; her bronzed boyfriend rocking the same chiselled six pack and defined jawline throughout.

*Still, they look cute together.* Gemma couldn't help smiling as she licked chocolate frosting her lips. And it was sweet that they had met by chance on a flight. In fact, the more Gemma thought about it, the more she started to feel sorry for Hayley. She said as much to Holly, who almost choked on her hobnob.

'Poor Hayley?!' Holly spluttered crumbs across her keyboard. 'Gem, have you read the article? She stole all that money! Her staff worked for months without getting paid, not knowing if they'd be able to pay their bills or feed their families!'

But it was no use. Having detected a spark of romance in the story, Gemma was in full-on swoon mode, reading on intently and fully rooting for the lovers. Moments later she gave a little cry. 'Awww, Hols, listen to this!' Pointing at the screen, Gemma shuffled her bottom in her chair and quoted directly from the Instagram caption alongside the last picture. 'A year ago I met an incredible girl on a flight and we started an adventure together. In love with her more than you can believe. Happy anniversary snugglemuffin. Here's to many many more!'

Beaming, Gemma lifted her face towards Holly, her blue eyes hot and glistening. Her small hands came up and clapped together. 'Snugglemuffin! He's so cute!' Then her face fell. 'And that was just before the police took her away!' Urgently Gemma returned to the article, staring intently, hoping against hope for a happy ending. 'He says he's going to work two jobs to make a life for him and Hayley when she gets out of prison.' Gemma sighed softly. 'Awwww. She put on all that weight but he still loves her so much!'

'Awww,' echoed Holly, imitating Gemma's pout. 'Just like you and Peter.'

Her snickering was cut short by a lethally accurate cherry that struck her right between the eyes. 'Ow!' She yelped, rubbing her forehead. 'Hmph. Must've really hit a nerve for you to be sacrificing food in my direction.' Pushing back her chair Holly scanned the floor for the errant cherry. Spotting it she gave a little cry of triumph and bent forward, getting down on her hands and knees.

Gemma grinned as Holly's bum rose formidably behind the desk, bumping her computer screen like a wrecking ball as she stretched for the cherry, which was nestled next to the front leg. 'Careful there Hollypops,' she laughed. 'You don't want to break a lightbulb.' Then she remembered something.

'Hey - but what's this article got to do with me?'

The huge grin on Holly's face as she resurfaced sent a chill down Gemma's spine.

'Didn't notice anything about the earlier pics?'

Gemma scrolled back up with a frown. 'The ones in the clinic? I - Oh *no!*'

Now it was Holly's turn to laugh. Plonking her big behind into her chair, she popped the retrieved cherry into her mouth. It was almost as sweet as the range of emotions passing across her blonde friend's face.

'Oh, that's not fair!' Gemma wailed. 'I'd eaten a big lunch that day! And I was anxious before my treatment! I bloat when I'm anxious! That useless photographer doesn't know his angles!'

Holly chuckled. 'Your hair looks good though.'

Throwing herself back in her chair, Gemma stared forlornly at the soft, round paunch sitting in her lap, jutting out beneath the considerable balcony of her boobs. If anything it looked even more globular than it did in the article. 'I'm hopelessly fat!' she moaned. Looking up, she pouted accusingly at the half-eaten slice of cake on her desk and pushed it away. Though not, Holly noted, so far away that she couldn't easily reach it again.

'Look on the bright side,' Holly said, treading a thin line between sarcasm and reassurance. 'Compared to Hayley, you're positively anorexic.'

Arms folded under the boobs, Gemma glanced hopefully at her screen. 'You think?' She scrolled down again. It was true. Hayley really had packed on the timber. She was as wide as two normal people, with a big surging gut and a pillar for a neck. Gemma looked up suddenly. 'Do you think her boyfriend really will wait for her?'

Amused at how quickly her friend's brain had switched back to romance, Holly rolled her eyes. 'I hope not. Sheesh Gem, seriously? After what she did?' Shaking her head in disbelief, the brunette pulled open her top drawer. 'Next you'll be telling me you're starting to feel sorry for *Abby*,' she said, starting to rummage. 'A-ha!'

Holly lifted her head, a chocolate orange clasped in her hand and a triumphant grin plastered on her face.

Both of which fell instantly when she saw her friend's expression.

'Oh, Gemma!' she sighed. 'No... No, no, no.'

'I didn't - *mmff* - say anything!' Gemma mumbled, having stuffed her cheeks to bursting with cake in an attempt to disguise her reaction. Gulping some down, she sighed. 'I just... I don't know.'

'Look, we gave her a chance yesterday.' Holly spoke softly, well aware that Gemma had a sweet nature as big as her sweet tooth. 'How did that go, hmm? And I'm guessing you got her lovely text this morning.' Holly paused for a moment to let this sink in. 'Being her usual nice self - rubbing our noses in the fact that she's swinging her enormous arse off to a lavish party while we have to sit here on ours working like slaves to keep her in designer coats. And then there's... did you get two slices of cake?'

It was as if someone had suddenly pressed the pause button on Gemma's life. She froze mid-chew, her lips glistening with icing sugar, one cake-stuffed cheek slightly higher than the other. The rest of her remaining as still as a waxwork, her blue eyes shifted right and then down, scanning down the length of her outstretched forearm along to the tips of the frozen

fingers, which were poised - to her shock - above her bonus slice of cake, which at some point she must have removed from her bag and begun to unwrap.

There wasn't much point in trying to deny it, so instead she aimed at justification.

'I eaff when I'm streffed, okay?'

Holly smirked. 'You really are trying to impress Peter, aren't you?'

'*Noff!*' Gemma retorted, spraying crumbs. Then her brow furrowed. 'Waiff...' she gulped down her cake. 'What do you mean?'

Holly's eyes, which had already completed roughly seven full rotations that morning, began another circle. 'Come on Gem... You... Abby...' She turned her palms up and dipped her head, as if to say it was obvious, but found the blonde still frowning at her obliviously. 'He clearly likes girls with a bit of... you know...' Not wanting to say it, Holly simply tapped her tummy. 'I'm only saying!' she interjected as Gemma emitted an indignant whine through her a month refilled with cake. 'Some men do. It's probably why he was so-'

Holly stopped short. An unpleasant thought had just struck her. She looked anxiously at Gemma to see if the same thing had occurred to her too. Thankfully there was no evidence that it had.

'You think... you think Peter likes me?' Gemma said. Her casual tone betrayed by the fierce redness on her chipmunk cheeks.

'Like duuuh,' rejoined Holly jokily. This was good; the further they could steer the topic away from Abby the better.

'And because of... because I'm a bit...' Not wanting to use the word, Gemma patted her flanks with both hands. Holly nodded softly.

As if in a trance, Gemma ran her fingers across her bulging tummy. Moving them underneath it, she hefted it a little, frowning (but now more with intrigue than disgust) at how it bounced when she let it drop. She knew she was cute of course - sexy, even. All that effort and money she spent on her looks and clothes had been paid back a hundred times in smiles and wolf whistles. And there were all the slobbering baristas and waiters in coffee shops. But she'd always assumed they liked her in spite of her...chubbiness - at least in spite of her chubbiness in the tummy area. The idea that her sizeable tum might actually be appealing - and appealing to Peter - was completely new to her.

Not that she was interested in him of course.

A rustle from across the room made her look up. With her tongue between her teeth in concentration, Holly was assiduously trying to break off a segment of her chocolate orange. Gemma was struck by the way her friend's tanned bingo wings wobbled with the effort.

'Maybe Peter's not the only one who likes a larger lady,' Gemma muttered to herself.

'Huh?' Holly looked up.

'Nothing, nothing.' Gemma said with a smile, which Holly would surely have returned had she not been biting into the chocolate orange, having failed to extract a slice by conventional means.

Stealing herself, Gemma looked again at the picture on the screen.

*My hair does look good*, she thought, reaching again for her cake.

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PS You can read the Daily Mail article Gemma and Holly were reading here (complete with pics): <https://www.patreon.com/posts/bernie-madoff-of-23538586>

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