



Freya North rumours

Can you believe
everything you hear?

Everybody's talking – but what's really going on?

Rumour has it that Stella Hutton landed her new job thanks to family connections. She's guarded about her past and private about her new life.

Over in Long Dansbury, there's always a rumour circulating about Xander Fletcher – but the eligible bachelor shrugs off village gossip.

Then a rumour starts that Longbridge Hall is up for sale. Home to the eccentric Fortescues, it has dominated Long Dansbury lives for centuries.

Stella is summoned to sell the estate. But Xander grew up there. His secrets and memories are not for sale. He'll do anything to stand in Stella's way. Anything but fall in love.

Extract from

rumours

Prologue

March 1790

Lord Frederick Makepeace William Fortescue, Earl of Barbary, ran his hands over the undulations of Molly's naked body, admiring the sight and relishing in the silky feel of her much as he did his favourite horse, Jepson. It gave him enormous pleasure, not in a carnal way, but for the sense of ownership. He loved to gaze, to feel, to assess what he had before he rode – either horse or woman – the delicious anticipation of how the external beauty brought with it the promise of such sublime physical rewards. He bucked into Molly hard, much as Jepson bucked after jumping a stile. Excited, he rode her energetically to the finish.

'My dear,' he said, 'though I would spend all afternoon with you, Lady Fortescue is shortly to return from Bath – and it would not do for your mistress to find you in my bed.' He slapped Molly's bottom and resisted the temptation to call it a fine rump. 'Out,' he laughed, letting his hand linger and wander, before he gave her another hearty wallop which made her giggle lasciviously and climb aboard again. 'Off!' he said. 'Away!'

Molly gave him a reproachful look that was as beguiling as it was coy. 'As you ask, My Lord,' she said, emphasizing

the 'Lord' in such a way that it warranted a further slap on her buttocks. He watched her dress. She was turned away from him – not from any shyness, but actually because after the act itself she no longer wanted to see his corpulent body sprawled inelegantly wasted. She felt that fornication, especially of the illicit type, was rather like gorging oneself when starving hungry. Once sated, the very sight of leftovers was repellent. Lord Fortescue didn't know this, of course. He thought it was a charming reversion of Molly from strumpet to servant; from a writhing, panting horny filly – unbridled, dirty and insatiable – to humble and reverent and back in her place. He wasn't aware how the extra coins he gave her provided her with both the last laugh *and* her growing independence and emancipation.

'I shall call for you,' he said in a low growl.

'I shall come,' she said, all meek, just the way she knew he liked.

'Molly Molly Molly,' he marvelled. She gave a demure little curtsy. 'A little something for your – exertion, a reward for your excellent fulfilment of all tasks set.' He nodded at the occasional chair, draped with hastily strewn clothing. 'Pocket,' he said softly. She slipped her hand into the pocket of his breeches as if unsure what she might find and feigned surprise and delight at the lace handkerchief knotted on its bundle of coins.

'Why, thank you, Lord Fortescue,' she said, as if payment was an unexpected bonus.

He winked. 'Be off now. I will ring down in a while and ask Mrs Fulford to send someone up to make the room afresh.'

'– because you had one of your funny turns –'

'That's my girl,' said Lord Fortescue. 'Away with you now. Shoo!'

Molly paused by the door. He was a good master. Her working conditions and remuneration were above par compared with other maids she knew. And, actually, the extras he sought and paid for honourably didn't offend her. He was rather good at it. And preferable to the fat fingers and clumsy cock of Lord Aldbury who'd had her before her move to the Fortescue household.

'Lord Fortescue, sir,' she said. She turned. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, his stomach like a plump pink pillow partially concealing the instrument of his adultery. 'It's just –'

He waited. 'Just what?'

'Something I heard,' she said.

He raised an eyebrow for her to continue.

'Probably just tittle-tattle. But my sister – she lives in Long Dansbury. And there's all sorts of rumours in the village – so she says – about that new house you are building.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Yes,' said Molly. 'And there's rumours, too, here in Knightsbridge – amongst the staff. About positions to be lost, or country pay being lower than London. And country ways, sir – being, well, unsavoury.'

Whoever gossips to you, gossips about you, Lord Fortescue mused as he looked at Molly. 'Bugger Knightsbridge,' he said, 'but I am interested in what the villagers are saying out there. From a philanthropic point of view, of course.'

Molly shrugged. 'Just about the house you're building.'

'The house?'

'The style – some say it's too modern. Too big. Ugly, even. Others say that you'll be chopping down all the forests to feed the fires just to heat the place.'

'I see.'

‘And that the barley fields will be turned fallow. And that you’ll do cattle not sheep. And that the villagers won’t get the jobs – us London staff will. But us London staff won’t want to go all the way out there if we’re not on Knightsbridge wages.’

Lord Fortescue was enjoying all this. And he could see Molly wasn’t done.

‘And there’s more.’ She reddened yet glanced at him lasciviously. ‘They say none of the men will let their wives or daughters work for you – on account of your *appetite*.’ She licked her lips, as if he’d whetted hers.

‘Away with you, Molly,’ Lord Fortescue laughed. And when she was gone, he rubbed his hands and his cock and his belly gleefully. ‘Idiots! All of them! Hertfordshire is the new Knightsbridge – and those who choose not to come with me are fools. Longbridge Hall will put the village of Long Dansbury on the map – geographically and architecturally. I fully intend to touch the lives of the villagers in ways they’ll never forget!’



Present Day – Xander

Jesus, do I *not* feel like doing this.

Xander reached over to whack down the alarm clock as if it was a bluebottle that had been bugging him for hours. Lying next to him, Siobhan mumbled in her reverie. He looked at her, naked and so very tempting. Outside, grey and raining. Inside, warm and cosy. Inside Siobhan, downright hot and snug. He lay back on his side of the

bed, his hand lolling over his morning erection, trying to persuade himself that he had a true dilemma on his hands. But the truth was, Siobhan wasn't really the distraction and he wasn't really all that horny – he just craved any excuse not to go. He didn't want to do ten miles. Not today. Not in the rain. But it wasn't a choice; there really was no decision to make. He had to do it. And that was that. Half-marathon at the end of the month, all the wonderful people in his life effervescing on his justgiving.com page, pledging money for his chosen good cause. He dressed, steeled himself and headed out into the rain. More fool him for having believed in all that mad March sunshine yesterday. iPod on, he headed out of his house, past the other estate cottages in his terrace, and headed up Tramfield Lane at a sprint as if to prove wrong the Xander who'd woken thinking he didn't want to run today.

Within two miles he felt good. Really good. He headed his loop up Bridgeback Hill and through Dansworth Forest, pushing on hard until the gradient levelled out and he was looking down on the Georgian beauty of Longbridge Hall; the arable fields, noble woods, rolling parkland and manicured gardens of the Fortescue estate. The rain had stopped and sudden sunlight elicited caramel tones from the mansion's brickwork, glints of silver from the expansive slate roof; the high floating hornbeam hedge sparkled like a soft chuckle and the gravel driveway, from this angle, was like a swooping butter-coloured smile. Xander thought, it's been a while since I saw Lady Lydia. His instinct was still to refer to her thus if he hadn't seen her recently – though he'd been invited to call her Lydia once he'd graduated from university almost two decades ago.

I must drop her a line. It's been over a month.

He ran on and laughed out loud – remembering a

conversation so clearly she could very well be running alongside him just then.

'Have you heard of eel mails, Xander?'

'Email?'

'What a ghastly notion. Lady Ranchester told me she is now called dorothy at ranchester dot com. All lower case. How preposterous! Dot Common – that's what she is now.'

'Handwritten letters are now known as snail mail, Lydia.'

'Nonsense. If one can write – it's downright wrong not to.'

Ten miles in sixty-eight minutes. Not bad. Not bad.

'Xan?'

He wished Siobhan wouldn't call him that. Laura used to call him Xan. And that experience had shown him how familiarity bred contempt. Also, with his mind now alert and his body charged by endorphins, he just wanted to shower, have a quick, quiet coffee with his bowl of muesli and be gone. Siobhan didn't need to be here – not in his bed, not on the scene. He had to do something about it, he really did. Just not now.

'Xan?' she called out.

God!

'I need a shower!' he called back.

'I need to go.'

Thank God!

'OK.'

'Call me.'

'OK.'

Xander always marvelled at the transformation. All it took for his Lazy Git alter ego (the duvet-muffled bloke who'd had too much red wine the night before) to morph into

Xander Fletcher with all traces of sleep, sex, stubble and sweat erased, bright and eager to greet the day, was a ten-mile run in under an hour and ten minutes. Dressed neatly in dark trousers and a pale shirt, driving sensibly through his beloved village of Long Dansbury to his office in Hertford twenty-five minutes away, he thought of the process as a sort of protracted Superman turnaround. Well, if not a super man, a good bloke at any rate. Heading for forty in a couple of years, Xander had no complaints at all. He lived in a lovely cottage, he had an OK bank balance and his own business keeping its head above water, a close family, great friends and a woman called Siobhan who didn't mind things being casual. Doing those ten miles in sixty-three minutes would ice an already tasty cake. He thought about it as he headed out for his car. It was doable. Xander had been brought up to believe anything was doable. Apart from Love, which was beyond one's control. Accordingly, he'd decided not to entertain it in his life, not since Laura.

He drove through a landscape which rolled and tumbled like a soft green rucked-up quilt. Born and bred here, Xander had never fallen out of love with his environs and never stopped noticing its beauty or the changes, for better or worse. That's why, after interludes in Nottingham and London, he'd returned home at thirty.

His route took him through a handful of small villages, a few still with a shop clinging on for dear life to the local economy like a limpet to a storm-lashed rock. Most supported a pub and all of the villages heralded their approach with a profusion of daffodils along the verges in spring. Beyond each community, pastureland subtly cordoned off by barely visible electric fencing supported little gatherings of horses in weatherproof rugs, looking like the equine relatives of the Michelin Man. Woodland

interrupted the swathes of fields like a patchy beard and the rivers Rib, Ash and Beane coursed through the landscape as if on a mission to deliver goodness straight to the Lea, the main artery of the area.

‘Good morning, Xander.’

Pauline Gregg, his PA of eight years, still wished he’d let her call him Mr Fletcher or Alexander at the very least. To her, it seemed too casual, unseemly somehow. When she’d been at secretarial school all those decades ago, she’d been trained, along with other girls, in the correct way to address their future employers and their clients. Formality is fitting; that’s what they learned. She felt it somehow downgraded her qualification to call her boss ‘Xander’. Her daughter, who was Xander’s age, told her it was a generational thing. But there again, her daughter had sent her children to a school where the pupils called their teachers by their Christian names. Moreover, the school didn’t classify it thus, but as ‘given names’. There again, *that* school appeared to be teaching Pauline’s grandchildren more about something called Diwali than Christmas. So many things to button one’s lip against – it was part of Pauline’s day to declare to herself at least once, what’s the world coming to?

‘Morning, Mrs Gregg,’ Xander said. He respected her right to be addressed like this – even though eight years on and being privy to the end of her marriage, the birth of her grandchildren and that Unfortunate Incident at the Roundabout With That Silly Car Which Wasn’t Her Fault, Xander considered Mrs Gregg to be on the outer ring of his family.

‘Seventy-two minutes?’ she ventured. Xander cocked his head and smiled. ‘Seventy?’

‘Sixty-eight,’ he said.

‘Very good, that,’ said Mrs Gregg. ‘Tea?’

‘Please.’ They sipped in amicable silence, each leafing through the documents on their desks. Xander looked up. ‘You’ve had your hair done.’

Mrs Gregg touched it self-consciously but smiled. ‘Yes.’

‘Very nice,’ said Xander. He wished his own mother would wear her hair in a similar style – elegant and in place – instead of the unruly thatch half in, half out of a bun, invariably adorned with debris from the garden. ‘Mrs Gregg, can you take this to the post office? And can you pick up a nice greetings card – blank inside?’

She glanced at him. When Xander had been steady with Laura for all those years, he’d never once asked her to help assist in the running of that relationship. He’d scoot off at lunch-time himself and return with flowers or something bulky in a bag which would sit quietly taunting her from the chair in the corner until he left in the evening. That was another part of her training going to waste – he had no need for her to alert him to Valentine’s Day, or Special Occasions. Yet today he was asking her to buy a card, blank, just like his expression.

‘Blank inside,’ she said, writing it down and, without looking up, she asked, ‘And what should be on the outside?’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘something soft – floral perhaps. Or a landscape.’

She wrote it down. Floral. Landscape. Unlikely to be a *special* card for a ‘significant other’ – or however his generation referred to girlfriends these days. She felt strangely relieved and yet somehow disappointed for him too. He’s such a nice young man, she often described to her friends at bridge. It’s a bit of a waste, she’d say. Perhaps he’s not a *lady’s man*, one of her chums might venture. Oh, he’s not like *that*, Pauline would say, almost

defensively. The contradiction had never confronted her – how she wanted to mother him, be at the helm of his life, yet keep the Decorum of Division she'd been trained to maintain.

‘Anything else?’

‘Treat yourself to a Danish pastry,’ said Xander.

‘Why, thank you!’

With Mrs Gregg gone, Xander leafed through his diary and in-tray. Design, print and packaging wasn't a sexy business, but it was a solid one and even in the dire economic climate, Xander found his long-term clients remained loyal. He'd cut overheads instead of staff and it had been serendipitous that Keith, the designer, had asked to go part-time just when the office rent had been hiked, so Xander and Mrs Gregg moved to these smaller premises in the same building. Everything remained the same. Apart from the chair that had been in the corner of the old office, on which the flowers or the bag with the bulky object for Laura had once sat.

I don't need that chair, Mrs Gregg, Xander had said. And that's when Mrs Gregg realized Xander had broken it off with Laura – right at the point of engagement, she assumed. Though he said they could bring the chair with them, if she felt it might be useful, she'd declined. If he didn't need it, who was she to suggest he might, at some point, in the future?

‘I bought this card – it has flowers *and* a landscape and is what I'd call gentle. I have paper napkins with this very design.’

‘Monet,’ said Xander.

‘No, no – it wasn't pricey.’

‘*Monet*,’ Xander said again, as if he hadn't heard her. ‘The Garden at Giverny.’

‘One of my favourites,’ Mrs Gregg said, as if there’d been no faux pas.

‘It’s most appropriate, thank you.’

Xander made a couple of calls and then, with the card open on his desk and his pen thoughtfully pursed between his lips, he gazed out of the window before beginning to write.

‘I’ll take the post,’ Mrs Gregg said at the end of the day.

‘There’s not much,’ said Xander.

‘It’s not a problem.’

‘I can post it on my way home.’

‘Let me,’ said Mrs Gregg. ‘You know those country lanes – if you get stuck behind something, you’ll be trundling along for hours and miss the post altogether. I’ll pop it in the box outside Elmfield Estates – it’s at the end of my street. It’s never collected before six. Never.’

‘OK,’ said Xander. ‘Thanks.’

She was barely out of the office door before she was leafing through the mail. Yes, yes, them, them, boring, boring. Ah! Aha!

*Lady Lydia Fortescue
Longbridge Hall
Long Dansbury
Hertfordshire*

Xander’s handwriting: even, bold and steady, written with his trademark calligraphy fountain pen. Mrs Gregg tutted at the envelope. Convene with women your own age, Xander, not an upper-class old battleaxe. Cut your ties with minor aristocracy! Venture forth into the real world – the one beyond Long Dansbury.



Stella

If one didn't know of Longbridge Hall then one might well assume the gates off the high street heralded a country park. On the Tuesday morning, at 11.00, Stella drove through the gates, noting how one was slightly crooked and both needed painting black again. Halfway up the drive, she said, oh God, where on earth is the house – I was here at 11.00, I've been going for miles and now I'm going to be late. However, even in the April shower that had suddenly descended, when the house came into view it was a breathtaking sight. Stella followed the driveway around it, until it ended in a flourish: a vast turning circle the size of a roundabout, with a small maze of box hedging at the centre. Stella checked her reflection and smoothed her hair and wondered if she should use the main front doors or what looked like a tradesmen's entrance off to one side. She also wondered whether she should curtsy. Clearing her throat, she made her way past the two stone lions at the base of the steps leading up to the front door. She gave the bell pole a pull and then did so again, with more force, and heard it clanging inside the house.

'Open the door, woman! Open the door!'

Stella panicked that the voice was shouting at her but even though she heaved her shoulder against them, the front doors were definitely shut.

Did she dare ring that bell again?

Luckily, a plump woman, wearing what her mother would call a pinny, opened one of the doors a fraction. She said nothing.

'Hullo,' said Stella.

‘Hullo.’

‘I’m expected.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Stella – Hutton.’

‘One moment.’ The woman left the door ajar and disappeared. Was that Lydia? Lady Fortescue? Mrs Barbary?

‘Is it Elmfield?’ she could hear another voice asking.

‘No, it’s Stella Someone.’

‘Well, it’s probably Stella Someone from Elmfield’s. Gracious me!’

That must be Lady Fortescue.

The plump woman returned. ‘Are you from Elmfield’s?’

‘Yes,’ said Stella. ‘Sorry – I should have said.’

‘Come this way, please. Coat.’

But what Stella really wanted to do was stand still for a moment and take it all in. Beyond the entrance hall was the grand stairwell, lit from above by a beautiful glass lantern roof, a swooping double staircase leading upwards to a galleried landing. But her coat was being all but wrenched from her back.

‘I’m Mrs Biggins – I’m housekeeper here. Lady Lydia takes coffee at this time – would you like coffee?’

‘No, thanks. Well – just a glass of water, please.’

‘Or tea?’

‘Tea! Oh yes, please – I’m gasping for a cup.’

The woman looked her up and down. ‘You’ll take it strong – like me.’ Stella was unsure whether she was referring to her own strength or a well-brewed cup, whether the woman’s remark was an observation, or a statement not open to dispute. If the housekeeper was this disarming, what could Lady Fortescue be like? Mrs Biggins opened the soaring double doors in front of them and gave Stella a little shove. The room was so stunning, in a thoroughly *Alice in Wonderland* way with everything oversized, that

momentarily Stella forgot all about locating the owner of the house and making her introduction. It was dual aspect, occupying three bays of the east front of the house and one bay south, and the four magnificent sash windows, at least eighteen feet high, flooded the room with light despite the dreary day outside. Stella was, quite literally, dazzled.

‘Good morning.’

Sitting in a wingback leather chair, Lydia slowly folded the *Telegraph* and placed it across her lap. Her knees were together, her legs neatly at an elegant angle; hair in a chignon with stray strands like spun silver. She wore a woollen skirt the colour of peat and a twinset the colour of heather. Her shoes were buffed and the decorative buckles shone. Neutral hosiery gathered just perceptibly in creases around the ankle – like a ploughed field seen from a distance.

‘Mrs Fortescue, I’m Stella Hutton.’ And immediately, Stella thought, oh God, I’ve addressed her incorrectly already. ‘Lady.’ No! That sounded plain rude.

Lydia did not rise. Indeed, she sat motionless and expressionless. ‘I see.’

‘I’m here on behalf of Elmfield Estates.’

‘Yes.’

Should she backtrack and apologize for the botched greeting? Stella was unsure. She didn’t know what she was meant to do next. Sit, stand, talk, wait, what? She was being looked at, assessed; she could feel it. It was as nerve-racking as the one time she’d been hauled in front of the headmistress at the age of thirteen. She felt hot and self-conscious. Did she appear suitably estate-agenty? Or was the fact that she really didn’t do the navy skirt-suit and court-shoe thing actually in her favour? She was today wearing slim-fitting black trousers and black suede ankle boots with a Cuban heel and a white shirt. Perhaps she looked too much like a waitress. Damn it! She’d been in

the pale blue shirt first thing, but had changed at the last minute. Perhaps Mrs Lady Barbary-Fortescue was waiting for her to be a little more estate-agenty. Perhaps she should deliver the Elmfield Estates mission statement.

What Stella really wanted to do was to sink into one of the sofas and say, wow, what an extraordinary place, how long have you lived here, tell me about the house, who is the lady in the painting – is it School of Reynolds? The rug is Persian, isn't it?

She was enamoured by everything: the carved frieze above the fireplace of cherubs apparently hunting down a deer; the wealth of photos from sepia, to tinted, to full colour, in a crowd on the grand piano, the thick velvet drapes, the Chinese paintings on silk. The glass-fronted book cabinet. The vast silk rug – yes, most certainly Persian – threadbare in one or two places but still magnificent, yet which went only some way in covering the impressive run of wide floorboards. Huge, heavy columnar curtains with flamboyant pelmets that reminded her of a theatre. More furniture than she, her brothers and her mother had between them. Finally, she noticed the archaic-looking electric bar heater standing in front of the capacious fireplace, trying valiantly to take the chill off the room and adding a warm down-to-earthness too. If there was so much to look at even in this one room, what delights could the rest of the house hold?

'Let me look at you.'

Stella felt like Tess being summoned by Mrs d'Urberville. But then she thought she remembered Mrs d'Urberville being blind and suddenly she felt very self-conscious that she really wasn't smart enough and why had she popped her slightly greasy hair into a hasty pony-tail when she'd had the time to wash and dry it? As she approached, Stella

decided to polish up her vowels and use words like ‘frightfully’ and ‘splendid’.

‘You’re not as I expected.’ Lady Lydia sounded disappointed.

She rose a little shakily. ‘You look like a girl – a waitress.’ She was not impressed.

‘That’s probably why my clients like me, Lady Fortescue,’ Stella said meekly. ‘I don’t boss them around. I take their order – be it for a house or a sale – and I deliver it to them.’ Stella thought about it. ‘With no spillage.’

The women regarded each other. Though Lydia was pretty much the same height as Stella, her aquiline haughtiness made her appear far taller. Or perhaps Stella just felt small in this grand room in this phenomenal old house and, for the first time in her life, in the presence of someone titled.

‘And have you ever been in a house like this?’

Stella was diplomatic. ‘There can’t possibly be another like it.’

Lydia looked at her as if she’d seen straight through her words. ‘Mrs Biggins, wretched woman – she never came with my coffee. Would you care for a sherry?’

‘It’s a little early for me,’ Stella said as if she didn’t take her sherry until after lunch. Lydia looked at her witheringly, as if she’d heard sarcasm. She walked over to the walnut drinks cabinet and inadvertently chinked the crystal stopper against the decanter and then the decanter against the glass. She took her sherry and walked to the sofa, spilling a little on her skirt as she sat herself down. She motioned to the companion sofa opposite and Stella sat. Lydia took a thoughtful sip. And then another.

‘I detest Asians.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘*All* agents – whatever their industry.’

Oh – *agents*.’ Stella’s relief was worn as an expansive smile which Lydia appeared to balk at.

‘I am going to sell Longbridge,’ she said levelly, ‘or at least, *you* are.’

Stella felt herself sinking into the sofa, as if her surroundings were suddenly growing and she was shrinking under the weight of the realization that this is why she was here. This couldn’t be real – this had to be Lewis Carroll. A joke. A dream.

But Lydia was continuing. ‘I have been thinking about selling Longbridge for some time. Sometimes I stop thinking about it – but not because I’ve changed my mind. The whole concept is so very tiresome.’ She stared at Stella, who tried to nod purposefully and to stop gawping, wishing she’d said yes to sherry, just to have something to hold instead of her hands feeling like clodden sponges awkward in her lap.

‘I’m haemorrhaging cash in upkeep.’ Lady Lydia gave a little cough for emphasis. ‘It’s preposterous! All that money just to keep the rain out and the heat in.’

The look she threw Stella as she knocked back her sherry suggested she was waiting for a response.

‘I hope I don’t sound ignorant or nosy –’ Or obsequious, Stella thought to herself. ‘But would a house like this not be handed down to the next generation?’

‘There is no next generation,’ Lady Lydia barked before going heavily silent, staring into her sherry glass as if, usually, it refilled spontaneously. ‘I am the eldest of four girls. Cordelia died young. Anne never bred. She was a lesbian – still is, I believe, though at her age that’s quite unnecessary. Margaret moved to Connecticut and remained barren despite landing herself three American husbands in quick succession.’

‘You have no children – offspring?’ She shouldn’t have said that – it sounded intrusive, impudent.

‘I had a son,’ Lydia said quietly. ‘And I have a daughter. She doesn’t want to live here. She lives with the Welsh.’ She made it sound as though her daughter had converted to an extreme religion and was living as part of a cult in a compound.

What could Stella say to that? Though desperate to know more, she bit her tongue and looked at her hands. Lydia’s were bony and long; papery skin over navy veins like very old corduroy. A signet ring loose on the little finger of her right hand, an antique diamond ring and thin gold wedding band on her left. Stella had a very strange impulse to lean right over the coffee table and take Lady Lydia’s hands in hers, give them a gentle rub. Perhaps Lydia sensed it because she took to her feet and demanded that Stella follow her on a tour of the house.

Sell? Sell all *this*? Is that really why I’m here? *Me*? Can’t be.

‘Of course, we’re the wrong way around,’ Lydia said of the drawing room. ‘When I was a girl, this was the dining room – one never had a south-facing drawing room because all the oil paintings would take a thrashing by the sun. That’s why the good paintings are currently in the dining room – which was once the drawing room because it’s north facing. That’s what my father told me – though my mother told me it was because my Fortescue ancestors were atrociously ugly.’ The slicing look Lydia sent Stella informed her that her giggle was inappropriate. ‘Hence them being consigned to a room less used.’ She was leading on, along the flagstone hallway, to the room in question. The same beautiful tall double doors and fanlight as the drawing room, the same lofty windows, but just two of them in here, east facing. The eyes of generations of Fortescues appeared to glower at her from the confines of their florid gilt frames as if to say, who

on earth do you think you are to sell our ancestral seat as though it's a commodity akin to a sack of apples?

'They're not so ugly,' Stella remarked diplomatically, 'they just look a little – humourless.'

She checked Lady Lydia's expression. She looked horrified. Stella shivered.

'Bastard!'

'Oh God – I'm so sorry – I didn't mean . . . I only meant—'

'Bastard bastard bloody dog! Barnaby! Mrs Biggins!'

It was then that Stella noticed a furl of turd that had been deposited (quite some time ago, it seemed) on the floor just by the head of the table.

'It's testimony to the airiness of the room that one cannot – *detect* it,' Stella said.

Lydia stared at her, unblinkingly, before nodding slowly. 'You are most certainly an estate agent,' she said, but Stella was unable to tell whether this was a compliment or an insult. 'You call it *spin*, don't you. This way.' They left the door open and the dog mess for Mrs Biggins to deal with; crossed the staircase and entrance hallway and went into the library. This room was as warm and inviting as the dining room was cold and uncongenial.

Stella ran her fingertips gently over the routered wooden shelves right to the end. She stopped. It couldn't be! She looked at Lydia and smiled.

'May I?' but she didn't wait for an answer. Where the bookcase ended in a long, slim vertical column, Stella gave a little press and a pull and the front of the column popped open like a secret door to reveal that it was a false front – behind it, the shelves continued, with just three books' width, for the full height of the bookcase. There were books on these hidden shelves too, but their spines were blank. 'Are they *very* rude?' Stella asked.

Lydia laughed. It was an unexpected warm, earthy cackle. ‘Eye-wateringly so – that is, if you were a dainty eighteenth-century lady prone to fainting at the very thought of even a naked forearm. Hardly the *Kama Sutra*. They’re frightfully tame to me, so goodness knows what you’d make of them.’ Insult or compliment – again Stella wasn’t sure and Lydia’s voice had become cool by the end of her sentence.

‘Have you had them valued?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Cart the lot off to Christie’s for them to be pored over so publicly? *Lady Lydia, your collection of two hundred years of pornography might fetch one hundred pounds at auction.*’ Stella laughed – but Lydia gave her a look to silence her. She led on, back through the hallways and up one side of the double staircase.

‘Now that,’ Stella murmured, ‘is a backside to behold.’

‘You insolent young woman.’ Lydia rounded on Stella who, for a split second, feared she might be pushed down the stairs. She’d already tripped over a threadbare section of runner.

‘Lady Lydia – no! I didn’t mean—! I was referring to – *that.*’ Stella was holding on to the banister with both hands so she moved her head fast as if banging it against an imaginary wall, to signify where she was looking. It was a huge oil painting of a horse and rider, portrayed from behind. Only an eye and an ear of the horse were visible, while the rider looked most uncomfortable turning around in an already cumbersome military get-up. It was the horse’s rump which all but filled the canvas, its tail mid-swish, revealing its arsehole.

‘I’m sorry, I—’ Stella glanced at Lydia who was staring at her. ‘I studied art. It was my world before I—’ And then Stella thought, Oh, for God’s sake, the woman’s not going

to bite you. And then she thought, I studied art before all the shit fell on me from a great height and I clawed my way out and am where I am today. And then she thought, But this woman doesn't need to know that. 'Before I went into property.' She made it sound like a sensible choice, that her current career was as dignified and hallowed as the study of art. Lydia's ice-pale blue eyes were still scoring straight through her, like a welder's flame through sheet metal.

'This painting was a gift – to Lord Frederick Makepeace William Fortescue, the first Earl of Barbary, who built this house.'

'Is it Mallory Beckinsford?'

'As I just said,' Lydia said slowly, witheringly, as if Stella was dim as well as deaf, 'Lord Frederick Makepeace William Fortescue, the first Earl of Barbary, who built this house.'

'I'm so sorry, I meant the artist – is it Mallory Beckinsford?' Stella could tell Lydia hadn't a clue who the artist was, and hitherto hadn't been remotely interested.

'Beckinsford,' Lydia said, in what she thought was a cleverly non-committal way. 'It's a portrait of the Prince Regent.'

Stella dared to take one hand from the banister. 'It's just Beckinsford was taught by Reynolds – and Reynolds painted a similar portrait of the Prince Regent.'

Lydia brushed the air. 'Longbridge is full of portraits. Fortescues, royalty, Fortescues with royalty, with swords, guns, with horses, dogs – it's who we are.'

Stella worked hard to keep her tone conversational, but she was excited. 'I think this painting would have been given to Lord Frederick Makepeace William Fortescue, the first Earl of Barbary – but as a rather barbed gift. It's a slur – an elegantly concealed two fingers – from the Prince Regent. He did it to others. A very nicely painted insult,

quite literally shoving his horse's great big bum in the face of Lord Fortescue. But no doubt the Earl knew that and turned the joke on its head by graciously accepting it and hanging it right here, pride of place.'

Lydia was looking at the painting again, her eyes travelling over it in little bursts. She turned to Stella and nodded.

'So one oughtn't to look a gift horse in the mouth – but up the arse?'

'Something like that,' Stella smiled at the painting. 'You might want to have it valued. Do you know of any fracas between the Prince and the Earl?'

'There is some salacious family rumour about the Earl and one of the Prince's mistresses and the billiards table right here at Longbridge.' Lydia's tone suggested it was all beyond ridiculous. 'I'll be sure to call Christie's,' she said. 'They can come and sift through all the historic backsides at Longbridge – human and equine – whether hidden in the library or hanging, bold as brass, right here.'

She sounded sharp and Stella felt deflated. Best leave all art in the past – her own as well as the Fortescues'. Leave it behind. Move on. Here to sell the house, remember. Then a notion sent a shot of adrenalin which almost winded her.

'How many bedrooms?' Stella asked, taking a sweeping glance at a queue of closed doors and that was just in this semicircular landing of the house.

'Five.'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry?'

'Only five bedrooms? Here? At Longbridge?'

'What are you talking about? Twelve bedrooms including the three in the Victorian wing,' Lady Lydia said.

'Pardon me, I thought you said five and I thought to myself surely not—'

‘You are pedantic – it’s tiresome,’ she barked. ‘These days, *five* of the rooms have *beds* in them – so the other rooms are *not* bedrooms, are they?’

Stella was tempted not to bite her tongue, she was tempted to say, well, if I’m pedantic, you’re downright rude. ‘Logical,’ she said instead. ‘It’s the estate agent in me – we’re trained to call even a store cupboard a bedroom if the headroom is sufficient and it is physically possible for someone to stand and also sleep in it.’

‘The more bedrooms, the higher the price?’

‘Square footage is the priority,’ Stella said, ‘and you certainly have that at Longbridge Hall – never mind the quota of bed frames.’

‘Well,’ said Lydia, ‘you’d better see if the servants’ rooms right at the top count too.’

‘How many bathrooms?’

‘Three.’

‘I don’t mean with baths – I mean, rooms in which there is the relevant plumbing.’

‘Three,’ Lydia said loudly, giving the ‘r’ a good roll around her tongue, as if Stella had reverted to dim and deaf again. ‘Mind you, there was only one until after the War.’

Oh dear, Stella thought. Three bathrooms? That’s *it*?

‘Chop chop,’ said Lydia, leading on; opening door after door and giving Stella just enough time to walk to the windows and back. ‘Do keep up.’

‘I love this,’ said Stella, fingering the embossed brass plate above the three taps. ‘Hot. Cold. Soft.’

‘For rainwater,’ said Lydia. She ran the tap and placed her hand under the water. She kept it there, as if the feel of it hastened a memory just coming back into focus and one that she wanted to revisit. ‘All the children had their hair washed in this sink – rinsed again and again with the water from “Soft”.’

Corridors that started poker straight and then suddenly veered off at angles with stairs to trip and confuse. Room after room after room. With clever wording in the particulars and positioning of furniture for the photos, Stella reckoned she could list twelve bedrooms at least. The three bathrooms were a worry though, not least because the most modern of them all, the only en-suite, was a homage to 1970s design with a corner bath, bidet, basin and toilet in a dull avocado shade.

It surprised her to find they were back on the ground floor. She'd quite lost her bearings.

'I'm tired now so you must go,' Lady Lydia announced, still walking ahead and not turning to look at Stella. 'You will come back again tomorrow. To see the grounds. To see Art. Eleven a.m. Prompt, please. Mrs Biggins, show Miss Hutton out please. Goodbye.'

And with that, Lydia went.

'Coat,' said Mrs Biggins, bundling it into Stella's arms. 'Ta-ta, duck.' And she chortled a little as if, perhaps, this was a scenario that had been re-enacted many times over the years.

The rain had stopped, everything glistened and shone but Stella shivered and put her coat on, hugging it tightly around herself as she walked across the driveway to her car. Inside, she put the heat on high and realized how that old house had quite chilled her to the bone. She thought again of Tess Durbeyfield, how Tess had wondered about Mrs d'Urberville.

'If there is such a lady, it would be enough for us if she were friendly . . .'



Xander

Xander was halfway through a second lap around what he termed the Killer Loop which circumnavigated Long Dansbury and skirted Little Dunwick in seven and a half arduous hilly miles. He didn't usually take much notice of specifics when he was running, especially not if he was going against the clock; instead he'd tick off a mental checklist of landmarks. Today, though, from the hill high above Longbridge Hall, a glint coming off a mirror-like slab caught his eye. It was the sunroof of a Mini, parked in the driveway. As he ran on, he glanced again at the vehicle and, as he dropped downhill a little, the company's branding emblazoned along the side came into view.

Elmfield Estates.

What the—!

It couldn't be! Bang outside Longbridge Hall? Where was Lydia? Did she know? Thank goodness he'd decided to work from home today. He ran fast – too fast for the gradient, really, and for this stage in his run, with twelve miles done at a pace and three left to go. But he felt strangely compelled to get there at all odds, as if expecting the whole estate to have been sold and new owners unpacking by the time he arrived.

Xander knew every gap in every hedge, every low part of every wall because, over the years, it appeared he was the only one who knew they were there as they'd never been fixed or filled. Down into the estate he sprinted. He ran; across a meadow, through the kitchen garden, along the drive and up to the front door. He rang and knocked but even through the great slabs of mahogany, he sensed the house was empty. Anyway, it wasn't really Lydia he

needed – because he couldn't believe that this could possibly be within her control, imagining instead an idea foisted upon her and now taking hold, like an infection, with a momentum of its own. No, Lydia wouldn't be the perpetrator.

There! In the garden! Noseying near the statue of Lord Frederick Makepeace William Fortescue, the first Earl of Barbary. Some woman, walking around in a tailored suit and heels, looking frankly ridiculous – both out of place and unwelcome. Xander tempered his pace and approached.

Stella heard panting, sensed the rhythmic beat across earth of someone approaching fast. She looked over and recognized at once the jogger who'd sent her flying on her very first visit to the village. And as he approached, Xander recalled the woman taking up the entire pavement that day, flapping around with her papers flying, getting in his way and messing up his timing. They stared at each other, Xander feeling as if he was running on the spot for the last few yards, Stella feeling as if she'd be sent flying at any moment. He was right there. Stopped.

'What!' she said defensively, because his displeasure was worn as an emphatic frown.

'Who the hell *are* you?' Hands on his hips, his damp hair plastered to his skull resembling a Roman emperor, his forearms all a-glisten, his chest rising and falling fast.

'I'm Stella Hutton, actually,' she said officiously. 'Elmfield Estates.' She didn't offer her hand because she had no desire to take his.

'But what are you doing *here*?' And he fixed her with his blue-grey eyes which appeared to darken the longer they kept her caught. 'Why are you snooping around?'

'Firstly, I am *not* snooping around.' Stella was indignant. 'Secondly, I've been invited, thank you very much. And

thirdly, what business is it of yours?’ She glanced over to the house, as if willing Mrs Biggins to come out brandishing a rolling pin or, better still, Lady Lydia to appear with her spear-sharp tongue.

‘Actually, it is very much my business,’ the man said. ‘Leave the Fortescues alone. They’ve been here for generations and the last thing they need is you filling their heads with notions of millions. And the last thing Long Dansbury needs is a bloody property developer carving up the history of the place and disrupting the dynamic.’ He looked thoroughly triumphant. ‘Do you *know* how many lives – entire families – this estate provides for?’ He’d stopped panting. His arms were crossed but still his eyes wouldn’t release her.

‘Who are *you*?’ Stella asked, regarding him as if he might be the village lunatic. She backed up a step, feeling bolstered to be standing side by side with Lord Fortescue, the very first Earl of Barbary, even if he was bronze and looking the other way.

‘I grew up here.’

‘You’re a *Fortescue*?’

‘Er – no.’ And he was helpless not to laugh a little. ‘No.’

Stella bristled. She didn’t like being shouted at and she didn’t like being laughed at. ‘Then I’ll thank you to leave me to my work.’

‘But what *are* you doing?’ He scratched his head, causing his hair to stand up in jaunty spikes.

‘I am here at Lady Lydia’s invitation and you’re in my way. You’re holding me up.’

‘But why?’

‘Because I have work to do!’ she chided.

‘I mean – why are you *here*? I’ve heard the rumours, you know.’

‘Well, you’ll have to discuss it with Lady Barbary,’ said Stella before thinking, No! That’s not her name.

Xander snorted and Stella reddened, feeling as if he now thought her more of a silly impostor than a threat. She cast her eyes down at her shoes. Stupid high heels. Muddied.

‘Just don’t bully her,’ he said. ‘She’s not as steely as she likes people to think.’ It was almost impossible for Stella to ally this to the Lydia she had met twice in the last twenty-four hours.

‘Look, I need to work,’ Stella muttered, ‘and if you have some sentimental attachment to the place, then I’m sorry.’

Xander stared at her hard and then he backed away a few steps, still shrugging, before turning and running off whence he came. She didn’t know why she watched after him nor why she sensed he’d turn again. But he did; timing it perfectly at the precise place just before the land climbed and the path curved and Lord Fortescue’s part of the garden would disappear from his view. And then he raised his hand; this weird, stropky bloke. He raised his hand and Stella wasn’t sure why, whether it was a wave or a halt sign. Either way, it threw her and she found herself raising hers back even though it conflicted with her better judgement. For goodness’ sake, woman! She gave herself a shake and turned to the bronze statue of Lord Fortescue, or Lord Frederick as she now thought of him, then stood on tiptoes until she felt she was looking right at him.

‘Good God, sir,’ she said, ‘this place is full of the most peculiar people.’

And she looked at his face and thought of him shagging the Prince Regent’s mistress and building this fine house and securing this wonderful land and planting these beautiful gardens and squirrelling away his secret porn collection and staring at that horse’s enormous backside every time he went up and down the stairs.

‘Actually, sir, I hope a property developer doesn’t buy it.’

‘Longbridge without a Fortescue?’ he seemed to exclaim. ‘How preposterous!’

And then Stella giggled a little. In a bizarre and surreal way, all of this was ever so slightly wonderful. What on earth was she doing here, conversing with a bronze statue? Having a stand-up row with a strange man dripping with sweat? Wearing high heels and a borrowed suit, when she was slowly sinking into the soft lawn and she really wasn’t warm enough. She hadn’t done the final figures – how could she, she hadn’t known until an hour ago about a whole other house in a whole other garden – but she could already estimate Longbridge Hall to be worth well over ten million pounds. Was she really being chosen to handle it all? She wasn’t a property guru. She was a single mum, a divorcee, an erstwhile art historian currently masquerading as an estate agent because she desperately needed to claw back money and stability into her life and fast. But could an eye-watering commission really be coming her way? The difference it would make to her life. The difference the sale of this place would make to so many lives. But that simply had to be no concern of hers. She had to look after herself. And answer to her client.

‘Where’s the Barbary money gone? Why does Lady Lydia need to sell?’ she asked Lord Frederick.

‘Buggered if I know, m’dear,’ he replied. ‘You need to ask her yourself.’