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Rumours

Written by Freya North

Published by Harper

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Freya North

rumours

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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2012
1

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2012

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 732670 9

Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Daddy

. . . to misquote Bobby – thank you for holding
steady my ladder to the stars, for teaching me how
to be righteous and true, for helping me to stand
upright, to feel strong and to be courageous.
Thanks to you, my heart's joyful –
and it's your song I'll always sing.

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 curtsey. '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!’

Chapter One

Stella knew there was a private car park at Elmfield Estates, and that a space would have been reserved for her little Fiat, but she pulled into a side street some way off and stopped the car. Adrenalin ate away at her, like lemon juice on teeth enamel; the same fresh but sour sensation, excitement and dread churning into an audible curdle in her stomach. She needed to compose herself and turned the ignition back on so she could have the radio on low, providing a comforting soft din to an otherwise loaded silence broken only by the rumble of her stomach. She hadn't eaten a thing at breakfast – usually her favourite meal of the day. This was so much more than first-day nerves. This job could be life changing. She'd done the figures and, with potential commission, they'd all added up. She checked her reflection – an early-morning hair wash and a brand-new mascara certainly made her look fresher than she felt, she thought to herself, as if judging the face of someone else. She knew she looked younger than she was, but no one else would know that she appeared brighter than she felt. If she could fool herself, hopefully she'd fool the office of new colleagues awaiting

her arrival just around the corner. She ought to waltz on in and simply say, hullo! Stella Hutton! Reporting for duty! How lovely to meet you all! Right, where do I begin! After all, if ever there was a new beginning, a golden opportunity, a lifeline, then taking on this job was it.

The first day of March, the first day of the week; the sky startlingly naked of clouds; the sun a slightly harsh white light and rather unnerving, like bare legs revealed for the first time after hibernating behind opaque tights all winter. Stella thought it must be a good omen – sunshine to signify the change from one month to another, not least because February had been alternately drenched and then frozen. A positive nod from the universe, perhaps, to say, it's a fresh start, Stella. Here's some brightness and warmth to prove it. Winter's receding, put spring in your step. Especially today. Of all days, *especially* today.

She shifted in her seat, flipped the sun visor back up, switched the radio off and the engine on, crunching the car into gear. My back aches, she thought. And then she wondered what on earth was being said behind it by the office personnel a few streets away.

I'd certainly have something to say about it, Stella thought, if I'd been told a person like me was starting today.

'Apparently, she has *very* little experience.'

'How can you go from being an art teacher to an estate agent?'

'Chalk and cheese, if you ask me.'

'No no – I don't think she was an art teacher – I heard she owned a gallery and it went bust.'

'How do you go from paintings to property?'

'Well, it's all sales, isn't it.'

'She did work experience here – during the summers when she was at college.'

'Well – obviously that's how she got this job. Her father is brother to Hutton Senior – apparently they don't speak. Black sheep. Apparently she's estranged from her father but really close with *our* Huttons.'

'Dear God, You Three – you've never met the woman!' Geoff looked up at Belinda, Gill and Steve, to whom he always referred as You Three. Every day that triumvirate of three interchangeable voices gossiped the air into an oppressive cloy around him. Mostly, he was able to filter it out, like dust in his peripheral vision. But not today. Today the talk wasn't about Z-list celebrities or people he didn't know, it concerned someone about to walk in through the office door any moment. New blood in the company. It made him more nervous than curious. There'd always been only four agents working here in the Hertford branch of Elmfield Estates, excluding the chairman Douglas Hutton Senior who came into the office infrequently, and Douglas Hutton Junior his son and managing director whose door was mostly closed though he heard everything. With this new person it meant five. And as he was the eldest and his sales were down, he wondered if it was true that she was being brought in to edge him out. New blood. New bloody person.

Belinda, Gill and Steve's eyes were glued to the door, not so much a welcoming committee, but a panel of judges. This was the most exciting thing to happen at work since Douglas Hutton Junior sold Ribstock Place for over the asking price last spring. A year, therefore, of dullness and drudgery, with little selling, little coming on, prices falling and commission being squeezed lower than ever. How could Elmfield Estates afford to take on an extra staff

member? What was she on, salary-wise? Commission only, Belinda reckoned. What of her bonus structure? They'd had a meeting at the beginning of the year to change from pooled to individual bonuses.

She'd better bloody well be given only the one-bedders then, this new girl, said Gill. Steve thought to himself he should have taken that position at arch rivals John Denby & Co. when it was offered to him last Christmas. But it would have only been a sideways move. He was on the up, he could feel it in his bones, he could sense it every morning when he tied his tie, when he'd decided to upgrade from polyester to silk. This Hutton niece – nothing but a blip, little more than something new to talk about. Not worth stressing over.

When she arrived, none of them thought that Stella was Stella. She looked nothing like Messrs Hutton, Senior or Junior. She had small features, a gentle waft of chestnut hair and a willing if shy smile, compared to the expressionless hard edges, the bristles which stuck both to the heads and faces of her relations, like coir matting. She was older than they'd expected – perhaps mid-thirties – but nevertheless, still younger than Belinda, Gill or Geoff were happy about. A pleasant surprise for Steve, though. Quite attractive.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm Stella – Hutton.'

She was stared at.

'I'm the new girl.'

Belinda didn't take her eyes off her when she lifted the phone handset, tapped in four numbers and said, pointedly, 'Your *niece* is here to see you.'

Oh God, please don't let Uncle Dougie kiss me.

Douglas Hutton had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

'Welcome, Stella,' he said with a gravity that was appropriate for any new agent starting with the company. 'This is the team – Belinda, Gill, Geoff, Steve. This is your desk. You'll be with Gill this morning – she has three viewings. Geoff will come with you this afternoon. There's a one-bedder on Bullocks Lane.'

He went to the whiteboard and added Stella's name to the horizontal and vertical bands of the chart. A glance told her all she needed to know about the team. Steve storming ahead, Geoff lagging behind. Belinda and Gill side by side, neck and neck, tête-à-tête – thick as thieves, apparently.

'I like your bag,' Stella said to Gill as they headed out to one of two dinky Minis branded with the agency logo. Gill looked at her, unconvinced. Stella was about to hone in on the woman's shoes for added praise but she stopped herself. Crazy – it's like being at school again – agonizing trepidation concerning The Older Girls. She decided not to talk, just to nod and smile a lot at the vendor, at the client, at Gill. The effort, combined with first-day nerves, was exhausting and she was glad of the silence on the drive back to the office at lunch-time.

'I like your hairstyle,' said Gill just before she opened the car door. But the compliment was tempered by a touch of resentment. 'Wish mine had a curl to it.' And then she walked on ahead of Stella, as if to say, that's as much as I can be nice to you for the time being. And don't tell the others.

Stella warmed to Geoff, with whom she was coupled after lunch, even though initially he was as uncommunicative as Gill had been. His silence bore no hostility, instead an air of resignation seeped out of him like a slow puncture.

He looked deflated. He didn't seem to fit his sharp suit; Stella imagined that faded cords and a soft old shirt with elbow patches were his weekend wear. The Mini stalled, seemingly disappointed to have Geoff behind the wheel. She glanced at him as he waited patiently at the lights, as if he never expected to come across anything other than a red light and that now, after years of life being like this, the predictability was acceptable rather than infuriating. She detected a shyness from him towards her that mirrored how she'd felt that morning, sitting by Gill.

'Was art your thing?' he asked, tackling the main roundabout cautiously.

'Sorry?'

'That's what I heard – that art was your thing.'

'Oh. Yes. Yes, it was – I studied fine art. And then I had a little – place.'

'A gallery?'

'That makes it sound so grand. But yes – in as much as there was art on the walls and people came in to see it.'

'And to buy?'

'Not often enough.'

'It went bust,' said Geoff.

'Sorry?'

'That's what we – what I was told.'

'I had to close it, yes. I chose to change career.'

'And that's why you're here?'

'Yes.'

'You couldn't sell art but you think you might be able to sell houses?' He hadn't meant it to sound rude. He just couldn't fathom how someone who wanted a career in art could metamorphose into someone wanting to work as an estate agent. 'There's an art to selling houses,' he said, helpfully, 'or so we like to lead our clients to believe.'

'In these crap times – financially speaking – I suppose people don't want to spend money on art. As much as I like to believe that people need art in their lives, there's no point splashing out on a painting if you haven't four walls around you and a roof over your head.'

He looked a little nonplussed and Stella cringed at what she'd said – it sounded like a dictum she might churn out in a job interview.

'Anyway,' she said, 'that was almost two years ago. I love art – but I also really like houses. And I know you probably all think it's family favouritism – but I did two years at the St Albans branch of Tremberton & Co. It's just I moved from Watford to Hertford last autumn.'

Geoff looked at her quizzically, as if her move from one side of Hertfordshire to the other and the revelation that the gallery hadn't gone bust yesterday and nepotism played little part in her change of career, moved her up in his estimation.

'I have a John Piper etching,' he told her with an almost-smile.

They had just pulled up outside the Victorian conversion, where the one-bedder was on the second floor.

'A *Piper*?'

But Geoff pressed the doorbell before Stella could coax a reply.

Forty minutes later, Geoff really couldn't fault her – they had a new vendor on their books, her valuation had been spot on. The client had liked her and Geoff had liked Stella's manner – chatty, enthusiastic, supportive. He sensed if she took a potential purchaser around, they'd be lining up a second viewing just as soon as they'd seen the place. He had to concede that she'd probably sell a place like this faster than he could.

'Nicely done,' he said when they headed back to the car.

'Thank you.'

'We'd heard all sorts of things about you,' he said, as if disbelieving that reality could be so very different. She looked aghast. 'I doubt whether there was much truth in any of them,' he told her. 'Ignore them – Those Three, back in the office – they're harmless.' He paused. 'Relatively.'

The trouble with rumours, thought Stella, is that once the seed is planted, roots spread and the whole thing rampages like ground elder. As fast as you pull it up, renegade shoots are already off on tangents.

But then she thought, it's impossible for something to grow from nothing. However tiny, there's always a seed of truth that starts it all off.

A bit like Love really.

Chapter Two

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.