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Opening Extract from...

Guerrillas in our Midst

Written by Claire Peate

Published by Honno Modern Fiction

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Prelims for GUERRILLAS IN OUR MIDST by Claire Peate

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Guerrillas in our Midst

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Also by Claire Peate and available from Honno
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Big Cats and Kitten Heels
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Guerrillas in our Midst
by
Claire Peate

Honno Modern Fiction

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For EJP and MJP. When you're older…

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With thanks to David, as always. Also a big thank you to Elizabeth McWilliams for the detailed stuff: sorry I called you Barry Manilow's daughter at school that was very wrong. Thanks to Bo and Alison who helped me with book-polishing. Thanks also to Hugh and Jane – supporters extraordinaire. And, lastly, thank you to my editor, Caroline Oakley, who gets inside my head and tells me what I'm thinking. Spooky.

Edda Mackenzie
189 Geoffrey Road
Brockley
LONDON
SE4 1NT

13th May

Dear Ms Mackenzie

Thank you for your letters regarding the abandoned skip. We appreciate that you are *not one to complain* (letter number two) and *are being driven to breaking point by the unsightliness of it* (letter four), but I regret to inform you that the Council will be unable to move the said waste receptacle on health and safety grounds: we suggest that you continue in your endeavours to contact Invinci-Skips who are legally obliged to remove their own property.

I sincerely wish you the best of luck for your *forthcoming papal visit* (letter seven) and feel confident that despite your concerns his Eminence will be in no way offended by the unsightly waste receptacle, during his luncheon at your house, should it not be removed in time.

Best wishes

Adrian Jag
Senior Assistant Sub Manager
Waste and Recycling, Lewisham Council
LEWISHAM COUNCIL: TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

failure notice

From: "MAILER-DAEMON@n21.bullet.mail.ukl.com" <MAILER-DAEMON@n21.bullet.mail.ukl.com>

Add
To: Eddamackenzie@yahoo.co.uk

Sorry, we were unable to deliver your message to the following address.

ENQUIRIES@INVINCI-SKIPS.CO.UK

No MX or A records for htmali.cmo

--- Below this line is a copy of the message.

Received: from [217.146.182.177] by n21.bullet.mail.ukl.com with NNFMP; 14May 19:18:45 -0000
Content-Type: multipart/alternative; boundary="0-1083190294-1269458324=:33052"

<html><head><style type=3D”Text/css"><!-- DIV {margin:0px;} --></style></he=ad><body><div style=3D

//returned content //

Subject: DUMPED SKIP

Dear Sir/ Madam

After repeated attempts to telephone you (is your phone cut off?) and writing to you I hope email will get through. One of your skips has been dumped on vacant land in front of my house and has not been collected for FIVE MONTHS. It is now overflowing with household waste, including a filthy mattress that smells of dead dogs. I imagine. Please can you move it immediately otherwise I will have to take legal action.

Yours sincerely

Edda Mackenzie
189 Geoffrey Road, Brockley, SE4 1NT

ONE

"Where's the Goddamn trowel, Edda, I need it right now!" Beth called from inside the skip.

"Shhh!" I was on the pavement below and looked up from my cork-wrangling. "I haven't got the trowel," I hissed as loudly as I dared. "You were going to bring it." I turned back to the bottle of Cava. Why I'd bought Cava I don't know: the deafening POP! was going to wake the neighbourhood and blow our cover. We should have brought something silent like a box of wine – although how much we would actually have achieved if we'd brought an entire box of wine with us was another matter. I also should have brought night-vision goggles: who would have thought it would be so dark? Only every other street light was working.

"*Edda we talked about this!"* A stern-voiced Beth peered over the top of the skip. "I mean, for God's sake Eds, the plan was that *you* would bring the trowels and *I* would bring – the – oh pants – no no, it was me bringing trowels wasn't it? Oh, hon', I'm sorry!" She sank back into the skip again, out of view. "I don't know what's got into me lately," her voice wobbled into the night, "I'm all over the place! I'd swear I'm going completely mad. I am! I'm going mad…"

Shpfut-thhhhhhhh. The cork greasily slid out of the Cava bottle. It was obvious from the wet noise that the drink inside the bottle was not destined for greatness.

But who cared about greatness? It was Cava – probably – and it was needed. I clambered up onto a rickety dumped chair I'd found inside the skip and got into the skip itself beside my best friend. "It's fine that we don't have trowels," I said, sniffing the neck of the bottle. "We can trowel with our hands. I bunged two spades in the shopping trolley, so we'll be OK for the big stuff. Here – try this!" I drank from the bottle and passed it to her.

And nearly threw up. "Urgh!"

"Bloody hell, Eds," Beth angled the label to the faint orange street light to read what she'd just imbibed. "It's like … it's like … *white wine vinegar*. Carbonated." She gamely took another swig and passed it back. "Dear God! But hey it's probably really good for my teeth though. How are they – are they Hollywood white now?"

"I can't see, Beth. It's dark."

"So it is." She laughed, took another mouthful, gasped, and passed the bottle back to me.

"Shall we have a fag before we start?" I said, hunting in my pockets. Anything to delay the start of the actual manual labour.

Beside us were two shopping trolleys, merely borrowed – and in no way stolen – from the local Sainsbury's in New Cross Gate. They were filled to the brim with bags of topsoil, shrubs and flowers. Mr Iqbal from the corner shop had lent us vast empty water bottles refilled with tap water – *For a party is it girls? I don't know – you two girls are forever on the town. You need to get yourselves good husbands and you know my two sons are very successful in the City. Did I tell you about my Ali who is forty and a very good looking boy…*

The water bottles were much too heavy to lift so to transport the water from the bottles in the trolleys to the garden we had the tiny watering can that I'd had as a child. Beth had scoffed when she saw it, but I loved my watering can. Around the body of the can was a picture of Zippy and Bungle holding an enormous marrow which, at even an early age, had struck me as inappropriate: something to do with the look in Zippy's eyes.

It had been 1am on Saturday morning when we had finally sneaked out of my house after many fortifying bottles of beer. We'd each pushed a squeaky trolley the few metres across the road to the *offending waste receptacle*, which for all the complaining in the world had proved immovable. An hour of settling, stamping and pushing later and the dumped waste only came

three-quarters of the way up the abandoned skip leaving us the top to cover in soil and plant up. My plan was coming together.

Beth knocked back the Cava. "Let's save the fags for when we've put the soil in… This skip stinks! Do you think there really is a dead dog or something in the bottom?"

"*Get down!"* I hissed, and as one we ducked.

"What is it?" came a tiny voice beside me.

"It's Babs. I think I see her watching from her bedroom window," I whispered.

"Babs? Babs from next door? God I hate that old crone!"

"Don't be so rude. I like Babs."

In the dark I could just make out that Beth had turned in my direction and was staring incredulous at me. "Seriously Eds, you don't really like her do you? She's just a miserable old rumourmonger. Here," she reached over the side of the skip to the trolley and passed me an enormous sombrero, which I donned while she put on her own. Our disguise was now complete. No-one, not even my neighbour Babs with her beady eyes, would know who was gardening the skip. Unless of course Babs had noticed the shopping trollies in my front garden which for the last week had been piled with bags of topsoil …

It was my job to heft the bags of topsoil from the trolleys up to the skip and it was Beth's job – on account of feeling under the weather – to open them and distribute the soil over the dumped waste. A quarter of an hour of hefting and carbonated-white-wine-vinegaring and we were done: the aroma of dead-dog was sealed off for good. A mini garden was being born. I clambered up onto the cool earth and together we enjoyed our Marlboro Lights – no easy task when sporting a one metre sombrero – and the rest of the Cava, leaning back against the rusty metal of the skip.

"You know this is such a cool idea of yours honey – it's going to look *ace!*" Beth gave me a one-armed hug and we clashed hat brims. "And I just can't believe that *you* actually came up with it! Of all the people!" She laughed, quietly, and tipped back the Cava bottle.

"Ha!" I said. And then added, "Me of all people? You're surprised?"

"Well a bit. Do you want any more of this by the way?"

I took the bottle from her. "Surprised by what?" I asked, as lightly as I could.

"What? Oh. Well. I suppose it's just that you're usually so … I don't know … you're usually quite reserved?"

"*Reserved?*"

"OK, *quiet* then." Beth contemplated her cigarette. "I mean, illegally planting up a skip in the dead of night seems a bit extreme. For you. That's all. Cracking idea, though, my love. Brilliant."

"I can be extreme," I said, in a small voice. "You know I can." After spending half our life together Beth must surely have up her sleeve one or two examples of when I'd been extreme.

Beth lifted up her sombrero and looked me in the eye. "Darling you've never been extreme in all your life. Not ever. And that's no bad thing." She managed to find me in the dark and plant a hat-dislodging kiss on my forehead. "I guess you just snapped when no-one listened to your complaints. Did you call the newspapers by the way? They're usually pretty good for stories like this and once the papers get hold of it then the Council will have to do something."

"They weren't interested. Unless there was a body in the skip and then they said they'd send someone round."

"What about the dog?"

"I think they meant a human body. Anyway there might not actually be a dead dog beneath us: it just smells like there's one there."

"I hope there isn't. It'd be kind of freaky if we were sitting above a dead dog. Now pass the bottle over and— It's empty! Edda you've finished it all!"

"I think you had more than half actually," I said.

"I think not! You've pigged the Goddamn lot! How am I supposed to carry on with this illicit manual labour without any more Cava? Since you finished it you should go and get some more."

"Beth! You could go too – you had just as much as I had. If not more."

"Yes but that's *your* house, right there. That is *your* living room window. I can see *your* cat sleeping on *your* bedroom windowsill."

"You boss me about too much." I said but nevertheless stood up and made to exit the skip. Not such an easy thing to do in the dark with a sombrero and after drinking half – well, maybe three-quarters of a bottle of Cava.

"I do not boss you around too much," Beth waved my comment away. "You love me telling you what's what. If you didn't have me to boss you around you'd be— "

"I'd still be up in a skip with a trowel, but on my own. And I'd have had a bottle of Cava all to myself."

"Shut up, woman, and do as I say and get more supplies!" and she threw a handful of topsoil at me.

*

Extract from *The Lewisham Advertister*

SKIP SKIP HOORAY!
FROM ABANDONED SKIP TO CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW CONTENDER

Something beautiful is happening in Brockley. On Saturday night, an abandoned skip was transformed into a miniature Garden of Eden fit for the Chelsea Flower Show itself. The skip, situated in the conservation area of up-and-coming Brockley, had been left there when local firm Invinci-Skips went into receivership. It had become a dumping ground for the community but one enterprising individual – or individuals – has turned it into something quite remarkable, as our picture attests. Painted in Farrow and Ball's Saxon Green, the skip features trailing variegated ivies, scented rosemary bushes and striking scarlet geraniums that brighten the street.

"Brockley is on the rise," says Eustace Fox, proprietor of Fox Estates of Brockley. "Once the suburb of choice for the wealthy Victorian industrialist, Brockley is being reclaimed by wealthy urban families appreciative of its beautiful early Victorian houses, large gardens and proximity to Central London. We're just 7 minutes away from London Bridge. I'm not surprised people are taking responsibility for their area, there's a lot of love for the neighbourhood and the new Brockleyites are a force to be reckoned with."

So, for now Brockleyites are enjoying their new garden. But can a leopard really change its spots? Is Brockley ready for gentrification and a move towards becoming the new Greenwich? Perhaps not just yet: already the vandals have paid a visit to the skip and left their mark. "It's such a shame," Eustace Fox had to concede, "that disgraceful youths have thrown several empty Cava bottles and fag ends into the new skip garden. Some people have no respect."

TWO

Something really odd was happening. Since the skip escapade, I'd hardly seen Beth at all. In fact, I *hadn't* seen her at all: all I'd had was a couple of text messages about the cheapness of the Cava, the cheapness of me for having bought it, and having sore muscles after the digging. Apart from that: silence. I'd left messages and had even wandered down the road to her flat, earlier in the week, to see how she was doing but both she and Jack had been out. Or hiding.

It was strange: horrible and strange, because I usually saw her or spoke to her if not every day then every other day. But it had been nearly a week and I was getting concerned. And lonely: the weekend was looming and it was going to be a long and barren one after the text on Friday night:

sorry hon feeling dreadful. resched Saturday? B x

I'd texted back but there had been no more replies. Just what was going on with Beth?

So, on Saturday morning, with no raging hangover to battle and no partying to look forward to I ran out of excuses to put off doing something I should have done a year ago or more. I decided to Clean My House. Since Beth had moved out two years ago, the place had begun to resemble the set of a gothic horror film: cobwebs, dust and dusty cobwebs – it was all there. And it did bother me and I did fully intend to clean, but there was always that nagging argument *well who else will see it but me, why bother?* That morning, however, buoyed up by my new-found activism post skip-gardening and with my enforced Bethlessness I'd got as far as finding the Dyson. And then the phone rang.

"Oh!" said the person on the other end of the phone:, at least I thought it was a person. "Eh! Eh! Eep eep eep eep eep eep eep eep eep eep eep …" I held the phone away from my ear. Who on earth was calling me – a mouse? I put it back to my ear. "Eep eep eep eep eep eep!"

My cat, Finley, could clearly hear the caller and was looking particularly interested. Most mice restricted themselves to the garden but I could tell that he was thinking that one bold enough to phone up was surely going to be fantastic sport.

"Hello?" I said when there was a break in the squeaking. "Who is this? Is this a sales call?"

There was a pause and then I heard a wobbly intake of breath, "Edda …!"

"Beth? Beth, is it you?" My chest tightened.

There was heavy sobbing followed by more squeaking.

"Beth, are you OK? Is everything OK? Are you in your flat? Shall I come round?" I felt sick to my core. Was she ill, was she *dying*? Had something awful happened to her boyfriend, Jack?

"Oh! Eds! Oh!"

"What's wrong?" I was almost crying myself, gripping the phone.

"Oh, Edda," Beth had a moment of squeakless clarity, "it's *awful*!"

"You're at your flat aren't you? I'm on my way! Stay there! Don't die! OK? *Don't die Beth!*"

I have never sprinted as fast as I did between my house and Beth and Jack's flat as I did just then. And in those three minutes scenes of horrific images filled my head: Beth with a kitchen knife plunged between her bloodied ribs, Beth on her bathroom floor with a bottle of pills spilling from her cold grey hand, Beth cradling an unconscious Jack in her arms at the bottom of her staircase…

I pummelled her front door and, thank God, she opened it. Clutching the door frame and panting like a sex fiend, I quickly scanned her for misplaced knives and mangled limbs. All looked in order.

She threw herself into my arms and wailed, "Oh, Edda, I am so bad! So bad!"

"Why? Why are you so bad?" I stroked her hair. "You're not bad, Beth!"

"No I am bad! I'm a really bad person."

"No honey you're not!" I held her close.

"I am! I'm so bad because I'm going to have a BABY Edda! I'm bloody well PREGNANT and I was DRUNK and I SMOKED and I was DRUNK…"

I held her to me, stroking her hair and saying nothing because my throat was tight and my heart was pounding and my eyes were prickling with tears. In a single second my whole world had just fallen apart.

Bethan was going to be a mum.

And there was no-one to stroke my hair and hold me.

"Oh Edda!" An exhausted cried-out Beth stared at me across the kitchen table with swollen red eyes.

I held her hands. "It will be OK you know…"

"No it won't!" She wailed.

"Well, how were you to know—"

"What kind of a mother am I going to be if I get pissed out of my head on cheap Cava and smoke a pack of fags a night?"

"They were *Lights* you know."

"Edda, for God's sake, this is serious!" she dropped my hands and started wailing again.

Fine. Fine then. There was no arguing with her. Beth – as always – was the boss.

After an hour of hand holding, hair stroking, hugging and generally hushing, Beth still hadn't progressed from the crying. Jack had hovered nervously in the background: I'd only noticed him after fifteen minutes; he was pacing the kitchen looking worried, an unlit fag in his mouth. He'd left soon after I'd noticed him; escaping to Surrey to tell his parents the good news and leaving me to sort out his pregnant girlfriend.

"Women do this, don't they Edda?" He'd whispered at me, wide-eyed, ramming on his shoes in the hallway while Beth, still wailing, had disappeared into the kitchen to get more kitchen towel. "They get all hormonal, don't they, when they're up the duff. That's right isn't it Edda? This is normal yeah?"

"Oh yes," I said, wondering why just being a woman gave him the impression that I had insight into this kind of stuff. "Beth is acting completely normally and rationally for a pregnant woman."

Back with Beth, there was a glint of hope as she surfaced from her wailing and took a sip of water. "I could have caused my little baby permanent harm though, couldn't I? That Cava was so bloody awful and I had so much of it! Do you think I've mutated my baby?"

"I'm—"

"Oh I would never have got so hammered on cheap alcohol and smoked if I'd have known!" she wailed. "When I think of the harm that I—"

"IT. IS. FINE," I shouted at her.

And for the first time that morning she stopped giving it the full Lady Macbeth and looked up at me.

I never shouted. Beth shouted. But I never did.

"Look, Beth," I filled the uncomfortable post-shout silence. "I don't know much about babies, but right now I imagine that your baby is probably no more than some dividing cells. You will have just mellowed out the cell division: eight cells probably didn't become sixteen

cells quite as quickly as they might have done. That's all. You haven't given it a weird nose or anything…"

"*Given it a weird nose?"*

Damn. The second I'd said the bit about the weird nose Beth started up again, wailing about foetal alcohol syndrome and sobbing the word *mutation* over and over, so I sat in silence with my head resting on my hands and contemplated the lonely road ahead.

THREE

The day after finding out about The Baby, and still in shock, I was on my way into work when I found myself standing beside a street light on Wickham Road, open mouthed and agog. More strange stuff. *What was going on with my world?* Wrapped around the base of the street light beside me, winding upwards, was a giant yellow and purple *knitted snake*. And there wasn't just one of the things, there were lots of them, twirled around all the street lights that ran along the length of the road, their heads drooping and tiny black wool tongues poking out at the pedestrians beneath them.

I hadn't noticed them straightaway, I'd been in my usual head-down if-I-don't-think-about-work-then-it-might-not-actually-happen mood, trudging down to the Council offices for another day filing paper in Beigedom. And then, for no real reason, I'd looked up and there was this giant woolly snake, looking down at me with white bobble eyes.

And I'd yipped, actually yipped like a poodle.

Fortunately there hadn't been anyone around at the time. Just me and the woolly snakes.

I raised a cautious hand up to the snake and touched it. Yes, it was definitely knitted. I started walking again, slowly, looking up at each of the snakes as I passed them: green and yellow, black and white, orange and blue, round and round the street lights, some of them boss-eyed, some of them winking, some of them looking straight down at me…

I turned the corner into Ashby Road with the same trepidation that a hunter might enter the jungle: what would be lurking *here*?

Hearts! Hundreds and hundreds of knitted hearts, hanging on woollen threads from the branches of the trees along the road. Pink and red and scarlet and raspberry, and every shade in between. I found it beautiful but also unnerving at the same time: like Sushi.

On Lewisham Way there were leg warmers on the parking meters and cutesy knitted animals, in fluffy pink and blue yarn, on the road signs. But by Lewisham it was all over – I found myself staring hard at the landscape around me, half expecting to see a giant tea-cosy over the entrance to the station. But no – the mass of knitted things appeared to be just limited to Brockley.

I continued my journey, still spooked.

The world was going mad.

Because not only had Brockley been attacked by grannies – which was odd enough – but last week I had made it into the national newspapers. It turned out that in the Big Society 'everyone doing their bit' was hot news and gardening an abandoned skip was very *now*. The *Telegraph* had taken a photo of my skip and hailed the new generation of do-gooders. OK so *I* wasn't mentioned per se (there was talk of residents seeing 'two men in large straw hats, clearly inebriated,') but at least someone had noticed my efforts and even better than that was the fact that Alan Titchmarsh had classed it, "a bold and imaginative use of colour and texture."

"Do you realise Edda," Amanda jumped on to the edge of my desk and flashed her knickers at me, "That that's like the fiftieth time, or something, you've sighed since you got into work this morning."

"Is it?" I said, weirdly drawn to gaze at her knickers, which were right there on display in front of me as they were most days. Today they were blue and had white hearts printed on them. They must have been her favourite pair: she wore them a lot.

"And you've just done it again." Amanda laughed.

"Done what?"

"Sigh."

"Oh." I bit my lip and managed to turn my attention to her face. "Yes. Maybe you're right…"

"So, what's up?"

I sighed. "I don't know … it's … well …" I threw my hands up. "It's because I've had my heart broken."

"Oh … no way! Boyfriend troubles?"

"You know I haven't got one."

"*Girlfriend* troubles?" her eyes widened with interest: Boring Old Colleague in Lesbian Shocker.

"Yes, but *not* in the way you're thinking."

"Oh. Go on then…" She leant back and, faced with the blue with white hearts again, I struggled to regain my train of thought.

"Is this the friend you're like *always* going on about? The one called Bethan?"

"Yes it is. But I don't always go on about her." I bristled.

"Yes you do. Seriously, you like never talk about anyone else; it's like *oh my God she's talking about that girl Bethan again already*."

Amanda watched too much American TV. She spent hours in front of the TV dramas because it was her sole ambition in life to be an actress: she studied American soaps like she was cramming for an audition.

"Well, I go on about Bethan because she's special to me," I said.

"But like not gay?" Amanda looked on unmoved.

"No." I said. And then because Amanda was completely impassive and, ridiculously, I wanted her to be moved by my tragic abandoned circumstances, I added, "Because when I was fourteen and I suddenly had no-one, Beth and her family took me in and loved me, and she's been like a sister to me." Still nothing. "Beth is all the family I've got. We went to university together, we lived together in London, up until she moved in with her boyfriend…"

"Oh, OK." Happily, Amanda looked slightly more moved now she was beginning to understand the full extent of my relationship with Beth. "So, like, why have you two split up?" She winked and then added, "In like a totally non-gay way, of course."

"We haven't 'split up'. She's far too lovely to split up from anyone. My friend's having a baby. Her life is going in one direction—"

"And yours is going in the other."

"Yes. Sort of. Actually, mine's staying the same. Mine has no other direction to go in."

"But she's, like, old, right?"

"She's twenty-eight. The same as me."

"Yeah. Exactly. So you must have seen it coming, yeah? I mean if someone's going to start a family they ought to do it before thirty, right?"

I winced. The single biggest mistake I have probably ever made was to tell nineteen–year-old Amanda that I was twenty-eight. To Amanda, someone 'staring thirty in the arse' (her words) had enjoyed a *good innings*. To Amanda I was ancient and wizened, I had lived out a distant childhood in sepia and had experienced the Industrial Revolution first-hand. Last week she'd asked me if I had all my own teeth.

"Anyway, that explains the sighing," I said, hoping she'd push off and take her blue knickers with her. Because I realised that I didn't want to talk to her about it. Apart from feeling sad and abandoned I didn't really have any other coherent thoughts to discuss or plans to move on.

"I read about this." Amanda was wagging her adolescent finger at me. "And do you know why you're so destroyed?"

"I am not *destroyed*."

"Well, whatever, but you're so *cut up* about this because you're, like, getting 'platonically divorced' from your friend."

"I am?"

"Totally. I read it in a magazine. Like, I *so* did," she added, seeing my scepticism, "You guys have been like a husband and wife…"

"I'm still not gay."

"No. So … you and Beth have been living so close for all those years and, like, your lives have been so bound up together – that's what the magazine said – and now she's cheated on you."

"With her boyfriend?"

"With her baby! So now there's going to be no room for you in her life. You're cast aside like an empty vessel."

I sat back and contemplated what Amanda had said. "You really think I'm an empty vessel?"

"Do *you* think you are?"

"Nooo…?"

"Good for you!" Amanda enthused. "Because it's still not too late for you, you know that. Even, like, near thirty. You have to treat it like a proper divorce, you know? Move on and everything. Go out with someone else, see your other friends when you would have seen her. You can come out with me and my friends if you want," she said. "There's older people in our group. My mate Rebecca is twenty-three. So you'd be OK, you'd have someone to talk to and everything."

I couldn't have been more tight-lipped if I'd caught my mouth in a vice. "Mmm. Great. Thanks."

"But the article said, in situations like this it's, like, absolutely over between the two of you. You aren't going back. You *can't* go back to how you were because she's having a baby and doesn't want you any more. So you have to start afresh. It's the start of a whole new you," she enthused.

"Well, that's just ridiculous," I said with a lump in my throat at the thought that Beth didn't want me any more. "We can pick up with something new. Just because she's having a baby doesn't mean it's the end. We can adapt: we've been friends for fourteen years." And then mentally added, *since you were five*. OK. Sometimes maybe I did seem quite old.

But the blue-knickered harbinger of doom was shaking her head. "It's, like, *so over* Edda. Accept it. You should like totally go wild and stuff, let your hair down. Hey – do you share a mortgage or something? Because that's, like, really bad if you do."

"No. I live on my own."

"You have your own flat?"

"House."

"You have your own *house*?" Amanda squeaked.

"It's an inheritance." I said lightly. And then stopped there. I was absolutely not going to get caught up in a conversation with Amanda about my dead parents. God knows what improving magazine article she would thrust at me.

"Well you could get a lodger, couldn't you? Like, a really hot guy…"

I considered it for a moment. "Ye-es. Or a nice girl, for company and not in a gay way..."

"Or a really hot guy." Amanda corrected me.

"I don't know. I'm really out of practice with socialising. It's been me and Beth practically forever and I think I must have lost the knack of meeting new people."

"So you've, like, put all your social eggs in one friend's basket?" Amanda said.

"Erm. What?"

A man politely cleared his throat behind me. "*Excuse me…*"

Amanda and I spun round and together we saw the Head of Planning looming up behind us. Just two steps down from the Chief Executive at Lewisham Council, Peter Shaw was definitely classed as a Person To Stop a Conversation For.

"I am very sorry to interrupt you two young ladies but I wondered if I could have a word with Edda Mackenzie."

"I'll be off, then," Amanda jumped down in a flurry of pale blue pants.

Peter Shaw politely looked away and, once she was gone, drew up a chair beside me.

"I don't think we've met." He offered me his hand and I shook it. "I head up Planning at the Council."

"Hi."

I knew who he was. Everybody at Lewisham Council knew who he was. He wasn't the God of Lewisham Council – that was the Chief Executive – but he was definitely around the Moses level. He certainly parted the queues at the on-site shop when he paid it a visit.

"I'm here," he dropped his voice and leant in towards me, all silver grey hair and affable M&S jumper stretched over a paunch, "in a non-work-related capacity."

I had no idea how to react to that. None. Was the Head of Planning going to ask me out on a date? Weirder things had happened: Beth was up the duff, I was in the papers (ish) and Brockley had been covered in knitting. Why shouldn't he ask me out? I braced myself.

"Edda, I have reason to believe," he looked left and right like a spy in an old espionage film, "That *you* are responsible for planting up the infamous Brockley skip. Am I right?"

"What?" I nearly jumped out of my seat. "How do you know?"

"Ahh!" He leant back. "So you are! Well, let me tell you how I worked it out. I was intrigued by the story of the gardened skip in the papers, so I did some investigating. I wanted to track down the person who planted that garden, so I thought to myself that the person who took it upon themselves to deal with the skip of their own volition had probably complained about it beforehand. And lo – there were *seven* written complaints about the skip in the Environmental Office's files. And all of them were from you."

"Oh."

"And one of the letters mentioned the fact that you worked for the Council."

"Did it? I—"

Peter Shaw, Head of Planning, *Moses*, pulled out papers, which I instantly recognised as being my letters, from a maroon leather folder he'd been carrying under his arm. He sifted through them, cleared his throat and looking around in case anyone was listening he read, *"I work for the Council: can't you pull your Goddamn finger out for one of your own?"*

"Ah." I said clammily, "Actually, I'm not really that rude. I sort of snapped. It had been months and the dumped rubbish smelled really, really bad."

"I quite understand. So, you see, it wasn't very hard to locate you as you'd said yourself that you worked for the Council. When I looked your details up in the Payroll Department I found that your house just happens to be directly opposite said skip, *would you believe?* And so I assembled the facts and I worked out that you are in a particularly unique position to have benefited from such a philanthropic act."

I shivered. I had been investigated. I had been investigated by the Lewisham Moses and he had put together a file on me. Was this it? Was I going to get the sack because of my rude letters and my illegal gardening? As much as I hated my job – and I really did – I didn't want to be sacked from it.

"Don't worry – in a way I'm just doing my job: we planners can be meticulous investigators. I wanted to find the skip-planter for a very *particular* reason, however..." He let the words hang in the air.

He was going to serve an Order on me. He was going to prosecute me, caution me, repossess my house and throw me out onto the South London streets … the Planning team at the Council were notorious, power-crazed, workaholics who liked nothing better than breaking the spirits of residents who flouted their regulations by so much as a millimetre.

Loft conversion too high? Five thousand pound fine!

Garage extension too large? Go to jail for six months!

"You don't need to look quite so alarmed, Edda." He laughed quietly.

"I'm fine." I laughed lightly, ungripping the table and dropping my shoulders by half a metre.

"No, no, no, no." He leant forward and placed a hand on my own. He *was* going to ask me out. Eugh. "I *admire* what you did. And so does my partner, Eustace Fox." OK. He wasn't going to ask me out. "And it's on his behalf that I came round here to see you. Do you know Eustace? He owns Fox Estates … at the corner of your road."

Hadn't I bought my house from a man called Eustace Fox a few years ago? A plump man with chequered trousers was all I could recall…

"Anyway," Peter continued, "Eustace very much wants to meet the infamous Brockley skip planter and he's throwing a party, a soirée if you like, at his Tresillian Road house, on Saturday night. He would be absolutely delighted if you were able to come along; plus guest, of course. There'll be lots of like-minded Brockleyites there and I'm sure you'd enjoy it." He leant close, waiting for a response.

Oh God. Amanda's magazine-style advice was ringing in my ears: I should get out more and socialise. But, *really*, did this offer count as socialising? A soirée with Lewisham Council's Moses and his middle-aged, check-trousered partner? I realised too late that my expression was answering the question for me: *DEAR GOD NO!* so I tried to smile politely. But Peter Shaw was already laughing.

"I can see you're not convinced, Edda. But I really think someone with your attitude would fit right in…"

"You've got the wrong impression of me. I was really flipping out when I did what I did to the skip," I explained. "It's so out of character for me. Usually I'm a very calm and quiet person. I—"

He stopped me in my self-deprecating tracks. "Did you see the *yarnstorming* in Brockley this morning?"

"Pardon?"

"Yarnstorming. Knitted graffiti."

"Oh!" I remembered the knitted street light snakes and the tree branch knitted hearts. "Yes, yes I did! That's 'yarnstorming'?"

"Yup. And that's *us*! You see, we're a radical bunch and someone who plants up a skip is going to fit in just perfectly. Here's an invitation." He placed a small card onto my desk with an address on Tresillian Road. "Come at around nine. And good work with the skip, young lady!"

I sat at my desk, unmoving, for the next ten minutes until the trembling stopped. And then I called Beth.

FOUR

It would have been easier to have persuaded Madonna to *cover up a bit love and put a cardigan on* but – finally – I convinced Beth to come with me to the soirée. There was no way I would go on my own: I was hopeless in social situations without my Beth as a prop.

"You don't have to be so nervous, little Eds!" Beth gave me a hug as we walked down the widening roads towards the party. "Eustace seems like a really nice person."

"What?" I said. "You *know* Eustace Fox? You know the bloke whose party we're going to? Why didn't you say before?"

"Well I forgot, darling. Of course I know him – he's selling our flat."

"*What*?" This time I stopped dead in my tracks.

Beth slapped her forehead. "Oh, shit, I'm sorry Eds. I didn't tell you, did I? Honestly, they weren't making it up when they say that motherhood completely messes with your head. I don't know if I'm coming or going. Anyway, yes, sorry honey, I should have told you. Jack and I are selling the flat and moving to Surrey."

"Oh."

"I know. It's a shock. I'm so sorry you found out like this."

"Oh."

"It makes sense, though. We'll be near his parents, so that'll be really helpful. His mum's already said she'll babysit for us, bless her, and – well – you know. It's just nicer out there isn't it? South London's so, well … gritty, isn't it? Not the sort of place you want to bring up a little life. I can't believe I didn't tell you we were moving! I'm so sorry, honey."

I took a deep breath. "'s fine."

"I knew you'd be OK about it. It's just so exciting! Jack's going to view this tiny cottage just outside Guildford tonight and it has a little nursery on the top floor; how perfect is that? It's pastel yellow and—"

Instantly, I tuned out. Pastel yellow now had that effect on me: it was like a sort of hypnotic trigger, putting me into a state where I could cope with being talked to about the baby. I could go under for minutes, or even hours, as I had done at the weekend when I'd finally managed to drag her out to V-2 and she'd talked solidly about baby-stuff all morning. The hypnotic release was always *Edda, Edda are you even listening to me?* at which point I would come round and say something like *that sounds like a great idea*, which usually worked well.

The further Beth and I walked from my house the grander the properties had become, until we reached Tresillian Road where Eustace Fox, friend to Beth, lived. The street was lined with palatial white villas, set back behind perfectly planted front gardens. And Eustace's house was the most palatial of all. It sported a turret, a balcony, gargoyles, gables and pretty much every Victorian whimsy except a drawbridge and a bronze of Bouddica in a chariot.

Beth stopped her stream of consciousness baby-talk – something about cribs versus cots – and gaped at the villa. "Eustace Fox lives here? He lives here and he runs an *estate agency*? Urgh, my flat sale is funding his amazing lifestyle. *I* am paying for this."

"Do you think we should turn back?" I said, ever the one to chicken out and seek the quiet life in these strange and disappointing times.

"Oh, don't be so bloody stupid," Beth grabbed my arm and frogmarched me up the mosaic-tiled pathway. "It was your skip and it's you they want to see. Stop being such a wuss. And you look great – see, I told you to wear the blue dress with the silver shoes."

Beth rapped on the vast glossy black front door, like a debt collector on a mission, while I cowered behind. Within a moment it was opened and a portly, jolly-faced man was ushering us in.

"Ahh, Miss Smedley," he said, seeing only Beth – on account of me cowering behind her. "How lovely to see you again! Do you know, your perfectly lovely flat has had quite a bit of interest. Expect great things in the next few days, but I must say that I am exceedingly sorry that you will be moving out of the neighbourhood: Brockley needs people like you and your charming fiancé in order to thrive. If you change your mind I can put a couple of very exciting properties your way. And you," he fixed his eyes on me when Beth stepped inside and left me exposed on the door step, "You must be the Lady of the Skip!"

"She is."

"I am." I shook the hand that was held out to me.

"Well, I'm delighted to meet you of course! Edda isn't it? Jolly good. Come in, come in!"

"What an absolutely amazing home you have," Beth gushed as she walked in, while I mumbled something vaguely similar but was too overawed by the place to fully commit to talking sense. It was *incredible*. It was, in fact, like stepping into a Victorian period drama so real that at any moment Sherlock Holmes might leap out of a doorway with an opium-addled *ha ha!* and toss off a tune on his violin. There were animal heads on dark-papered walls, etched lanterns, candelabras and a giant marble fireplace. And all of it in *a hallway*.

I turned back to the host, who now I realised looked every bit as Victorian as his house. Dressed in tweeds, he sported white whiskers and red-cheeks with an air of joviality that gave him the look of a Dickens character: the jolly sort who went about saving East London orphans and handing out hot pies, as opposed to the evil sort who made hot pies out of East London orphans.

The next guests arrived almost immediately after us, so we were shown into a sitting room and the direction of an ample bar pointed out. "I'll catch up with you soon, ladies," Eustace Fox said. "Excuse me."

"Well," I collected a gin and tonic and handed Beth a mineral water, "he's not what I was expecting."

"No – the whole thing is quite odd isn't it?" We took in our surroundings as we sipped our drinks. There were vast gilt-framed oil paintings, velvet wallpapers, exotic button-eyed stuffed birds in glass jars; the place was a living museum. In fact, apart from the mass of party-goers with drinks in hand, and the flat-screen TV, it could have been the National Trust-preserved house of a wealthy Victorian industrialist. All it needed was some roped-off areas and *don't you even think about sitting on this you common peasant* notices on the chairs.

"Glad you came?" Beth asked.

"I think so. Aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. We should mingle."

"I don't think I really feel like mingling," I looked at the various groups of trendy slick-haired types, dreadlocked cool sorts and serious barrister types. There weren't many Council pen-pusher types amongst them. "I wouldn't know what to say to anyone. Why don't you mingle and I'll tag along!"

"Oh come on – don't be so shy! Look at them all looking at you – I think they know who you are! How cool is that Eds? Eds! Come out from there. I'm not having you hiding yourself away. Mingle woman! Mingle! Do you think all these people live in Brockley? I don't recall seeing this sort of person in and around Brockley, much. Greenwich maybe…"

"This place is so weird – there's a giant stuffed bear holding umbrellas at the end of the hallway. A real stuffed bear with teeth and claws and umbrellas."

"Well, the people look pretty normal. Trendy. But normal."

"I still wouldn't know what to say to them." I said.

"You could tell them you're here because of the skip?"

"I suppose so … oh my God … Beth, look at that man!"

"I am!" As one we had focused on the spot where the partygoers had parted and there, newly revealed, was the most gorgeous dark-haired arty-type leaning louchely against the far wall. A MilkTray man. A man with jet black ringlets, stubble, an open-necked shirt and an utterly, fantastically, beautiful bod.

"I am carrying my fiancé's baby and I am lusting after that man," Beth mused. "Is that bad? Does that make me a bad person?"

"Yes it does."

"Ah ha, I find you again at last!" The cheerful voice of Eustace Fox boomed behind us.

"We were just – ah – admiring your place," Beth peeled her eyes away from the very particular place she'd been admiring. "It must have taken you years to get it like this."

"Oh you'd be surprised," he said. "When I bought the villa it was almost entirely unmodernised: there was very little work needed to renovate it. I'm glad you like it. What say you, Edda? Is it to your taste?"

"Oh," I said, focusing for no good reason on the wall of stuffed animal heads opposite, "absolutely."

Eustace laughed and to my surprise he lent down to me and said in a low voice, "I don't like the animal trophies either but some bugger shot them a century ago and it seems sacrilegious to throw them away. Makes their shooting seem all the more pointless, don't you think? Might as well have 'em up. So," he stood up, "*Edda*. That *is* an unusual name."

"It's Old Norse." I replied, taking a liking to him. There was something fun about him, in a jolly-uncle sort of a way. "It means *poem*."

"Does it? Does it really? Well, how unique. I don't think I've ever met anyone with an Old Norse name before. You're of Scandinavian origin I take it? Although your beautiful red hair and those hazel eyes are quite Celtic…"

"Her parents were Viking fanatics. Totally mad for it all weren't they, Eds?" Beth spoke up for me.

"Well, there's a lot to be said for the Vikings," Eustace contemplated his vast tumbler of whisky. "Lot of bad press in the last decades but everyone's so damn touchy-feely these days. You see, I admire them: they did a lot of good. Yes they might have been a bit eager with the broad sword and a touch boisterous with the women, but in doing so they gave England its backbone. Wouldn't you say so, eh? Otherwise where would we be? Overly Norman with a fondness for heavily stylised tapestries… No – we owe our fighting British spirit to those men from across the sea! So, do your parents take part in re-enactments Edda? Hog roasts and sword fights? Eh?"

"I…"

What I wanted to say was a breezy *Oh they're no longer with us, sadly,* but experience told me that no matter how breezy I tried to be I would actually end up saying something along the lines of *They're dead. Dead and gone. I'm an orphan!* because I'd never mastered the art of unemotively telling people my parents had died. So, I tried to compose myself before I responded. In the composing-silence that followed Beth, love her, stepped in to save me.

"Edda's parents died."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Eustace put a hand on my shoulder and patted it, which was surprisingly comforting.

"It's fine. Fine." I waved the tragedy away with the breezy tone I'd been composing myself for. "It was a long time ago."

"It was quite bizarre, actually. How they died. Wasn't it, Eds?" Beth laughed. "Plain freaky, really. It made the national papers at the time didn't it, Eds?"

"I—"

"Well, this is no place for maudlin talk," Eustace cut in, "Although I mean no disrespect to your late parents, of course, my dear Edda, however they passed into the next life. Now then, I wanted to talk to you, Edda, about your planting of the skip – if you don't mind me talking openly about your little secret."

"Oh no. Not at all," I said, suddenly wondering whether I *should* actually worry about talking about it. After all wasn't it illegal or at the least unauthorised?

"Well, then, I think it shows enormous spunk to do what you did."

I could feel Beth stiffen beside me, stifling a giggle.

"Eustace! Darling!" A thin, blonde forty-something flew at him with a kiss. While he obliged I looked over at Beth who was pointing to me and mouthing the word *spunky*. "So sorry to interrupt," the blonde woman was saying, "but I just wanted to say hello!" she beamed at him. "By the way, Eust – there's another one of those signs right outside your house. Timing couldn't be more off could it, darling? Ciao!" and she headed off to the drinks table.

Eustace, frowning, turned to us. "Excuse me, ladies," and without another word he marched to the front door.

Beth and I stared after him.

"What was all that about?" Beth said.

"I have no idea."

"What was she talking about? Did you see a sign right outside his house?"

"No. Did you?" I said.

"No—"

"Shall we follow him?" I surprised myself.

"Of course!"

Together, like the contingent of the Famous Five we had always been BB (before baby), Beth and I speed-walked through the house in the direction that Eustace had taken. Taking up a position screened behind the bear with the umbrellas we watched as, a moment later, the man himself crashed back in through the front doorway, purple-faced, staggering heavily and with an enormous yellow metal rectangle on legs wedged under his arm.

"Is that a *police* sign?" Beth hissed in my ear.

"I think so. Can you read what it says?"

"No, darling. There's a giant stuffed bear in the way."

Eustace had now rested the sign on the floor and was busy jabbing a key into the lock of an understairs cupboard door.

The sign was facing us and I could see the words quite clearly.

Woman fatally stabbed here between 1 and 2am, Friday 6th. Witnesses in the vicinity at the time should contact Lewisham Police on the numbers below.

A woman had died outside Eustace Fox's house in the early hours of this morning. And Eustace had just removed the police sign.

Beth clamped a hand on my arm.

We watched in a troubled silence as he opened the cupboard and disappeared into it.

"Go on," Beth was pushing me out past the bear. "See what's inside the cupboard."

"Bethan! Bloody hell!" Feeling horribly exposed in the bear-free open space of the hallway, I dithered.

"Oh, for God's sake I thought you were supposed to have spunk? Isn't that what Eustace Fox said?" Beth came out from behind the bear and took a step towards the cupboard. Empowered, now I had my friend beside me, I stood beside her and we looked into the darkness.

I could see shelves, pegs, coats and hats and…

I gasped. It was an Aladdin's cave of crime signs! There were yellow and black metal signs leaning up against the walls, piled on top of one another, hanging from the walls, shouting doom and gloom like a week's worth of *Daily Mail* headlines: *man attacked here, spate of bags snatched here, woman fatally shot here, man stabbed here, five cars set alight here…*

Several men knifed
Man shot
Youth assaulted
Here
Here
Here…

There was a noise from the cupboard. Eustace was coming out.

Beth and I shot back into the sitting room and threw ourselves onto a vacant Chesterfield: she staring dumbfounded at me and me opening the hatch and sinking the rest of my gin and tonic in a single gulp.

"So… That was normal, then," I said, pulling the slice of lemon out of my throat and hoping that by saying things were normal they suddenly would be.

"No." Beth said. "That was quite far from normal, I'd say." She was frowning and stroking her slight bump of a stomach.

"Are you OK?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Just a twinge." She waved my concern away and fixed a smile on her face. "I probably shouldn't run that fast."

"Do you think he's hiding those police signs because he's the one that did all that stuff?" I said, after a moment's reflection.

"Edda!"

"Well – the sign said someone was stabbed *right outside his house*."

"Eds, don't be so melodramatic!" Beth was laughing at me, "Eustace is a portly estate agent. He's probably worried that all the bad publicity will affect house prices, that's all. He's not built to be a bag-snatching, gang-raping arsonist and besides it wouldn't be good for business."

I considered it for a moment. "Yes. You're probably right—"

Beth yawned and sank back onto the sofa.

"You're tired." I said.

"I am."

"Do you want to go? I don't mind. I mean – Mr Sign-hoarder doesn't really do it for me and it's not like we've mingled or anything. This is all pretty weird…" My focus went back to the wall of glassy-eyed animal heads.

Beth yawned again. "Do you mind? I am outrageously tired all of a sudden. I'm so sorry, Eds. I must be the crappiest friend ever."

"No," I said as I hauled her off the sofa. "No, you're not and you know it. Damn you. I wish you were crappy then I wouldn't mind half as much that you're running off to Surrey without me."

"Oh, you say the sweetest things, honey."

"I wonder who the good-looking man was?"

"Listen, darling," Beth put a hand on my shoulder, "you stay here and enjoy yourself. Go meet the Romeo with the dark hair and then call me tomorrow and tell me every single thing that happened. OK?"

"I don't want to stay without you." I said. "I'd just wander around the party fretting: I don't know any people here except for that balding bloke over by the window."

"Who?"

"That one," I pointed out Peter Shaw to her as discreetly as I could. "He's Eustace Fox's partner and he's high up in the Council – so I don't particularly want to talk to the only person I know here, bar Eustace Fox himself. No, come on, let's go."

I took her hand and gently pulled her forwards. "Oh thank you, darling," she said, leaning against me as we slowly left the party. "You have so much *spunk*, you know that?" She was laughing again, holding her sides. "Oh God, I so have to grow up with baby on the way."

"Oh, come on," I said, walking her slowly to the front door, "You can be rude, can't you? It can't hear you."

"Yes but no big laughs and no blue cheese…"

"Pregnant Woman Caught Laughing With Spunky Sidekick Here. Any witnesses call Lewisham Police..."

"Edda! Bloody well stop it!"