

3
little black dress
BOOK



BLUE REMEMBERED HEELS

Love, lies, and lightning strikes **Neil Dixon**

One minute I stood on the high street, minding my own business, waiting for my bus. It was a nice day, no clouds or rain in sight, which makes what happened next all the more puzzling. Wham, out of nowhere I was struck down. The only reason I know I was hit by lightning is because there were witnesses, and because it left me with a scar. Otherwise I might not have believed them.

It sounds like a cliché but I don't remember much else, except the pain. Oh, and the man who gave me the kiss of life. I'd rather not remember him, he was a bit creepy. Then everything goes a bit blurry until I woke up in the hospital with a strange name above my bed and my family sitting next to me.

* * * * *

"And what exactly do you think you're doing?"

Charlotte leaned back against the door of the powder room to stop anyone from disturbing us.

I opened my bag and pulled out my lipgloss. My older sister could be very scary when she was angry and right now she looked steaming mad.

"I didn't mean it. I just can't seem to stop myself." The reflection in the oval gold mirror above the sink showed two high spots of colour on my cheeks. It also showed Charlie glowering at me in the background.

"I've spent weeks setting this job up, and I had to do most of the last part on my own because you were wallowing on the couch with Kip hanging on your every word."

I finished touching up my lips as I waited for Charlie's temper to cool down. Only my sister could make me feel guilty about being found unconscious outside Debenhams after having been struck down by a bolt from the blue.

"If you can't stick to the story then stay schtum. We are set to make a nice little sum out of this but if your new-found conscience keeps twittering then we won't make a penny and we'll end up in the clink instead."

"It's not my fault. It's as if I haven't any control over what's coming out of my mouth."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not." I wished I could explain it better to Charlie. It was hard not to feel resentful. She should know I never normally made careless mistakes or blabbed giveaway information when we were working.

Someone tried the door of the powder room. It bumped against the backs of Charlie's heels so she stepped aside to join me at the mirror. A buxom lady wearing a too-tight chiffon dress came in and shot us both a hard stare before disappearing inside one of the cubicles.

"Just remember – keep it zipped," Charlie hissed as I followed her back out into the lobby.

Our mark had waited for us in the bar area. It had been decorated according to some designer's vision of an old-fashioned gentleman's club. All overstuffed seats and fake marble fireplace with crap lighting. I walked a couple of steps behind my sister and fumed silently.

"I do apologize, my assistant hasn't been well lately." Charlie sank down gracefully on to one of the leather-padded armchairs and accepted a tall glass of gin and tonic from the man she'd come to scam.

The target flicked me a glance. I suspected he wouldn't have cared if I'd been dying of some rare tropical disease - it was Charlie he was interested in. Anyone who didn't know us would never guess we were sisters. Charlie is tall, dark and beautiful. That's why she's so good at what she does; enticing vain men to become hopelessly besotted with her so she can plunder their bank accounts. My skills, on the other hand, come from looking so ordinary. Average height, build, weight, blondish-brown hair - absolutely no qualities that would make me stand out in a crowd or a police line-up. I was the invisible woman.

For this particular job I had to play the part of Charlie's personal assistant. She had passed herself off as Lady Charlotte Bloom, which was a bit of a lark as although Charlie might be many things, she was certainly no lady. Fortunately for us, the real Lady Charlotte was on safari in Africa and expected to remain there for another three weeks.

"Show Freddie the portfolio for the castle, Abigail."

I fished about for the blue document folder that contained the details for Manydown Castle and tried to look like an efficient PA.

Freddie Davis was a self-made millionaire on the lookout for a property to develop as his country home. There were lots of rumours about how he'd made his fortune and none of them were very flattering to his character. He was well-known for being open to a dodgy deal so we were pretty sure he wouldn't worry about the ethics of the supposed sale. The idea of pulling a fast one over the tax man was much more appealing.

He liked Charlie for her looks and alleged breeding, since he was anxious to move up the social scale. A hefty man in his late fifties with a round florid face, he couldn't believe his luck at hooking up with someone like Charlie. It pandered to his ego, which was the size of a planet; it would serve him right when we took his money. He made the perfect mark.

Once Charlie had extracted a juicy "deposit" for the castle then we would be away and clear with the cash and Freddie would be history. I suppose it was a kind of rough justice – us doing to Freddie what he'd done to so many other people.

"My great-uncle Edward is anxious to keep this as a private sale, so I had a job to coax him into allowing me to show these to you. It would be simply too terrible if a treasured family home fell into the wrong hands." Charlie sipped her drink and crossed her long elegant legs.

"Oh, um... quite." Freddie dragged his attention away from Charlie's legs and back to the folder containing the details for the castle. I prayed he wouldn't ask me any direct questions in case I did it again.

Told the truth, that is.

Not that I normally had any problem with lying. I'd made a career out of it, for heaven's sake. It was simply that ever since that freak bolt of lightning had hit me I couldn't seem to stop telling the truth. In our business, this was likely to prove a major handicap.

Charlie and I did have some morals - we never took money from anyone who couldn't afford it and we never did anything that could cause physical harm to someone. As criminals go, we were very moralistic.

We wouldn't be in this line of business at all if it weren't for Kip. He's our younger brother and he isn't - how do I put this... Quite like other people. He has this dream of living on a farm, deep in the heart of the countryside, away from the city and all the hustle and bustle that so confuses and upsets him. Living in the city is making him ill. At the moment he never goes out, never meets anyone and the longer we stay in London, the worse he gets.

There has just been the three of us ever since Kip was a baby. Our mother had disappeared – vanished – when we were small. There was no hope of us helping Kip or escaping from the city via a 'normal' route. Office jobs simply don't pay the kind of money we need. We'd tried and failed in the past.

"I'd want to go and view the property," Freddie said, looking straight at me with his avaricious little eyes.

"Of course. Great-uncle Edward is away at the moment but we'd be able to arrange for you to see the castle and land at the weekend, if you like."

I breathed a small sigh of relief when Charlie answered before me. I hadn't said much to my sister about this yet, but I'd started to worry that being hit by that bolt a few weeks ago might have had some weird effect on me. The argument in the cloakroom had been the first time I'd tried to broach the subject with her.

I suppose you might think getting zapped out of a clear blue sky on a crowded high street could be construed as an act of God. A kind of punishment for all the crimes I'd committed, even. I can tell you it was not at all nice to come round and find some ancient, smelly taxi driver giving you the kiss of life in front of a crowd of onlookers. My favourite gold earring had melted, I had a weird scar on my neck and my brain felt as if it had been boiled.

Charlie hadn't been impressed when my photograph had ended up splattered all over the papers. There had even been a small snippet on the evening news. The bag I'd had with me that day – and most of its contents – had been part of a fake identity from our last job. To the world at large, the lightning-strike victim had been Henrietta Jones, a twenty-two-year-old art restorer.

Just then I felt an odd prickling on my scalp. A sure sign of potential trouble. While Charlie continued to expound the virtues of dear great-uncle Edward's castle, I glanced around the room to try and spot the cause of the warning. A tall man stood at the end of the bar with a bottle of lager in front of him. Good-looking but not head-turning, his eyes met mine and a chill ran down my spine.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a faint smile as he raised the bottle to his lips. He was fuzz, I could smell it, and handsome or not, the fuzz always spelled trouble. Time to bail. Charlie and I had pre-arranged phrases to alert one another if we ever felt something were wrong.

I interrupted Charlie's spiel with the cue words, "Excuse me, Lady Charlotte, but I believe your cousin Nigel may be calling on you today."

She immediately acted on her cue by glancing at her tiny gold watch and making a little sound of dismay. "Oh, how could I have forgotten? You will excuse me, won't you, Freddie? You know I'll make it up to you." She gave him one of her trademark little-girl pouts and ran her hand seductively over his arm. "I'll call you later with the details for the visit to Manydown." She placed her empty glass on the table and rose to her feet.

Freddie immediately stood up and she leaned forward to kiss his cheek, leaving behind a tiny smudge of dark red lipstick. The man at the bar watched our little drama intently with a glint of amusement in his eyes, as if he knew exactly why we were leaving so suddenly. I had the uneasy feeling that he'd stored every detail of our meeting away in his mind for future use as evidence.

Charlie extracted the folder with the details of the castle from Freddie's fat little hands and passed it back to me. It didn't pay to leave loose ends, especially not ones that might have our fingerprints on. Freddie saw us out to the front entrance where the doorman called us a cab from the rank. Charlie managed to dodge an on-the-lips farewell smacker from Freddie and we slipped away with her promising him a dinner date later in the week.

The taxi driver dropped us a couple of streets away from the hotel, near a tube station from which we could get home. It was cheaper to go by train and we always used more than one mode of transport when possible so we could be certain that no one had followed us.

"Well? Why the alarm?" Charlie asked as soon as we were safely swallowed up into the crowd of anonymous commuters.

"Policeman at the bar." I hung on tightly to one of the overhead straps.

My sister narrowed her dark green eyes. "Mmm, do you think it was set-up?"

"I don't know, but he seemed very interested in our meeting." My head ached from concentrating on being someone I wasn't and my fake glasses with plain lenses had begun to annoy me.

"Better to be cautious. I'll sound Freddie out some more when he takes me out to dinner later this week."

Kip wasn't in the lounge when we got home, but his latest project stood uncovered on a table in the middle of the bay window.

"Kip, we're back!" It didn't look as if he'd done much work while we were out. His modelling knives and wood were still in a neat line next to his tool

kit. When he didn't answer my call, Charlie went and knocked on the door of his room. Kip usually stayed in the lounge when we were out. He felt safe there, especially if he had a modelling project to work on. At the moment he had a balsa wood construction of the London Eye on the go.

"He's not in here." I joined Charlie at Kip's door as she cautiously pushed it open a little wider. It took my eyes a moment to focus in the gloom. Kip always kept his curtains closed and the green glow from the tank where he kept his pet iguana bathed the room with a spooky alien light.

"Kip?"

A flicker of movement under the bed caught my eye. I lifted the Spiderman valance and hoped his pet rat, Claude, wasn't on the loose again. It was dark under there, but I could just make out the pale blue of his favourite tee shirt.

"Kip, it's me, Abbey. We're home." I stepped back as Kip wriggled forward and commando-rolled into the middle of the room, depositing his six-foot length at Charlie's feet.

She extended her hand to help him up. "What happened?"

"Someone knocked on the door." He pushed his glasses higher on to the bridge of his nose and blinked owlishly at Charlie.

Between us we steered him into the living room and plonked him down in a chair.

"How many times have we gone over this?" Charlie asked. Her voice was resigned. It did no good if you shouted at Kip. He would simply go and lock himself in the bathroom and refuse to come out.

"You don't have to answer the door. It's always locked. You can just stay nice and quiet in here."

He nodded obediently at Charlie, just like always, but she and I knew he would have forgotten our instructions by the time the next caller came. It reinforced our determination to escape from the city and start a new life somewhere Kip would feel safe.

"How about I do fish fingers for supper?" If I made his favourite food it might help calm him down. Anything out of the ordinary like a knock at the door when we were out would unsettle him.

"And potato smiley faces?" he asked in a hopeful voice.

"Okay."

I went into the kitchen to start supper while Charlie fired up the computer ready to trawl the net in the name of research for our next project. Kip followed me in.

"Abbey, when will we be able to buy a farm?" He watched me place the fish fingers on the oven tray next to the smiley faces.

"Soon." If our current project came off it would be a deposit for Kip's dream home. Freddie could afford to buy a hundred farms, or castles for that matter. He really wouldn't miss the money Charlie planned to extract from him. The majority of Freddie's money had come from illicit land deals and letting properties at exorbitant rents to illegal immigrants. The rest had come from extortion and fraud. He wasn't a nice man so it would serve him right to get a taste of his own medicine.

Kip leaned against the countertop while I set the timer on the oven. His seventeen-year-old frame was far too skinny for his height and his skin looked pale from lack of sunlight.

"How's your model coming on?" I poured a couple of glasses of Coke and handed one to Kip.

"It's looking nice. I'm going to put lights on this one, Abbey."

I'd guessed as much from the pile of library books on electric circuitry that he'd made me fetch for him. Kip's hyper-intelligence at things like electricity and computers had been part of the reason why he hadn't functioned well at school. That, and his lack of social awareness.

The educational psychologists had spent more time arguing about whether he should be in the gifted group or the autistic group than actually helping him. His red hair and the accompanying bullying hadn't helped much either so all in all he hadn't spent much time in the classroom.

I wandered back into the lounge and sat down on the sofa. My head ached from the hotel escapade so I closed my eyes and settled back for a minute.

I opened them again just as quickly. It had happened again.

I swear to God that something had altered when that lightning bolt hit me. Everyone said I was lucky to be alive and the doctors had warned me that strikes often left odd side-effects behind. Now, every time I closed my eyes, I saw the same set of images. Just for a few seconds. Nothing scary, or the sort of thing that might hold any kind of significance. It wasn't even something I remembered happening. Perhaps that was why it had started to freak me out.

I saw the same vision every time. It was as if I was lying on the floor and I could see a pair of feet walking away from me. Women's feet, wearing navy blue high-heeled shoes.

I picked up my Coke from the coffee table and took a sip. Charlie gave a cackle of glee from her corner of the room.

"What have you found?" I knew that laugh; it meant she had a possibility in sight for the next job.

She reached her arms above her head in a satisfied stretch. "Wait and see. We need to part Freddie from the contents of his wallet first."

The oven timer pinged and I went back into the kitchen. Kip lay on the floor watching his tea cooking through the glass panel in the oven door.

"You don't need to do that." I stepped over him and picked up the oven gloves.

He jumped up. "I wanted to see how the light worked."

I pulled the fish fingers and smiley faces out of the oven. "Promise you won't mess with the cooker."

Kip couldn't resist dismantling things to see how they worked. We'd lost a microwave and the toaster to his need to take things to pieces. Since we often needed an expert electrician in our job Charlie and I tried not to get mad at him but it wasn't easy.

"Kip." My voice held a note of warning.

"Okay, Abbey, I promise."

I hoped he didn't have his fingers crossed behind his back. After installing Kip in front of the TV with his supper on a lap-tray, I went to see what Charlie was up to. She frowned at the screen as I leaned over to see what she'd found.

"Well?"

"What's your knowledge of dogs like?" Charlie asked.

"I am not scooping poop!" I didn't like the speculative look in her eyes.

"But you like dogs?"

I scanned the screen for some clue to what she'd got in mind. It seemed to be a report about some middle-aged foreign lady and her charity work.

"Dogs are okay, I suppose."

"Fab. You need to check out some more books from the library."

Oh, goody, more research... "What am I supposed to be this time?"

My brain still hurt from the art restoration job. Switching a painting and fencing the original to an Italian collector had netted us a tidy profit but had

been riskier than normal. The more people that were involved in a scam the bigger the chance there was that something could go wrong.

"Get books on pet psychology and problem animals. I'll get what I can from the 'net."

"I'd like to point out that in addition to not scooping poop I'm not prepared to get bitten." I wasn't certain I liked the sound of this at all. My last close encounter with a dog had been with an Alsatian tearing a chunk out of my jeans as I'd scrambled over a fence in an escape from good old PC Plod. That had been on one of our first jobs.

"Relax, it's just a means to an end, that's all. After we've finished with Freddie this should be a nice little break. Kip could do with a holiday."

I glanced over to where Kip sat on the sofa munching contentedly on smiley faces while he watched some game show.

"Holiday, where?" I suspected the kind of vacation my sister had in mind didn't involve buckets and spades and a little piece of Blackpool rock.

Charlie waved her hand airily. "A spell out of town. Let the heat die down. I hear it's quite civilised now in the North."

"I'd like to see the Angel of the North," Kip announced.

"We'll try and fit it in," she promised.

Charlie always behaved as if anything above Watford was as dangerous as the Amazon jungle. This had to be a pretty good job if she was prepared to risk leaving London.

"And what about you? What will you be doing while I'm faffing around with dogs?"

"Same thing I always do. I'll be entertaining the mark till we get our hands on the cash. Well... in this case, gold." Charlie's smile broadened. "I always fancied becoming a WAG."

Great, I get to scoop poop and she dates a footballer.