

Animal Instincts

Nell Dixon

Published by Little Black Dress

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First published in 2009
by LITTLE BLACK DRESS
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

A LITTLE BLACK DRESS paperback

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ISBN 978 0 7553 4520 5

Typeset in Transit511BT by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

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

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.littleblackdressbooks.com
www.headline.co.uk
www.hachettelivre.co.uk



The light from the hall spilled out into the night, illuminating the two figures on my front doorstep.

‘Surprise!’ Immi wobbled on her heels and blinked owlishly at me. ‘I’ve got a present for you.’ She waved an unopened bottle of champagne in my face.

‘That’ll be sixty quid, miss.’ The taxi driver supporting my sozzled stepsister propped her against the doorframe, a look of relief on his florid features. He must have driven her quite a distance to want sixty pounds, and it was typical of Immi not to have any money with her.

‘Pay the man, Clo,’ Immi ordered. She staggered sideways, flinging her arm round the driver’s neck to steady herself.

‘Whoops!’ She giggled.

The only money I had in the house – the only cash I had at all – was hidden in the greedy pig cookie barrel in the kitchen. I left Immi and her new friend on the doorstep and scurried off to fetch the cash, mentally cursing her as I went.

As soon as the cabbie had been paid, I yanked her inside and closed the door.

She peered at me in the dim yellow light of the hallway. ‘Wassup, Clo? Were you in bed?’

Well, duh, it was two o’clock in the morning and my pyjamas would be a big clue. I steered her into the kitchen and put the kettle on. One – or both of us – needed coffee.

Immi flopped on to one of the mismatched wooden chairs next to the Aga and plunked the champagne bottle down on the table. Her long blond hair was tousled and her usually immaculate make-up was smudged. She was dressed in a silvery minidress and matching cardigan, as if she’d been out clubbing.

‘God, I need a drink.’ She leaned forward on to the table, scattering a pile of bills and final demands as she buried her head in her arms.

‘I think you’ve had enough to drink.’

Having my half-cut stepsister turn up out of the blue at such an odd hour wasn’t strange in itself. Normally, however, she would arrive with a full set of matching pink luggage, her mobile phone glued to her ear as she ranted on about whichever boyfriend of the moment had broken her heart. She would then stay for less than a day until the errant male in question arrived with his arms full of roses to beg her forgiveness.

She lifted her head. ‘You don’t understand, Clodagh. My life is over. Ruined.’ The dramatic effect of her statement was slightly marred by the slurring. I wondered where she’d been to arrive on my doorstep at this hour of the night.

‘I’m sure it can’t be that bad.’

‘S worse than bad.’ She nodded her head drunkenly.

Her mood had changed from happy drunk to depths of despair during the short stagger from the hall to the kitchen. Oh, boy. At this rate I would be the one needing a drink; her current man trouble must be worse than usual. It had to be a boyfriend problem. Immi was the only person in the world with worse judgement than me when it came to men. I moved my book-keeping paperwork to one side and slid a mug of black coffee in front of her. ‘Drink this.’

Immi fixed big, tear-filled blue eyes on me. ‘I’m serious. I’m in big trouble.’

I wasn’t unduly shocked by her declaration. My step-sister always thought her emotional crises were the end of the world. I’d been holding her hand and passing her tissues ever since she’d hit her teens. She always fell in love too hard and too fast.

I took the chair opposite hers. ‘Who is it this time?’ I’d been racking my brains while I’d made the coffee to try to recall the name of her current squeeze.

She sniffed and wiped away a tear with the side of her finger. ‘It’s not a man. It’s a TV show.’

There was a roll of kitchen towel on the counter, so I passed it over. Career issues were also nothing new. Immi’s an actress. Not A list, more like C list with aspirations. She’s had some good supporting roles, is the face of Blitzclean mouthwash and has a part in a daytime soap. Her lifestyle is a million miles away from mine; hers is glamour and glitter, mine denim and doggy. I don’t know much about Immi’s world – I don’t even own a TV any more.

‘A TV show?’ I remembered she’d sent me a confusing text a few weeks back about a live chat show. It had said BG BRK in capital letters a dozen times. I’d tried to call her but as usual had kept getting her voicemail instead.

Immi ripped off a sheet of kitchen towel and blew her nose. ‘It was awful. I can never appear on TV again. My career’s over. I’ll be lucky to get a chorus job in a pantomime in the sticks after this.’

‘What happened?’ I yawned. I wanted to go back to my nice warm bed. I love Immi dearly but I love her better when she’s in London. Her current problem didn’t sound as if it was likely to be something I would be able to help her with and I’d had a long day.

She let out a wail. ‘I was escorted off the set.’

Now that did sound bad. ‘What did you do?’

‘I’d had a few drinks in the green room. You know, just to relax a little before I went on. Honest to God, Clo, I only had a couple.’ She broke off with a hiccup and dabbed at her eyes once more, leaving a streak of blue eyeliner along her cheek. Immi’s drinking was a small bone of contention between us. Okay, a medium to large bone of contention.

‘And?’ My feet were freezing and I needed to get up at six to let the geese out into their field. I’m not normally unsympathetic but I was tired and she has a tendency to ramble, especially when she’s had a few.

‘You remember Kirk?’

Kirk had been one of the more memorable of Immi’s men, another bit-part actor who’d recently hit the big time with a popular TV series. Now he was hot property

and had recently landed a part in a big Hollywood movie – at least that was what the gossip magazines said.

‘Uh-huh.’ He and Immi had a truly spectacular break-up when Immi discovered that he’d installed secret video equipment inside her wardrobe. For a time she’d been concerned that she might have ended up doing a Paris Hilton all over the Internet. In revenge she’d burned his secret porn stash and rubbed white pepper along the seams of his underpants.

‘He was there too. Mr Big Time, throwing his success in my face.’ She scrubbed at her eyes again.

I could see where this was heading and it wasn’t looking pretty. ‘What did you do to get escorted off the show?’

‘I was on first, the three-minute ice-break slot. Bottom of the bill always gets put on first – so unfair.’

‘Immi!’

‘He was on last, the fat-headed pimple on the face of humanity. He was so full of crap, going on about his show and his film deal and his new girlfriend and all the time having nasty little digs at me.’ She scowled into her mug. ‘Pretending to be nice, the patronising sleaze bucket!’

‘Tell me what you did.’ I knew my sister. She was as sweet and kind as the next person, but if anyone upset her then woe betide them. Kirk had been pretty horrid to her, though. I mean, I know she peppered his pants, but he broke the heels off all her designer shoes and bad-mouthed her to a big Hollywood director.

‘He asked for it.’ She pouted.

‘What did you do?’

Immi was normally a happy drunk, but when she lost her temper she *really* lost it. It wouldn't be the first time she'd landed in hot water as a result. There had been an unfortunate incident a few years ago when she'd shoved a fellow Miss Teen Starlet into a fishpond on a photo shoot. Drink had been involved on that occasion too.

'Smacked him one. Right across his stupid, self-righteous, smug face.' She rubbed her knuckles in satisfaction at the memory.

'On live TV?'

A tear rolled down her cheek and landed with a fat blob on top of one of the outstanding vet bills. 'I called him as many names as I could think of and told everyone about all the awful things he'd done to me.'

'You mentioned the sex video?' I hoped she'd managed to ensure that every copy of that tape had been destroyed. There were probably a million hits on YouTube even now as people tried to track down a copy.

She wiped her eyes and continued with her tale of woe. 'Then his latest fling came rushing out of the green room – tarty little bitch with the most awful nose job – and we ended up brawling on the sofa.'

'Bloody hell.' I leaned back and pulled open the cutlery drawer. Now I did need a drink and I was sure there was a miniature of brandy in there, lurking under a pile of feed catalogues.

Immi grabbed the bottle from my hand as I unscrewed the cap and tipped a big slug into her coffee mug. I managed to snatch it back before she could drink the lot. I wanted a shot myself to help me think.

‘What does Marty have to say about all this?’ I was sure Immi’s chain-smoking, ballsy agent would be out there firefighting on her behalf. After all, everyone knew a scandal was usually good for business, especially when that business was show business. I mean, Kate Moss and co. hadn’t done so badly out of their headline-making antics.

‘I don’t know. I called and called her on my mobile all the way here until the battery died and she still wouldn’t pick up. I must have left a zillion messages.’

That didn’t sound good. ‘Listen, I’ll go and make up the spare bed. Perhaps Marty will ring in the morning once your phone’s charged.’

Immi gave a doleful sniff. ‘Suppose. Thanks, Clo.’

I left her nursing her mug of coffee and slipped upstairs to turf Clive, the cat, off the spare bed. Luckily there weren’t too many hairs on the quilt. Immi gets quite funny about little things like that. Once the cat had been evicted and the electric blanket switched on to air the bed I called Marty on my own phone.

I left a message on her voicemail. ‘It’s Clodagh. Immi’s here with me at the sanctuary. Call me.’

I’d barely had time to get across the landing to find Immi some nightclothes when my phone rang.

‘Clodagh, Marty. God, all hell’s broken loose here. Keep Imogen away from the press and out of the pub. I’ll call tomorrow with an update.’ I could hear another phone ringing in the background as she ended the call.

‘Was that the phone?’ Immi staggered into the hall on her high heels. ‘If it was Marty I need to talk to her.’

‘Wrong number.’ It didn’t seem like a great idea at this time in the morning to tell her what Marty had said.

‘Oh.’ Immi’s face crumpled and she slid down the wall to sit crying on the bottom step.

‘Come on, let’s get you upstairs. Everything will seem better when you wake up.’ At least, I hoped everything would seem better; otherwise Immi might be staying with me for a while and that would drive both of us mad.

I coaxed her up to her bedroom and hoped that the cat had enough sense to stay out of her way. Immi wasn’t overly fond of pets, which was a snag as I ran an animal sanctuary. Whenever she stayed she complained about the cat, the geese, the general smell, and Dave, the parrot no one would take on because of his bad language.

With Immi safely tucked up under her duvet I checked the locks and headed back to bed. She might have troubles but I had problems enough of my own. Rainbow Ridge Animal Sanctuary was broke and if I didn’t come up with some money soon it wasn’t only the animals that would be homeless.

The alarm seemed to sound only seconds after I’d closed my eyes. I moved Clive, who had settled around my head like a feline fur hat, and tried to focus. Today was a big day. Once I’d seen to the animals, organised the volunteers, and poured more caffeine into Immi, I had an important afternoon appointment at the bank.

Not that I was hopeful about getting another loan from them. Mr Curzon, my not-so-friendly bank manager, had taken to avoiding seeing me in person.

Instead I kept receiving threatening letters via the post. Today I had actually managed to make an appointment, but unless I could come up with a fantabulous business plan by three o'clock I guessed I would be coming home empty-handed.

The volunteers who helped me run the sanctuary would be arriving soon so I scrambled into my jeans and sweater and headed downstairs. One of my aims had been to make enough money to employ staff instead of relying on goodwill. Since I barely made enough to cover a basic wage for myself my aim was rapidly becoming a distant dream.

'Cooee, Clodagh.' There was a sharp rap on the back door.

I opened the door for Susie. She's my longest-standing volunteer, not that she actually does very much – well, except make tea and talk a lot. She's very good at tea-making and talking. I'd kind of inherited her when I'd taken over the sanctuary.

'Ooh, it's a bit chilly this morning.' She wombled into the kitchen, unravelling a vast hand-knitted scarf from round her neck as she entered. I wondered how she would cope when it really did turn cold. We were only in September now and she was already muffled up in layers of wool.

Susie is a bit of an odd bod. She's in her late thirties and has never mentioned a family or a social life in all the time I've known her. I'm not even really sure how she can afford to spend most of her time at the sanctuary, since she doesn't have a job of any kind. She has a kind

heart, though, and means well even if she can be a pain in the bottom sometimes.

‘Tea?’ I don’t know why I bothered asking. Susie never turned down a cup of tea.

‘Lovely.’ She settled herself at the table and rubbed her hands together to warm them up.

I handed her a mug and grabbed my old wax jacket from the back of the pantry door. ‘I’ll go and let the geese out. Could you unveil Dave?’

Dave’s cage was in the sitting room; I had to keep him well away from the public. His previous owner had owned a brothel and Dave had acquired a very colourful vocabulary from his time there. He also had a very vicious personality.

Susie’s lips pursed and I waited for the excuse.

‘I’ve got a bit of a sniffle at the moment, Clodagh; I wouldn’t want to infect the animals. Perhaps I should tidy up for you. Jade could see to Dave when she gets here in a minute.’ She produced a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose in an unconvincing fashion.

I guessed what she really wanted was an opportunity to snoop. She was incredibly nosy and on a couple of occasions I’d caught her reading private letters that I thought I’d put away in the cutlery drawer. I think she liked to feel she knew more about what was going on than the other volunteers. It was as if it made her feel important in some way.

‘If you like.’ I picked up the pile of books and invoices from the table. ‘I’ll pop these out of your way.’ I carried them upstairs and dumped them on my bed; I didn’t want

her to know about the sanctuary's financial problems. Some things need to be kept private.

Immi's room was silent. I assumed she must still be sleeping off the events of the previous night and was glad of it. It would be better if she didn't run into Susie or any of the other volunteers. If Marty was to be believed, the press would be all over the sanctuary like a rash if they found out Immi was here. The last thing I needed was bad publicity and camera crews blocking the gates.

Susie was still at the table drinking her tea when I tiptoed back down to the kitchen.

'I'll be back in a few minutes.' I toed my feet into my wellies.

She glanced up from an old copy of *Pet Keepers Monthly*. 'Okay. Is it all right if I get a biscuit?'

'There are a few left in the tin.' I clumped off down the steps and left her to finish off the digestives. If I wasn't so short of helpers I might have been tempted to tell Susie to sling her hook ages ago. Perhaps that's a bit mean; she did have some good points when she wasn't being nosy and annoying. She was quite good at organising the rest of the volunteers and, to tell the truth, it was nice to have someone to talk to. Well, apart from Dave, that is.

I let the geese into their field and put out the feed. A pale mist hovered over the dewy grass, which sparkled in the early morning light. Mr Sheen, the goat, peered hopefully at me over his fence as I made my way back to the house to finish my morning cuppa. He always hoped

more food would be headed his way. Goats don't have a reputation for being greedy for nothing.

Jade, the other volunteer, had arrived and was standing in the kitchen cradling her drink when I returned. I could hear Dave squawking and cursing from the other room so she must have taken the blanket off his cage.

'Hiya, boss.' Jade grinned at me from under her floppy pink fringe. She was a college student who gave me a hand at weekends and on the days she didn't have any lectures. She wanted to be a social worker but liked animals. I always felt guilty that I couldn't afford to pay her or Susie. They both put in hours of time helping me to keep the sanctuary going. Jade was supposed to be on holiday as lectures didn't start again for a few more weeks but she had a boyfriend locally and had stayed on for the summer, supplementing her income with bar jobs.

Susie didn't appear to have moved from where I'd left her. I've seen giant land snails with a better turn of speed than Susie.

'Jade, will you be around to look after the animals this afternoon? I have to go to a meeting in town.'

'Sure.' Jade swallowed the rest of her tea.

'Is there anything I can do to help you with your meeting?' Susie offered.

'No, it's a personal thing.' Nosy cow. I wasn't about to tell her where I was going. Not that it would be a secret for much longer if I didn't get the loan I needed to keep the sanctuary open. All the helpers knew we were broke, but none of them knew quite how bad it was.

‘Come on then, Suze. Time we cleaned out the donkeys.’ Jade pulled a bright green knitted cap from her coat pocket and set it on her head at a jaunty angle, then dragged a reluctant Susie out of the kitchen.

I jammed some bread in the toaster and refilled the kettle. A floorboard creaked upstairs.

Immi appeared in the doorway, wearing the pale blue satin pyjamas she’d sent me last Christmas. She looked wrecked.

‘Coffee?’

She raked her hand through her hair, making it appear even crazier than before. ‘I just want to die.’

‘No, you don’t.’ I snatched my toast from the toaster and dropped it on to a plate.

‘My life is over.’ Immi flopped on to the chair Susie had recently vacated.

‘Rubbish.’ I started to butter my toast.

Immi winced. ‘Clo, please, some of us have a headache.’

I handed her a mug and took a bite of toast as an all too familiar 4x4 pulled into the yard.