



a novel

A

Shoe Addict's
Christmas

Beth Harbison

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Chapter 1



It was a picture-perfect Christmas Eve. Snow was falling at almost two inches an hour, swirling down in front of the Simon's Department Store window displays on Massachusetts Avenue like flakes in a snow globe. People either hurried past—clutching their coats to them and closing their eyes against the cold—or ambled along, looking up and around with childlike wonder at the beauty. Even the most ordinary scene, like the Exxon service station across the street from the main door, took on a fairy-tale quality, like a gingerbread house iced in a confection of snow.

Simon's, where I worked in human resources, would have been the perfect subject inside a snow globe, or maybe

an impressionistic painting. The owner, Lex Prather, was a very old-fashioned guy (bow tie, martinis, a physique as straight and trim as a cigarette), and I swear he designed the place with Fred Astaire movies in mind.

Or maybe it was more accurate to say that the store was established in the thirties and all of the owners since then, including Lex's late mother and now he himself, had maintained it as the kind of setting where you wouldn't be at all surprised to see a guy in a top hat and tails walk in.

There was even a glove counter. Small, admittedly. Not the most popular department in the store, by any means, but it did more business than you'd expect. There are always Audrey Hepburn/Holly Golightly wannabes, and this was like a Wonderland to them; there are always Women of a Certain Age, and Simon's had everything to make them feel younger, prettier, or happy exactly as they were. Weirdly, a surprising number of dance students also patronized the store. I've never been able to figure out that one, except that we were one of the closest high-end department stores to Georgetown, American University, and George Washington University.

Of all the stuff that was great in Simon's, the shoe de-

partment was the best, at least as far as I was concerned. And as far as the readers of *Washingtonian* magazine were concerned as well, since it always rated a mention in the annual roundup. Simon's had begun as a shoe store in the early thirties and had grown rapidly from that, but we still maintained one of the best ranges of sizes in the business. Well, besides online places—hard to compete with Zappos in that arena. But we carried small, handmade brands that the big online companies couldn't.

My friend Lorna Rafferty and her business partners at Shoe Addicts Anonymous were among the best shoe designers around, and we were one of the company's only distributors. Because it had made the gossip columns when it started up—thanks to the dramas of some of the owners—a lot of people came searching for its shoes in particular. Made in Italy from the finest materials, exquisitely designed by a team headed by an unbelievably gorgeous Italian stallion . . . Not that his hot looks were on purpose; he was a brilliant shoe designer, something like fifth generation in a line of shoemakers, but his good looks and charisma were a happy coincidence that got the company even more press.

Everything about its story spoke to a woman's heart.

Of course, there were plenty of plain old shoe addicts themselves at Simon's, looking for any or all brands, and more importantly for the experience of shopping for them there.

The shoe floor was a gorgeous treat of clean lines—up, down, left, right, it was classic upmarket department store all the way. But Lex had gone further and gotten tall, flattering mirrors that were true, not the cheap ones that warped subtly at the belly, putting on an imaginary five pounds. The lighting was soft, too, showcasing the shoes like so many gems. You know how you look at a pair of earrings at the jewelry store and get mesmerized by the sparkle? The Simon's shoe department was like that, only it was the shoes that gleamed and shone under each of the spotlights. At night, with no other lights on, it almost looked like a musical number from one of those old Busby Berkeley movies, each light shining down on some beautiful starlet who might or might not become a star someday.

Each display told a story, and everyone loves to buy a great story.

Here's the one about the wedding!

This one is a wonderful summer evening on the patio.

First date! But I've got a good feeling about this . . .

I read an article once that said that's how women shop—they buy a story, a fantasy. Every item chosen comes with an accompanying narrative in her head. Men tend to be more in and out with a list and no extras.

These were stories I wanted to buy by the armful. It was all I could do to avoid the lure of the shoe department—but I had to, or I'd never be able to make my rent or pay my utilities!

As it was, I worked in human resources, and the hours were long, so I didn't get into the front rooms very often. In fact, tonight was a perfect example of that. I was wrapping up some year-end things, including, thanks to an urgent note from Lex, a fruitless search through storage for the file of an employee named Charlene Pennymar, who'd worked there in the eighties and whom he *had to find*.

Tracking down a long-gone employee was harder than he must have imagined, made even more so because so many people who might remember her had already left

for vacations and holiday time off. The entire last week had been filled with excited chatter about skiing in Vail, basking in Martinique, riding and roping in Texas, and chasing exhausted children through the parks in Orlando. It all sounded good from a safe distance, but when Lorna had asked me to accompany her on a trip to Rome, leaving Christmas Day, I balked.

It was another one of those things that I feared would sound good, look good on paper, but end up being more of a challenge than expected. I know that sounds crazy—why do you think I didn't tell many people about the invite?—but when it comes down to it, I'm a real homebody. Typical Cancer on the astrological charts, afraid to leave and, when I did, eager to get back.

Lex, in fact, had tried to persuade me to take a trip between Christmas and New Year's, since it was "the perfect time of year for some R&R by a crackling fire with a hot toddy in hand and a hot man by your side." I wasn't quite sure, though, whether that was his vision for me or for himself.

Anyway, I've never been entirely clear on what a hot toddy is, and as for a hot man by my side? Unless you

count feverish, sneezing Doug from bookkeeping, who had come to say good-bye and wish me happy holidays in a cough cloud of germs, I hadn't been around anyone who was a digit over 98.6 in *quite* some time.

As for the other kind of hot—the kind Lex meant—forget it. In my little life there were few surprises.

Anyway, back to Christmas Eve this year. I worked for several hours solid, without looking up or speaking to another person, so finally, just after 7:30 p.m., I reached a stopping point and leaned back for a break. The store closed in half an hour, and if I started hitting a new pile, I probably wouldn't be out until New Year's, so I decided to go grab some dinner at Filigree—the store's fabulous in-house restaurant—and then go home, although honestly I wasn't in that much of a hurry, given that I was going to be alone. I have no siblings, my mom is long gone, and my dad and stepmother, Carla, live in Charleston, S.C., where her family is from.

So, dragging my feet some, I put my work aside and went out to execute the few plans I did have for the night.

But when I went out into the store, I was greeted by . . . nothing. The place was empty. Nat King Cole was crooning

faintly from the speakers, that eerie tune about Toyland, and the whole store was as lonely and otherwise silent as a tomb.

I felt like Rip Van Winkle, without the good long rest.

“Hello?” I called foolishly. As if everyone were going to jump out from behind mannequins and display counters and shout, “Surprise!”

Unsurprisingly, there was not a festive peep.

In fact, it was so obvious no one was there that I think I feared an answer more than hoped for one.

Had something gone terribly wrong while I was locked away in my office? Like that episode of *The Twilight Zone* where the bank teller is reading in the bank vault while a bomb wipes everyone out and he emerges into a world where he’s alone and then he breaks his glasses?

Creepy things like that are never far from my mind, thanks to watching every episode of *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, and *Kraft Suspense Theatre* when I was a kid, so I went to the door to check the streets for any sign of life.

I was glad to see the lights were all on out there as usual, but there wasn’t a lot of movement. I imagined I could hear the thick silence. Snowflakes twirled around the

streetlights before they fell to the ground or blew across the landscape in the modest wind. Somehow in the time since I'd commented on the quaintness of the scene and gone back to the storage room behind my office to search in vain for Charlene Pennymar's file, the snow had really piled up.

Naturally I tried the door. It would be stupid to stand behind it like a lost child, looking at the outside world, and not at least *try* it. But it was locked tight, and the lights above told me that the alarm was on. If worse came to worst, I could always smash a window to get the attention of the police.

I hurried back to my office and took my phone from my purse. A call from Lorna, two from Carla (along with a text that said *MERRY CHRISTMAS EVE* in all caps—I could not get her to understand that was shouting in Textville), and one from a number I didn't recognize. Probably another recording; I'd been getting tons of those calls lately, just a recorded voice, telling me I could pay back my nonexistent student loans at a lower rate (I'd graduated ten years ago with no debt), or that home employment was just a few digits' dialing away. I was at least encouraged to see that I had reception.

First I called Sandy, my co-worker, whom I had last seen this morning over coffee.

“Happy holidays!” she chirped after two rings.

“I’m stuck in the store.” God, how Eeyore of me! But what could I do, repeat it with a jolly lilt in my voice?

“What? Hello?”

“Sandy, it’s me, Noelle.” Yes, *Noelle*. Yes, named for the holiday. I was a July baby; the story was that my father said it was “Christmas in July” when I came along, and my parents had agreed immediately upon the name. “I’m stuck in the store,” I said again. Then the obvious question, “*Why is it closed?*”

“Noelle! What do you mean why is the store closed?”

“I mean what happened? I’m stuck in here, alone, and the doors are all locked and alarmed, and I don’t know how to get out without creating a huge mess of police and alarm-company employees!” A small surge of hysteria caught in my throat. I stopped and took a deep breath. There was nothing to panic about. I spent more hours here than anywhere else, so what difference did it really make that I was here now?

“But—why are you there? We closed at six!”

“*Why?*”

“Well, look outside, baby girl. The snow is coming down like a thousand inches an hour!”

“And the store closed at *six?*” I took the phone from my ear and looked at the time. It was seven forty. I hadn’t missed it by much, but if the snow really was coming down so rapidly, an hour and a half’s worth of it had accumulated on top of what they’d decided was too much to stay open an hour and a half ago.

“Lex didn’t want anyone out traveling in dangerous weather, especially not on Christmas Eve.” Her voice was starting to mirror my anxiety. Or at least boost it. “Honest to Pete, how on earth did you miss that?”

I sighed. How *had* I missed it? Had I gotten that lost in my work? “I was looking for a file for Lex, and I went into the archives and, well, I guess I lost track of time.”

“I’ll say! What are you going to do? How did you get in to work today?”

“I drove. My car is in the garage.”

“Well, *that’s* good, at least. It won’t get flattened by a salt truck. But still, the roads are a mess. You absolutely cannot go out on them. Not in the car.”

I sure couldn't go on foot. My apartment was about five miles away, but five miles in this mess might as well have been a hundred. I tried to picture myself making the walk there on these all-but-abandoned tundra-esque streets, and quickly decided I'd rather just go to the bedding department and sleep in a display. "You're right," I told Sandy. "Not that it matters. I can't even get out of the store."

"What are you going to *do*?" she asked fretfully. "Are you warm enough?"

I laughed. "If you can name me one place that's *more* comfortable than Simon's, I will give you a hundred bucks."

"True." She gave a small laugh. "And the phones and electricity are working?"

"Absolutely. Don't worry about me. I'm just going to give Lex a quick call and let him know what's going on. See if he has any brilliant suggestions. But I don't see how to fight Mother Nature, so I'll probably just hang out here for the night and leave in the morning when they dig the streets out."

"That's always about four A.M.," Sandy commented. "They scrape along the street, and Bill thinks they're going to hit the cars every time."

“There aren’t a lot of cars out now, that’s for sure. So don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“Call me if you need anything. *Anything.*”

And what could she do? But I didn’t ask that. Sandy was a mother and more prone to worry than most. Even more than me. “I will,” I said, and we hung up.

Next I dialed Lex. He answered just when I was about to give up, and sounded as if he had a good couple of hours of celebration under his belt already. I imagined his apartment, glowing with real candles, a tree alight with heavy tin tinsel, a martini in every guest’s hand. I hated to interrupt with a problem, but I didn’t see an alternative.

I explained the situation to him.

“I’ll send the fire department immediately,” he declared, ever dramatic.

“No!” I could well imagine what that would look like, wasting the city’s resources on one dumb woman who had managed to get herself stuck in a high-end store with every luxury amenity anyone could dream of and few could afford. “I’m going to hunker down here,” I told him. “I just wanted to let you know the situation in case anyone is monitoring the cameras or whatever.”

“That’s usually handled by Bulldog, the overnight security guard, but he called in with a fake stomach flu earlier, so there’s no one.”

It hadn’t occurred to me to wonder where the overnight security guard was, and now that I knew he’d called in and wouldn’t be here, a tremor of discomfort shivered down my spine. I was well and truly alone.

But I didn’t want to worry Lex, especially since it was painfully clear that there were far worse places to be trapped, in the snow, on Christmas Eve, or otherwise. Honestly, this was better than being stuck at the Four Seasons in Manhattan.

“If you get hungry, you make sure you go on over to Filigree and help yourself to whatever you like,” Lex was saying, then corrected himself. “Not *if* you get hungry, *when* you get hungry.”

“I don’t want to upset Gemma’s inventory.”

“Nonsense. She’d be horrified to even hear you say that! I want you to make yourself *absolutely* at home. Don’t you worry about a thing. As long as you’re safe inside there, I’m not going to worry. Heaven knows you’re as safe as you’d be locked in a fortress.”

And that was basically the situation. I was locked in a fortress. Alone. Actually, it was kind of a fantasy come true.

Lex and I hung up, and I looked around. Locked in a beautiful fortress. What did I want to do? I had the entire store to myself. What was first?

Clothes.

The funny thing about working at Simon's was that my hours were often so long that I didn't get many chances to shop. This was, if nothing else, a great opportunity to pick up a few much-needed items. In fact, it was a great opportunity to take advantage of the Christmas sale *and* my employee discount.

My phone rang. I looked at it.

Gemma.

"Like you didn't do this on purpose," she joked the minute I answered. "Forget men and tight abs and champagne; every woman's *real* fantasy is to get locked in a department store overnight."

I had to laugh. "I'm trying to look at it that way, but, boy, the place feels really different when no one is here."

In the background a baby screamed. Gemma sighed.

“Paul is getting the baby overexcited, and we’re going to be up all night long with him.”

“With Paul or the baby?”

“Paul, of course.” She laughed. “He cannot wait to have a first Christmas to beat the band. Anyway, Lex told me you were making noise about worrying about eating my food, but I’ve got to tell you I have baby-mama brain and haven’t been ordering as well as I should. If you can eat some of that stuff, you’d actually be doing me a favor. Especially the cheese. I got carried away thinking about cheese plates and went a little nuts. Oh! There are spiced nuts, too. To go with the cheese. Trust me, they’re amazing. And top the Brie with some of the balsamic cherries in the flat white container in the fridge.”

“Thanks, Gemma.”

“Will you be okay? Do you need me to come up with a few simple recipes? I think everything should be easy for you to find.”

“I’ll be *fine*,” I told her. “Honest. And I’ll eat some cheese.”

“Good! And sorbet! There’s fresh raspberry sorbet in

the freezer. I got a lot of that after trying a sample in Chelsea Market.”

“Sounds fabulous.” And it did. “Now go Christmas Eve-ing with your family and don’t worry about me.”

“Okay.” She sounded doubtful. “If you’re sure you don’t need anything else from me.”

“Honestly? I need you to let me go so I can do some shopping.” The truth was, it was comforting to hear her voice, but I didn’t want her wasting her night on me.

Plus, I knew she’d understand that shopping thing. “Well, then! Go to it! Have a blast.”

I thanked her and told her I would. Then I told myself the same, because this was no time to feel trapped or sorry for myself.

So I spent a good forty-five minutes trying on clothes in a scene that looked like the ones from so many chick flicks. Only I didn’t have a best friend or love interest there, goading me along and clapping with approval at every look that worked or was hilarious. And, believe me, I had both. Let’s just say caftans are not my style, and I don’t know what yacht I thought I was going to

be sitting on, eating berries with mimosas for breakfast, wearing one.

I did, however, find a bunch of things I *did* want, and I made a pile and left it on the counter.

Then I went to the bedding department to choose my bed for the night. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but I was really pretty psyched about that part. My bed at home sagged in the middle, and I spent every night feeling like I was trying to crawl up a ravine, but so far I'd just been too lazy to get a new mattress. If I got a new mattress, I'd want a bigger one, which meant a new frame, which meant me disassembling the one I had, and—ugh. It was just more than I felt like dealing with, so I stuck with the same old bed for now.

The beds at Simon's, though . . . wow. Top end.

"Who's been sleepin' in my bed?" I asked no one, as I threw back the thousand-dollar Belgian linen sheets on Bed Number One. God, they were luxurious. I didn't know how rich I'd have to be in order to justify such a purchase without thinking about the hundreds of other necessities I might have gotten with the same money, but I sure wasn't there now.

The only problem with the bed was that it was kind of out in the open. Granted, no one else was in the store, and I knew it, but I also knew I'd feel vulnerable trying to sleep there.

So I went to another bed, this one bordered by a wall and topped with rose-gold silk sheets. They were almost as expensive as the linen, truth be told, and the latest sales angle was that silk kept your skin from wrinkling and kept your hair smooth. Well, who wouldn't want that?

I got in the bed for a moment and reveled in the luxury. "And this one was *just right*." Thank goodness the security guard *wasn't* there, because if he'd come upon me, I would have sounded like a lunatic. But I was having fun. What the heck, right?

I left the bed turned down, half wishing some magic housekeeper had left a chocolate on my pillow. This was about as close as I was going to get to staying in a four-star hotel, and I wanted to enjoy every minute.

I smiled to myself. This really was fun. Another person might have freaked out at being trapped—hell, another *me* might have freaked out at being trapped—but with the cheerful holiday music playing (it was Andy Williams

and “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” right now), it was hard to feel anything but festive.

Next up was the lingerie department. I needed a nightgown and robe. Well, *needed* . . . maybe I didn’t *need* them, but I couldn’t see myself sleeping comfortably if I just stripped down to my undies, and I sure couldn’t see myself walking around in this potential fishbowl in a T-shirt, in case the roads cleared and the world came back to life.

Besides, I didn’t actually *have* a nice nightgown and robe (see “T-shirt” above—that’s what I usually sleep in). It seemed like a good idea to have at least one in case I ever had company or, God willing, any sort of romantic life. So I picked them out and went into the dressing room to change.

Did I mention this was fun?

It was *really* fun.

I took the tags off and added them to my pile of clothes at the casuals department cash register.

“The Christmas Waltz” came on, and I began dancing goofily to it, sweeping past the window with its view of the snowy outside, and feeling lighter and happier than

I could remember feeling in a long, long time. *This* was it—*this* was the “holiday spirit” everyone talked about. I’d been meh about it for so long, year after year, but at this moment, it didn’t matter that I was alone and that I didn’t have any big plans for tomorrow; all that mattered was that I was in a magical place, and for the rest of my life no one would ever be able to ruin this moment or take it away from me.

That’s when it happened.

There was a tremendously loud crash in the shoe department, about fifteen yards away, past Men’s Suits and Juniors. Not a “Hm, something fell off the wall, that’s strange, it must not have been on very securely” crash, but more of a “Good lord, the wall must have just caved in!” crash.

Then a shrill, worried exclamation. I’m pretty sure it was “Zooterkins!”

I was not alone.

Also by Beth Harbison



One Less Problem Without You

If I Could Turn Back Time

Driving with the Top Down

Chose the Wrong Guy, Gave Him the Wrong Finger

When in Doubt, Add Butter

Always Something There to Remind Me

Thin, Rich, Pretty

Hope in a Jar

Shoe Addicts Anonymous

Secrets of a Shoe Addict

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A SHOE ADDICT'S CHRISTMAS. Copyright © 2016 by Beth Harbison. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Harbison, Elizabeth M., author.

Title: A shoe addict's Christmas / Beth Harbison.

Description: First edition. | New York : St. Martin's Press, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016024800 | ISBN 9781250087218 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250087232 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Christmas stories. | BISAC: FICTION /

Contemporary Women. | GSAFD: Ghost stories.

Classification: LCC PS3558.A564 S58 2016 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016024800>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: October 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1