

The Christmas Shoe

I sat in my office. Outside the snow was trying to fluff over my windows. It was Christmas Eve and I had a giant Yule log burning in my library hearth. In the Christmas Mood by Glenn Miller was softly serenading me over my laptop speakers. My library was also my office. I should have been curled up in my favorite chair reading, sipping a hot toddy with my feet up and wrapped in fuzzy slippers. Instead, I was working. It was a lingering case, and I was almost done putting the final touches on my notes.

I tapped out a few more notes in the case file and clicked save. Staring bug-eyed at the screen for a few seconds made me realize that I was done. A long drawn out case was finally finished, and my fuzzy slippers were calling to me. I stretched my arms over my head and yawned luxuriously. I glanced at the phone, thinking of calling my partner, but decided he would be busy with his family. No matter, he'd get to work the notes on the next case we got over a major holiday.

I uncurled from my desk chair and groaned as I realized my legs had fallen asleep. I had to stop sitting with my legs crossed when I worked. I tottered toward the library door, shaking some tingling life back into my legs, intending to seek out my fuzzy slippers and the bathrobe my partner had once called scuzzy.

The knock on the door resounded through my drafty, crumbling castle of a house. Yeah, I really lived in a castle. Well, a facsimile of one. My family had a weird history. The knock sounded again and I glanced back at the window that was powdered with tiny snowdrifts. Sighing, I put thoughts of my slippers and robe aside and headed to my front door. Only wayfarers and salesmen came to my front door in this kind of weather. Since it was Christmas Eve, I was guessing the former. My heart gave a small twinge as I anticipated a stray for Christmas.

I looked out of the peep hole and saw a man shivering on my doorstep. Yup, wayfarer. His car had probably broken down. His tousled brown hair was covered in snowflakes and he blew on his hands, stomping his feet. He kept looking at my windows which were lit. In the light of my porch lamp, the guy looked pretty young, maybe late teens, early twenties. I felt another heartstring tighten. I tugged my sweater closer and opened the door. "May I help you?"

The young man looked up and blinked the snow out of his eyes. "Katherine Montrose?"

"Yes..."

"I need you to help me find something."

I stepped back and let the man come in out of the snow. "But, sir, it's uh...you do know it's Christmas Eve, right? I mean, I'm sorry if you don't celebrate Christmas or something, but..." I faltered as I shut the door behind him and studied him in my entrance hall light. He was as I suspected, maybe 20, and dressed in a tweedy outfit of corduroy pants and jacket. He had a plaid scarf generously wrapped around his neck and plain leather shoes, drenched from the snow. His hands were covered in fingerless gloves. My hometown had generally mild winters, but he was underdressed for the current weather.

He was looking down at his feet, his wavy hair dripping onto my tiled floor. He looked up at me shyly. "I know, Miss Montrose." He looked down again. "You see, I've been looking on my own for a very long time and I've become desperate."

I studied him a moment longer. "Uh, ok, well, come on in and warm up." I gestured to my library door where he could catch a glimpse of my glowing hearth. "Go on in. I'll just go grab us some hot drinks and you can tell me about this thing you want me to find, ok?"

He nodded and smiled, and my heart tried to melt before I closed a business like cage of ice around it. Time for heart melting later, Christmas or not. If this was a case I was going to take, I need to stay objective. He wandered into my library, unwrapping his scarf, and I took off for the kitchen to prepare

some hot chocolate, and hot water for tea or instant coffee. I set everything out on a tray and returned to my library ala Mrs. Danvers. I saw my guest shiver a little as I entered. Sheesh, I guess I should have toned down my severity a little. I set the tray down and gave my perspective client a bright smile and tossed my wavy blond hair behind my shoulder to make sure I didn't leave an evil housekeeper impression.

"Now, Mr, eh...what can I do for you?" I asked as I offered hot chocolate, tea and coffee. He chose chocolate. I chose coffee and chocolate. I took my mug and sat across from the guy.

"My name is David Phipps, Miss Montrose," the guy said, taking a sip of his hot chocolate. He scooted his chair a little closer to the fire. "I apologize for coming on Christmas, but as I said, I am at the end of my rope. When I heard you could find just about anything, I had to come." I raised an eyebrow. "I guess it's good that my reputation proceeds me. May I ask who is giving out recommendations?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine. He and I attend Dr. Squire's English class at the university," David Phipps explained. "He said you and Dr. Squire do some sleuthing on the side and that you can find things..." He hesitated. "Like magic."

I chuckled. "Well, I don't find magic and what I do isn't exactly magical, but I do have a talent for finding things. Just how urgent is this search of yours?" I glanced at the clock and noticed that Christmas Eve was slowly inching into Christmas Day and I didn't have my cookies out for Santa yet.

David Phipps pulled an object from inside his coat. How he had hidden it there without my noticing, I have no idea. I stared as he held the item out to me. It was a shoe, a rather fancy woman's shoe, like something worn for a wedding or formal. I blinked up at my client.

"A shoe?" I took a fortifying drink of my coffee. "You need me to find a shoe..."

He nodded. "The match to this shoe, Miss Montrose."

I swallowed more coffee. The boy was handing me a fancy shoe, wanting me to find the match. "Uh, you're sure you want me to find the shoe and not the girl who goes with it?"

"Well, I am hoping that will be the end result, but for now I just need the match to the shoe," David said. "Please, will you help me?"

I studied the shoe. It was a white satin and lace slipper, dirtied by much handling. There wasn't much out of the ordinary to it. I felt a tingle of energy skitter over my arm as I held the shoe, which was a sure sign I could find its match. I looked up at David. "Sure, I can help you." I handed him the shoe. "Why don't you give me a call in a couple of days and I'll start out on the search."

"I need to find the shoe, now, Miss Montrose."

My eyebrow raised on its own accord. "Um, David...mind if I call you David? You can call me Kitty. Miss Montrose is so stuffy...Anyway, I'd really like to help you, but it's, you know...Christmas?"

"Isn't that when you're supposed to help people?"

I felt like I had been stabbed. "Oh, um, uh...yeah...er, well..." I stared at him like a startled reindeer. "Uh, well...what is so urgent?"

"Well, see the party where I got this shoe...well, it um, it happened awhile ago. I tried and tried to find the match, really I did. I've been looking for so long..."

"You're afraid the wearer of those pretty shoes will have forgotten you. Why not just check the

phonebook?”

David Phipps looked at me with big brown embarrassed eyes. “That’s just it, I never got her name. We met, we danced, we laughed, we talked and then she just disappeared.”

“Just like Cinderella.”

He blushed. “Yeah, I know, right? It sounds crazy. I’ve endured no end of teasing from my friends. But I just can’t get her out of my head. And...” He looked up at me, his eyes once again pleading. “She looked scared, Kitty. Just before she ran off...she looked really scared. And not of me, I should add.”

I inhaled deeply and hid my instant concern in my coffee mug. “OK. In that case, David. Let’s go find us a shoe.” I downed my coffee, offered him some more chocolate and left all the stuff on the tray. “You didn’t ask Dr. Squire at all?”

“I couldn’t find him. I supposed he must be off for Christmas or something. I’m sorry, should I have tried him first?”

“Oh no, I can take a case alone. I was just curious.” I smiled and held out my hand. “May I see the shoe again please?”

David handed me the shoe and I sat with it in my hands awhile, just letting my senses take over. I felt the ragged silk, smelled the slightly damp fabric and a waft of leftover perfume. I felt the heat of a foot inside, and heard the click of heels on stone as the wearer walked to her destination. Pairs of things were usually easy to find when I had one of the set. I concentrated now on the tether this shoe held with its mate. It was like a shoe string made out of energy. The little strand swirled out from the shoe and through my mind, as I started to see images of where the shoe had been.

I saw the leg of the foot and heard the rustling taffeta gown of blue. I saw everything from the girl’s perspective as if she was looking down at her shoes, so I never saw above her waist. Unless she found a mirror, I wouldn’t know what she looked like. The vision wavered and I now got a sense of abandonment. It seemed to be the feeling of loss from the girl when she left the other shoe behind. So much could be told from an object, that it was hard to describe. In any case, I had a good idea where I could find the other shoe, and I didn’t like it.

I handed the shoe back and David slipped it into his jacket. “Can you find the match?”

“Yup. Come on, we will take my car.”

“Good, I took a bus.”

I grinned and went to my hall closet to get my coat, satchel and keys. We ventured out into the snow, sprinting to my garage, which wasn’t a short trip. My outbuildings didn’t have the luxury of being attached to my house. I lived in a castle, but I didn’t have servants and my family’s chauffeur died a long time ago. David and I had to go it alone. I got behind the driver’s wheel of my SUV, and we were on the road with windshield wipers whirring and my stereo blasting Christmas carols.

I had to drive some very slippery and treacherous roads to follow the shoe’s lead. David offered to drive once in a generous feat of chivalry, but I explained I had to follow the trail and giving him directions would distract me.

We drove for a long time. It seemed like hours in that snowy tunnel. I was beginning to think my lead was way off. We had driven into the boonies. Snow covered trees, and drifts sparkled in my headlights. Not a house came into sight for miles. I bit my lip and glanced over at my passenger. He was white knuckling the “OSH” - the Oh Shit Handle - of my car. I didn’t think my driving was that bad, but the

roads were definitely a challenge.

“Does any of this look familiar to you?” I asked him.

“No...where are we?”

I shrugged. “Just going where that shoe told me to.” I was getting creepy vibes. If this shoe led to anything other than its match I was going to take down my shingle and retire. We were driving through farm country now, and the snow was getting thicker. “Really, David? None of this looks familiar?”

“Not really, but it’s hard to say with the dark and snow.”

I sighed and drove on. It was Christmas Eve, and I was determined now to help this guy out of the giving spirit, if nothing else. The tether with the shoe was strong and I had to trust that the internal warmer - colder game I was playing would pan out. I knew I was getting warmer, and when I felt hot, I skidded and screeched to a halt with my SUV’s tires groaning on the snow in protest.

“We’re here?” David said tentatively peering into the blizzard.

“Yeah.” I wished I had worn my boots. I was probably going to lose a shoe too. “Uh, over there.” I pointed. In the distance was a barn. It was a barn for a farmhouse and I saw David’s face light up. “Um, well, it’s in the barn,” I told him, not really wanting to see that light dim. He blinked at me, and we got out of the car.

“The barn, huh?”

“Yeah...”

He looked around. “Weird.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t like trespassing, but the house lights were out, and it was unlikely anyone was home. “Let’s just get the shoe and go. No telling when the family will come back. They are probably at church or something.”

I flipped on my flashlight and we trudged through the drifts to the barn. The door screeched open menacingly in the silence of the night. I cringed. David swallowed. “Kitty, what if...”

“Shhh,” I held my finger to my lips. “Let’s just think the happy thoughts.” I didn’t want him to voice his fears out loud. He said his date had been scared the night she lost her shoe. Now I was certain I would find the match to that shoe in this remote barn. I shivered. David sighed.

We went deeper into the barn. The smell of the hay and mustiness of long gone animals overcame the fresh, crisp scent of snow. I cleared my throat and led David still further into the room. It was a big barn. Cow stanchions, horse stalls, hay lofts, heaps of left over hay, storage areas. I was passing one of the last horse stalls when the shoe I was holding felt like it was going to jump out of my hands. I turned toward the stall and like a divining rod, the shoe led me inside.

I scraped away the grubby hay and piles of debris I didn’t want to identify and there, underneath lay the match to the white shoe. A family of mice blinked up into the glare of my flashlight before scattering with loud squeaks of protest.

“Sorry,” I whispered to the mice. I looked up at David who had followed close behind me. “Sorry,” I said to him.

The prospects did not look good. The shoe had been left in an old barn, now home for mice, gathering dust. What possible reason could a girl have to be in a barn wearing white slippers and an evening

gown? Several reasons came to mind, none of them favorable toward David, and most of them hinting of malice. I swallowed, handing him the shoe he had kept for so long. He knelt and put it beside the mouse infested mate. Straightening, he shrugged. "Well, thanks. You certainly can do what you proclaim." I smiled weakly. "Sure."

We plowed our way back to my car and got in. "I'll give you a lift home." The drive to David's flat wasn't too bad. We didn't talk much. I glanced down at his feet, once, kind of wondering why a guy would hold onto a shoe for so long, wishing that I had been able to give him a better outlook, especially on Christmas Eve. I turned up the heat in my car and aimed it at the floor. Our shoes were soaked through. He smiled at me gratefully.

My drive home was just as dismal. I dropped off David, refusing his offer to repay me in hot chocolate. I was tired, depressed and cold. I wanted my scuzzy bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. The hot toddy wouldn't be bad either. I walked into my hall at 11:55. Still time to get out the cookies for Santa. I pattered around in the kitchen for awhile, making the hot toddy and setting out the tray for Santa and his reindeer. Oh yeah, I still believed. You couldn't talk me out of my dream of someday meeting a jolly old man at my Christmas tree. Besides, I really wanted to meet a reindeer up close.

I had just settled into my chair, hot toddy, robe, slippers and blazing fire all in place, when there was a knock on my door. I looked at the clock. It was 12:06 AM. Christmas Day. I grinned. Maybe it was Santa. He would have to deal with my fashionable bath robed attire. I shuffled my way to the door. Peered through the peep hole and groaned. A girl stood on my doorstep. Blond curls were dampened with still falling snow and her cute cheeks were rosy, her pert nose red like Rudolph's. I sighed. I was getting all the strays tonight. I opened the door.

"Merry Christmas!" I said cheerfully, gently tugging the girl into the hall. She didn't look dressed for the weather in a ragged coat and gloves that were fingerless because they were torn instead of made that way. "Come on in. You look chilled to the bone." I led her to the hearth, taking note of her bewildered glances.

I sat her down and served her my hot toddy. "That will warm you up quick."

"Miss Montrose?" the girl said shyly.

"Yup, that's me. Sorry about the garb. I was getting ready for bed."

"I am sorry to bother you." She rummaged through the pockets in her coat. "I need you to help me find something."

"Uh, well, honey, it's Christmas and..." I bit my lip, looking at her rosy cheeks and disheveled appearance. I sighed. "What do you need me to find?"

She unrumped the thing she had bunched in her hand. It was an argyle sock. It's colors were distinct and while there were a few worn spots from what looked like multiple washings, it was in fair condition. I looked up at the girl in shock. "I know that sock!"

The girl blinked at me. "Miss Montrose?" Her expression turned hopeful.

"Yeah, um hang on..." I started fishing through my satchel where I had stashed a scrap of paper. I removed my prize triumphantly. "I don't have to look for that sock." I handed her the paper. "Here. Go there. You'll find the sock. And well, you'll probably find the person wearing it still."

The girl took the paper and looked at the address. "Really? But..."

"Really. Go...I know it." I gently pushed her out of my library, shoving a five dollar bill for bus fare into her other hand. "Merry Christmas."

I returned to my library and stood staring at the flames in my fireplace, smiling. I knew the match for that argyle sock without ever having to touch it. David had been wearing mismatched socks. I had noticed them when I had looked at his cold feet in my car. One of those socks had been the same argyle the girl brought to me. I downed the rest of my hot toddy and threw the glass into the fireplace. "Merry

Christmas, you two.” I told my wayfaring clients. “At least you’ll get to hang out some stockings.”