

WELL HEELED

Alexandra, Xandy to some, X to a few, with disciplined calm and with two enabling friends, called on her dealer to feed her addiction to the sensuous feel of soft calf leather that caressed her feet. Saturday afternoon she left behind a draft of an appellate brief at her law office and, instead, went to South Coast Plaza. They didn't know that the shopping trip would produce inexplicable repercussions.

"Doesn't this feel good, X? Get out of the office?" Clem said.

"I feel the brief calling: Alexandra, come back to the office," X said.

Due to her supervising attorney in one week, the brief was indeed calling to her. The client had been convicted of possession to sell. The brief argued the original arrest constituted illegal search and seizure. The police found ten pounds of cocaine, baggies and a scale (street value \$1,500,000). X believed justice was served when the jury found the client guilty. She loved the law, but thought the client was a marginal citizen. She kept that opinion to herself. An attorney on partner track, X established her worthiness to the firm when she billed at least fifty hours a week, which meant she worked sixty-five. If she could have sprinkled fairy dust on herself to become *more* productive, she would have done so. She had no social life except for mall runs with Clem and Nic.

They ignored the action and mayhem at the carousel: the interminable music that had made them clap when they were three years old, but registered as white noise on that day on the hunt. The smells of French bread, espresso, croissants, and Godiva chocolate did not divert them.

"Is it a difficult case?" Clem asked while she craned her neck in the direction of Burberry.

“No work talk,” Nic said as she pulled her attention away from the handbags in the window of Bally.

They walked along the wide corridors of the über mall three abreast, two blondes, one brunette. Clem a tall thin woman with a bouncy walk in Ferragamo spiked heel black boots with bow on the toe, X with a purposeful walk in Gucci rhinestone flip flops (to take off easily when trying on shoes), and Nic, the last member of the triad and a trained ballerina, walked with her feet splayed out in Tory Burch quilted ballet flats.

They turned right at Cartier. With her arm held out in front of her like Smee spotting Crocodile, Nic pointed to the store in front of them: Nordstrom, the store that brought them to South Coast Plaza.

“I *desperately* need Uggs for skiing,” Nic, the dramatic one, said.

“I need some *shoes*,” X said in her well modulated, dial tone courtroom voice.

“In whose fantasy world?” Clem asked. “You’ve overrun the closets in your bedroom and guest bedroom.”

“I will use your closet.”

“No, no, no, you won’t.”

X referred to the third bedroom she used as an office. She had deeded the closet to Clem, who hid purchases from her husband and introduced them into her closet at home at discreet moments.

They reached the entrance to the sacred ground and already the air smelled different, probably because twenty-year-old women who stood in strategic locations on the main floor spritzed customers with perfume that was being pushed that particular day. However, the trio did

not consider the obvious. Instead, they clung to the idea—like believing in Santa Claus—Nordstrom was magical, even the scent of its air.

“Okay, are we going to break up here and surround them or *pillage* every department *en masse*?” Nic asked.

“You can find me in Shoes,” X said and walked, fairly sprinted, to Women’s Shoes.

Two hours later, carrying two Nordstrom bags each, Clem and Nic did indeed find her in that department. She sat with a harried, yet perpetually helpful clerk at her feet and multi-colored shoeboxes—black, silver, red, pink and white stripe, gold—stacked three and four deep on the floor, adult-sized Legos.

“Two hours, and this is all you’ve looked at?” Nic asked. “You’re slowing down.”

“No, I’ve already re-stocked the ones she didn’t like,” the clerk said, his voice like piped-in elevator music.

Clem counted the boxes aloud. To make a point. “Twenty-two. You’re not serious, are you?” she asked.

“I think I can narrow it down to a more manageable number,” X said.

“Why can’t your manageable number be zero? You’re seriously spending money that should go for your retirement. You can’t wear Stuart Weitzman in a nursing home.” Ever the accountant..

X frowned at Clem, closed her eyes and shook her head from side to side. Clem incessantly got on her case about her shoe shopping. She of course assumed she could indeed wear designer shoes wherever and whenever she chose to and turned her attention back to the booty at her feet. With a rapacious glint in her eyes, she concentrated on the boxes that held the shoes that would complete her life. Clem and Nic browsed through the glass displays. Clem tried

to squeeze her foot into a wedge and succeeded in looking like one of the sisters trying on the glass slipper. Nic looked at the bottoms of shoes to read the prices. With each shoe she groaned, “For a flimsy piece of leather? In your dreams.” X appreciated the humor of Nic’s running commentary, but also found it distracted her from her mission.

“Maybe you shouldn’t look at the prices, Nic,” she said. “Besides, I’m finished.”

The clerk walked to the counter with four boxes. Clem and Nic took chairs on either side of X.

“I’m proud of you, girl. Only four pairs,” Nic said.

“She needs a therapist, not more shoes,” Clem said.

When the clerk returned with two large bags and the receipt for X to sign, Clem looked over at X with a frown. “Alexandra Blair Leon, that’s seriously *more* than my mortgage payment.” She didn’t sound as though she was joking.

“I need good shoes for work. I have to look professional,” X said, looking at the ceiling.

That evening X laid the four shoeboxes on her bed. She breathed in the intoxicating new shoe smell as she found homes for her purchases in her closet. “Darn, I forgot to buy shoe trees.” She found Hayneedle online. While it maintained a website, Hayneedle didn’t take online orders. X called and placed an order for three sets of cedar shoetrees and one set of cedar boot trees in size medium.

“They don’t come in medium,” the Hayneedle rep said. “I need your shoe size.”

“I have always ordered them in medium,” X sighed. Custom shoetrees. Clem would have fun with that. “Size eight. Oh, and a shoe horn, too.”

“Which one do you want?”

“I don’t care. Just a shoe horn,” she said. “You choose.” X had to get back to that appellate brief.

Four days later, while reading and writing and re-writing the analysis of search and seizure laws, she got a call from Hayneedle to schedule delivery.

“Leave it on my front porch.”

“No. We only deliver when the customer is home.”

She scheduled delivery for the next morning.

Promptly at 8:00, a truck pulled into X’s driveway. She walked out onto the forest green covered timber front porch with yellow and red clematis climbing the white pillars and railings. It looked like a porch in Hansel and Gretel’s house. The driver asked her where she wanted them.

“Here—inside the door.” She sipped her tea. She needed to get to work.

The man carried two saplings to the porch steps. X looked up from the chip in the violet nail polish on her thumb to see the man with a small tree in a red can in the crook of each arm.

“You want these *in* the house?” he asked.

“Why are you bringing me trees? I didn’t order trees.”

The man looked at his paperwork and read off X’s name, address, and phone number. “Is that you, ma’am?”

X cringed, not because the information was incorrect, but because he called her ma’am. “Please wait here. I’m going to call your store.”

She got live customer service after being on hold for fifteen minutes listening to a Beatles tribute band's rendition of songs from *Yellow Submarine*.

"You asked for three sets of cedar shoe and one set of cedar boot trees in size eight. Isn't that what you ordered?"

"A shoe tree is something I put in my closet, and what you shipped—"

"Ma'am. You can put them wherever you want, but usually they need sunlight."

Ma'am again. "But there isn't a window in the closet." *Am I really having this conversation?*

"Make sure you water those saplings. They grow into beautiful cedar trees. Yours were grown in Oregon."

X thanked the rep and decided to keep the trees. She had been too busy at work to do much with her backyard and her gardener pined for new plants. *So, what the hell, a couple of trees would spruce up the yard.* She walked back to the porch, where eight young trees and a large box—a size that would hold a washing machine—sat.

"I will take the trees," she told the man. Focusing intently on the trees, she didn't notice the box that sat next to two rockers and almost filled her porch.

"We like to plant the trees ourselves. Give them a good start in life," the man said.

X took two of the saplings and led the man up her driveway to a backyard with annuals and perennials in tasteful flower boxes and grass manicured to within an inch of its dark roots. She considered placement of the trees and pointed to eight spots where she wanted the trees planted. While the man bent to the task of making eighteen-inch deep by ten-inch diameter holes, X paid attention to the trees for the first time. Each one was about three feet tall, with sturdy branches, needles like a Christmas tree, and tiny green buds.

“I guess it’s going to take years before these trees are fully grown,” X said, more of a question than a statement.

“No, these trees grow fast. You’ll be impressed, I think.”

On the next Saturday, enjoying the sun, X sat on her barn red wooden deck at a glass-topped table. Most of her reading time was devoted to work, but that day she she flipped the pages of *Vogue*. She looked up vaguely toward the sky. Something got her attention. She walked over to a tree, then four feet tall. Running needles through her hand, feeling the sun on her face, she looked where the buds had been. They had flowered in a myriad of colors: pinks, reds, yellows, whites, oranges, blues, purples, the effect an *Alice in Wonderland* garden. X bent down and smelled one, but couldn’t connect the smell with a flower. She scowled, shrugged her shoulders and went back to the magazine.

A couple of weeks passed with X jammed at work. She drove from one end of Orange County to the far end of Los Angeles County and east to San Bernardino County. She made court appearances and took depositions in her office, in other attorneys’ offices, in doctors’ offices, in county jail. X wore a suit or dress every day and was on a four-week cycle, where she wore twenty outfits before she had to repeat. (On Saturdays and Sundays she wore jeans.) Her shoes provided infinite combinations. While it was true she had filled closets with shoes, she also collected clothes generally and work attire specifically.

Sunday was overcast, typical for June mornings. X stepped onto the deck, willing her brain to turn off the legal noise. She looked up—for indeed the trees were now about six feet tall—and gasped. It was not the size of the trees that surprised her.

Each tree was filled with shoes: blue wedges, black platform sandals, red slings, purple pumps, leopard print flats, blue and tan oxfords. One tree was filled with boots: black leather low heel round toe, tan suede stacked heel, black leather knee high almond toe, two-tone brown waterproof hiking.

X's scalp tingled. She tried to remember if she owned a ladder.

The next week she took time from work. She called her gardener to tell him she decided to tinker with her yard alone for a bit. She didn't communicate with Nic or Clem, not by phone, fax, email, text, tweet, Instagram, MySpace, Pinerest, Skype, Google+, tumblr, LinkedIn, Facebook or U.S. mail. However, on Friday morning, she placed an urgent call to Clem at her office.

"You have *got* to come over here *now*. Hurry. It's raining. Bring an umbrella."

Clem had been in her office since 7:00 that morning doing quarterly taxes for one of her clients. "Have you been in an accident? Are you hurt?"

"I am fine. I, I'm at home. Hurry. Umbrella. Now. The trees are getting wet. I have to go."

"Trees are supposed to get wet," Clem said into a dead phone. She sighed and stretched languidly, but then hurried to her car.

As Clem walked onto the front porch, X opened the door and pulled on her arm.

“Okay, I’m coming. What’s in the big box?” Clem asked.

“Huh?” X had forgotten about the box. Later. She would deal with it later. “You’ve got to come with me quickly.” She continued to pull Clem into the house.

“What is that smell?” Clem asked. “Wait, hold on,” she said as she stopped in the living room and pried X’s fingers off her arm. “Are you cleaning out your closets and those of all your neighbors or have you been shopping and didn’t invite me?”

The couch, love seat, chairs, coffee table and floor were covered in mounds of shoes like large ant hills.

“Please, I will tell you after we take care of the backyard. They’re getting wet.”

Clem had last been in X’s backyard a month before when some friends got together to grill steaks, a rare night off for X. That evening had turned into a drunk-drugged winner-take-all Trivial Pursuit game.

Clem followed X and almost stumbled on the deck when she saw the trees that filled the yard and came up to the edge of the deck. She counted sixteen of them. They looked like a Christmas tree lot at heights from four to seven feet. Each of the tall trees held shoes nestled in its needles. Clem screamed. X, who had run over to one of the trees, rushed back and put her hand over Clem’s mouth.

“Stop, I beg you. This is not the time for hysterics.”

“I think this is an excellent time for hysterics. Tell me what I’m seeing. What have you done? Your previously boring backyard is now a forest—filled with *shoes*?”

“Yes, that’s correct. And it’s raining.”

Clem looked at X and recognition set in. “Oh, of course. We have to get the shoes *off* the trees.” She shook her head. “Why did you put shoes *on* the trees?”

“I didn’t. Do you get it?”

“Ah, X, I—”

X handed Clem a black trash bag. They began with the lower branches and filled the bags that they stacked in the garage. Then X got on the ladder and dropped the shoes down to Clem. When they could no longer reach shoes with the ladder, they shook the trees and tried to catch them as though they were in-field fly pupae. After an hour and a half passed and the only shoes left were on the tallest branches, X and Clem sat on the top step of the deck. Their clothes were soaked and their hair stuck to their faces. The rain continued unperturbed, the sky the color of a scouring pad.

“You owe me for this outfit. It’s ruined, and I only wore it one time,” Clem said. “If you had told me what we were going to be doing, I could’ve stopped at home to get something more appropriate to wear for the occasion. And the number for a psychiatrist.” She rung out her pant legs.

“Number one, I couldn’t explain this in a phone call,” X said as she opened her arms to take in the majesty of her backyard. “Number two, there was not time. Number three, I think we can find something in the house to repay you for the suit. Number four, I am not crazy.”

“We’ll discuss number four later. Are these shoes all the same size?”

“Yes.”

“Let me guess. Your size? Um hum. Eights? I’m an eight in a half. I’ll make them fit. I want to know how this happened, and I don’t want you to leave out any detail.”

“Let us go in and grab something to drink.”

Shoes filled every room of the house, hundreds of shoes, thousands of shoes. The house smelled like cowhide. X and Clem sat in the only free space, X's claw foot bathtub. They wore fleecy robes—X's was pink and Clem's, white—and draped their legs over the edge of the tub. Clem wore five-inch heel gold sandals, while X wore black patent leather stiletto knee-length boots. They sipped their drinks and X told Clem about ordering shoe trees and the delivery of the trees, and the buds and flowers and—Shazam!—shoes, and she ordered more trees, and she plucked pairs of shoes off trees to match her outfits, and after she took a pair, new buds appeared, followed by flowers and more shoes.

“Once after I plucked black Ferragamo loafers, I said aloud, ‘I want these in brown,’ thinking I was talking to myself. The next day new buds appeared, then flowers, and yesterday the brown loafers sat in a branch like Christmas decorations. Today before it started raining I told a tree I wanted Prada one-inch sandals in lavender. A bud popped out like that.” She snapped her fingers. “I asked for any shoe by Manolo, then changed my mind. I said to the tree, ‘Never mind. I take it back.’ Too late. The tree delivered, apparently not interested that I didn't want them.”

Clem hoisted herself out of the tub. “I'll try your tricks later. It's time to call Nic. It's not sporting to leave her out of this.”

“But she's a nine-and-a-half. These shoes won't fit her. We'd torture her when she saw them.”

They threaded cautiously through the narrow aisles between heaps of shoes. Clem stopped to choose some of them, attempting to remove them without starting an avalanche.

“Shoes can always be stretched,” Clem said.

“Come on. There’s only so much a piece of leather can withstand. All right. I’ll call her.” She found her phone in the kitchen sink. “Hi. Clem and I want to show you something.” She listened. “Yes, we can wait until you finish your rehearsal.” She listened again. “I won’t tell you what it is, but get here as soon as you can.” X ended the call. “There, she will be here in about an hour.”

“In the meantime, why don’t we open the box on the porch?” Clem asked.

“The box! I keep forgetting the box.”

They clicked in their heels onto the porch, still wearing the robes. Rainwater dripped from the shingle roof, making plunking sounds as it hit the concrete sidewalk. They decided to wait to open the box until Nic arrived.

“Let’s give her a thrill, since she missed the trees,” Clem said.

As the gray sky turned to darkness the rain stopped. Since they didn’t want to go back in the bathtub, Clem perched on top of the box, kicking her new heels against the cardboard, and X sat against her red front door, stretching her legs out in front of her. The porch light made X’s patent leather boots shine as though they were wet like oil. The ladies shared a joint and margaritas. (X found the blender under Stuart Weitzman brown suede booties.)

“I can still smell the shoes out here,” Clem said, as she munched on a tortilla chip.

“Are you ready for another margarita?” Without waiting for an answer X poured more into Clem’s glass.

They sang “Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes” and “Footloose,” X thinking that karaoke had been actually useful.

Nic arrived as X was making a mercy run to the kitchen for more munchies. X returned with Nic's drink. Nic stood on the bottom step and stared at Clem on top of the box, wearing the fluffy white robe and the pair of gold heels, and holding a margarita glass in one hand and a joint in the other.

"Now that's a sight you don't see every day. Clem, you look like you're hatching a giant square egg," Nic said.

X and Clem found that statement hysterically funny. Clem laughed from down in her sculpted abs and whacked the box with the hand that held the glass, causing tequila, triple sec and Rose's lime juice to slosh over her hand. X held her breath, then pinched her nose because she was hiccupping. Tears streaked her face.

"Wow, am I a couple of hours behind you two. What's that smell?" Nic asked.

That started X and Clem all over again. Clem snorted like a spotted brood sow drinking a chocolate milkshake. X chortled and continued to hiccup. They looked at each other and pointed at Nic, who appeared not to appreciate whatever psychic message was being transmitted.

"I'm here. Why are you both in bathrobes? Is there something weird going on?" Nic leaned against the railing.

Clem couldn't take the questions any longer. She jumped down from the box.

"Hey, nice shoes. Are they new?" Nic asked Clem. She took the joint out of Clem's hand and took a hit.

"Look," Clem said, taking Nic's hand. "Come with me."

X, who blocked the front door, reluctantly stood up.

"Sick boots," Nic said. "The pink robe kind of ruins the effect if you're going for slutty."

X simply nodded as they walked into her living room.

“God almighty! What is all this?” Nic asked as she fingered various shoes while they slowly took the tour.

X and Clem told their versions of the story, which caused Nic to go to the backyard with a flashlight because she believed her friends were perpetrating a gigantic hoax, an ultra expensive gigantic hoax. She returned to the kitchen.

“They’re up there. They’re really on those trees. You guys put them there. ‘Fess up.”

“Even as much as I spend on shoes, do I look like I could afford to buy all these?”

“Hey! What about the box?” Clem asked for about the fifteenth time that day.

The three trooped back out to the front porch, and X gave Nic a knife. “You do the honors.”

“You haven’t yet explained the shoes. Okay, okay. Don’t peek,” Nic said, getting into the spirit of the evening without benefit of the spirits.

X and Clem turned their backs on the box. They heard Nic slice the top of it open.

“What the fuck?” Nic asked. She held the top open, and the other two peered into the dark contents. “Why did you order a tuba?”

X furrowed her brow for a couple of seconds and then laughed. She leaned over and held onto her thighs, a kinky yoga posture considering the boots.

“Share,” Clem said, also feeling left out.

“I ordered a shoe horn.”

Nic and Clem tore away the cardboard, and Nic and X hoisted the oddly-shaped instrument onto Clem’s lap.

“Jeez, this is heavy,” Clem said. She blew into it, and a sound like a mating Indian bull elephant came forth from the bell, along with ballet flats, slippers, tennies, topsiders and running

shoes. Nic and X caught some of the them, but couldn't get them all, because Clem continued to blow.

“Stop. You've got to stop. You're going to cause a neighbor to call the police on me, and how do I explain this?” X asked as she pointed to the porch floor. Then she looked at Nic.

Her friend stood stone still. She held nine or ten assorted shoes to her chest with both hands as she stared down at the pile at her feet, as though she had come out on the wrong end at the sale rack. “Oh, X, I knew you were a clothes horse, but—”

“No!” X said, as she dropped shoes and reached out to put her hand over Nic's mouth. Nic moved out of her reach.

“No, Nic. Take it back. Take it back right now,” Clem said.

“What did I say? I was just commenting on how X has always been a clothes horse, but she has taken it to a new level.”

“Nic, please stop talking,” Clem said, as she attempted to extricate herself from the tuba.

“Okay, all right, I take it back.” Nic said.

But it was too late.