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I should've known I'd lose my job after splurging on my first pair of Valentino boots. Actually, they were my first Valentino anything. I don't even own fake Valentino. My neighbor Monica has a fake Valentino purse, but my older sister has the real thing—along with an impressive variety of other authentic Valentino items. Callie tosses the Valentino name around with ease, as if she's on personal terms with the designer himself. And I suppose I'm slightly awed by this or perhaps just envious. Whatever the reason, I splurged awhile back, and now I'm fairly certain these boots will be my last Valentino of any kind.

The truth is, I'd been eying those sleek brown beauties since late August. It figures that Martolli's of Seattle would put them in the front window while it was still ninety degrees outside. But ignoring the fact that my feet were hot and sweaty in my Anne Klein sandals, which weren't exactly cheap, I ate the bait. I immediately began to imagine how the exquisitely shaped four-inch heels would make me look taller, thinner, and more successful and might possibly even get me that promotion I'd been stealthily pursuing all summer. While other employees were sneaking in extra-long

lunches, extended vacations, shortened days, and secret trysts in the copy room, I slaved. Please, do not get me going about the copy room—those two sex maniacs, unlike me, are still gainfully employed. But back in August, I honestly believed those boots would be my ticket to happiness, a better love life, and a new-and-improved position in our marketing firm, one of the biggest and best in Seattle. It just made sense.

I must admit that I freaked over the price of those delectable boots—at first anyway. But then I rationalized, which I am quite good at, telling myself, *Okay, you're thirty-one, Cassidy, and still depressingly single, but you've got a decent job in a top firm, and your credit is reasonably good, plus you did just give twenty bucks to the Make-A-Wish Foundation at Safeway last night. Seriously, don't you deserve those boots?*

Never mind that my checking account was a little on the skinny side; I knew I'd be getting paid in a couple of weeks. It wouldn't kill me to live on ramen noodles for a few days or even forgo my morning latte for a while. I mean, a girl's gotta make sacrifices sometimes. So when the saleswoman offered me that extra ten percent discount if I opened up a Martolli's account, well, it just seemed like fate. Those soft suede boots were as good as mine!

"Why not?" I told the slightly gaunt brunette as I carefully filled out the detailed application, promising myself that I'd pay off the entire balance with my next check. I'd be broke for the rest of the month. But I do try to reserve my credit card for real emer-

gencies or necessities or when I'm running low on cash or perhaps just desperate for a girls' night out before payday. And then I always try to pay off my cards promptly. Well, mostly anyway. No one's perfect. Having a sleek, gold credit card at Martolli's—which caters to a certain clientele, is only located in truly cosmopolitan cities, and is the only designer store in Seattle that carries Valentino—well, it seemed an arrival of sorts. I felt very grown-up.

I carried my large package home with a sense of real accomplishment, as if it were my personal trophy. Like a huntress who had tracked and stalked and finally bagged her prey, I walked victoriously down the street toward my apartment. But once I got inside my small studio, I was hit by a tidal wave of guilt. How could I possibly have spent that much money on a ridiculous pair of boots? My younger sister is always reminding me that children are starving and dying in Uganda right now, and I'm sure she'd have a cow over what I just spent on footwear. It could've fed an entire village for a year, I'm sure. They're just boots, for Pete's sake, and who really cares if they're Valentino or not? So I put the over-size bag into my closet—out of sight, out of mind—and promised myself I'd return them the very next day.

The very next day came, and I didn't return the boots. I mean, what was I going to tell the saleswoman? That I'd decided they were too expensive? How humiliating would that be anyway? Oh, sure, I could lie. My friend next-door, Monica Johnson, has no problem with this sort of thing. She's the Return Queen, with very few scruples. I was with her once at Macy's, and I actually saw a salesclerk

cringe when Monica stepped up to the poor woman's register. I happen to know that Monica actually wears a lot of her purchases before she returns them, snipping the price tags and everything. (Of course, she only wears them once, or so she says, and only for special events or important job interviews.) Then, like it's no big deal, she returns the items afterward. She says she's good advertising for the stores because she's so tall and thin and gorgeous and the clothes look fantastic on her. And while I can't disagree with that, her values are not the same as mine. No matter how desperate I might be over Valentino or any designer, I could never do something that low. First of all, I don't have that kind of nerve (or maybe it's verve) to pull it off. Even if I did, I would feel too guilty. Besides, I'm a very bad liar. My ears turn bright red if I don't tell the truth. Monica won't even let me shop with her if she's returning something—she swears my expression alone would tip them off.

Somehow I let nearly two weeks slip by without returning those boots. I always had a good excuse. It was too late; it was too hot; I was too tired. I'd tell myself that I would return those boots the next day right after work, but I just couldn't bring myself to actually do it. Never mind that I'd taken them out of their beautiful box a few times. I'd stroked the buttery-soft suede and fingered the cool trim that runs down the side, a detail that's meant to elongate the leg. Yes, I even inhaled the sweet smell of leather, rubbing it across my cheek, carefully avoiding drooling on the lovely boots that I kept telling myself *must* be returned.

Finally, at the end of September, one of those perfect boot days

cropped up. The weather was crisp and cool, with leaves just starting to turn. I pulled out one of my favorite cool-weather suits, a gorgeous Ralph Lauren tweed that simply begged for those brown Valentino boots. The skirt was just the perfect length for knee-high boots. They were made for each other.

Oh, why not? With a sense of adventure, maybe even danger, I pulled out the slick Martolli's bag once again. I slipped out the large, impressive Valentino box, and slowly, almost reverently, opened the lid. I carefully removed the amazing boots. I took my time examining each detail, and I asked myself, *Why shouldn't I keep them?* They were, after all, exquisite. Oh, that luxurious feel of fine Italian leather—so smooth, softer than a baby's bottom. Maybe that's the thing that got me, since I'm sure to be middle-aged before I ever have a chance to hold a baby of my own. No matter how I hint, Eric barely seems to notice that my body clock is ticking faster than ever. Sometimes I imagine the hands on my clock whirling around so rapidly that I could use it as a fan. Perhaps I'll need it for hot flashes someday. Anyway, I knew I deserved these boots!

So I pulled on the first boot, giving it a firm tug to get it over my rather high instep before I zipped it snugly around my calf. "Maybe *these* babies will get Eric's attention," I grunted to myself as I tugged on the second boot. Maybe this head-turning footwear could show that slow-moving man that I'm a hot babe and worth paying serious attention to. Or maybe I could just give him a big kick in the—

I reeled in my imagination. I was, after all, getting dressed for work.

That's when it occurred to me that perhaps these boots might be just the number to get my boss's attention today. Really, as I strutted around my apartment, it seemed highly plausible that these incredibly cool boots might actually help my slightly arrogant, I'm-so-cool, thirty-something boss, George, see that I, Cassidy Cantrell, had something going on as well. These expensive and impressive boots were proof that I, too, was up-and-coming, hip and cool, and someone my boss should be watching a bit more closely. In fact, these boots seemed to almost shout, "Look out! This girl is going places! She is real promotion material!"

With both boots on, I checked out my image in the full-length mirror. And if I do say so myself, I did look pretty hot. Okay, I was well aware of the fact that I'd put on a few extra pounds this past year, and maybe the jacket didn't button quite as smoothly as it used to, but it looked perfectly fine open. In all fairness, the weight gain was really Eric's fault. If he'd only get serious about commitment instead of playing stupid mind games... But I didn't want to go back there just yet. I needed to keep my focus positive. I had to get my head into my new role as the successful career woman, that hardworking girl who'd paid her dues, put in her time, and was now ready and willing to step up a few more rungs on the corporate ladder. I'd seen others doing it recently. Claire Hoffman had recently been made a VP. Why shouldn't it be my turn to move up? I'd done a fantastic job on my latest project—a project that was

due today. A project that I would proudly turn in while wearing these boots! I couldn't wait to see George's face!

I don't know why I didn't sense something in the air when I walked into the office that morning. Looking back, I do recall an uneasy expression on the receptionist's face, as if she knew something was going down, and in retrospect, I'm certain she did. I'm sure that she and many others had been briefed. But I suppose I was too focused on those daring boots and on making a spectacular impression as I carried my project directly to George's office. I could've sent it by Claudia, my faithful assistant (actually she was the faithful assistant to several of us), but I wanted George to see me up close and personal. I wanted him to be impressed by both my work and those amazing boots.

It made so much sense at the time. But it all seems so silly now.

"George is busy," said his executive assistant, Ginnie, when I made my grand appearance. I did observe that she didn't make eye contact with me. It should've been my first clue.

"Can you call me when he's available?" I asked, holding my precious folder tightly because I wanted to present it to him personally.

"Sure." She flipped through her Day-Timer, keeping the conversation short, guarded, limited.

"Thanks," I said, starting to walk away.

"Nice boots," she called after me.

I turned to smile, but she was glued to her Day-Timer again. "Thank you," I said in a cheerful and confident tone. *Yes*, I thought as I strutted away, *these boots are already working for me.*