



‘I’d die for that purse,’ Marcie said.
‘I’d kill for it,’ I replied.

Thus, the difference between me and my best friend, Marcie Hanover.

We were at the Beverly Center, LA’s mecca for expensive handbags, and we’d come to worship at the altar of Gucci, Prada, Fendi, and other high-end gods.

Calling Marcie and me appreciative of designer purses wouldn’t do our neuroses justice. To say that we were obsessive, compulsive, crazed white twenty-somethings might be more accurate.

We’d long ago faced the truth: we’re handbag whores.

Marcie glanced at her wristwatch. ‘Guess you’d better go, huh?’

I looked at my own watch. It matched the Dooney & Bourke barrel bag I was carrying.

Nearly two o’clock. Time to go to my ‘other’ job.

With great reluctance we left the Kate Spade display and the black hobo purse for which Marcie had been ready to die and I’d been willing to kill. The November, Sunday afternoon crowd carried us through the mall toward the escalator to the parking garage, and I had every intention of actually leaving. Then, I swear, light suddenly beamed down from above, and really, I swear,

angels began to sing, and Marcie and I were frozen in humble reverence.

The Louis Vuitton store.

I gasped and she made that little mewling sound that I suspected – ugh, gross – she only made during sex, and we both rushed to the display windows.

Louis Vuitton. Now, this was a company. These people knew how to make bags. They knew their accessories. From key chains to steamer trunks, they had it all. Handbag heaven, no doubt about it.

Then I spotted it. A gorgeous organizer at center stage in the display window.

My stomach knotted and my heart raced. It took everything I had not to lick the glass.

‘I’m getting that,’ I declared.

‘It’s nearly seven hundred dollars.’

‘I’m getting it.’

‘But what about buying Christmas gifts?’ Marcie asked.

‘Screw Christmas.’

‘And your New Year’s resolution? You took that second job so you could pay off your credit cards.’

I hate it when other people make good sense.

‘I’m getting that bag,’ I said again, mentally etching the conviction into the lining of my brain.

‘You’re going to be late,’ Marcie said, glancing at her watch again. ‘You know what happens if you’re late.’

I was glued to that window. ‘Yeah, in a minute . . .’

‘Now, Haley,’ Marcie said, with a fierceness you wouldn’t expect from a petite, blue-eyed blonde. ‘Step away from the handbags. Now.’

She tugged on my arm, breaking the spell.

‘Thanks for talking me down,’ I told her.

You can't find a friend like Marcie just anywhere.

'See you,' she called, as I walked away.

I found my Honda in the crowded parking lot and headed north on the 101 freeway, visions of the Louis Vuitton organizer dancing behind my eyes.

I had to get it. I had to. And I could manage it. I could.

Just a week ago I'd taken a second job at a department store for extra money. I wanted to go all out for Christmas this year, I'd told myself, really do it up right, give everyone a fabulous gift. I wanted some things for myself too, of course.

And there was that slight miscalculation I'd made in my checking account.

So with my evenings and weekends free, I'd taken a part-time, Christmas-help job as a salesclerk at Holt's Department Store. It was a midrange store that carried clothing and shoes for the whole family, housewares, kitchen items, and small electronics.

Holt's wasn't my first choice. I'd applied at all the upscale stores – the ones that carried designer handbags, where I could avail myself of a sizable employee discount – but none of them had offered me a job. So I ended up at Holt's.

Holt's motto was 'Of Course You Can,' the *you* being the customer, unfortunately. As a salesclerk, I had to provide top-quality service at all times, to assist customers in every way possible, to go the extra mile for them, and do it all with a big-of-course-you-can smile on my face.

All of this for about seven bucks an hour.

Yeah, right.

Holt's had policies and procedures in place to handle

any situation, and these had been reviewed in depth during my orientation, or at least that's what someone told me later. I drifted off during orientation.

I took the off-ramp and whipped around a couple of slow-moving cars to get into the Holt's parking lot, then cut off an SUV and grabbed a choice space near the door.

I sat in my car for a moment looking up at the blue neon sign that spelled out HOLT's in cursive. I'd been here five days now and, so far, my journey to The Dark Side of retail wasn't great.

Not that I think I'm all-that, or anything. But, jeez, come on. Seven bucks an hour to fold merchandise, stock shelves, and actually wait on customers? And smile at the same time?

Maybe I wouldn't feel this way if I didn't already have a real job. Again, not to sound bigheaded, but it's with the most prestigious law firm in Los Angeles, with sumptuous offices located on three floors of the best building in Century City.

So you might think that I, Haley Randolph, with my long, coltlike legs, shampoo-commercial-thick dark hair, and my fifty percent beauty-queen genes, have superior skills of some sort to be sought after by such a highly regarded firm. I don't. So then you might believe it was simply destiny, serendipity, or good mojo that got me the job. Nope. It's that I'm a heck of a partier and know how to pick a great club.

I woke up one Sunday afternoon about four months ago with a business card clutched in my hand from some guy named Kirk Keegan. An attorney at a law firm on Wilshire.

I shot up in bed. An attorney? What had I done last night?

I didn't remember a car accident, or being in jail – I'd remember that, wouldn't I? But I didn't remember this guy either, so could I really trust my memory?

He called later that afternoon and I stood horrified at the sight of his name on my caller ID.

Was he calling to warn me that the police were on their way to arrest me and that I should make a break for the border, take a room on the second floor of the Motel Marta in Cabo under the name Juanita Rivas? Attorneys do that, don't they?

Damn, I should have paid better attention in Spanish class.

I'm not big on suspense, so I answered the phone. Kirk Keegan's voice came through smooth and mellow, despite the background noise.

'We met at the club last night,' he said.

We did?

'Yes,' I said, because I definitely remembered going to a club. Otherwise, I was clueless.

'I was impressed with you,' Kirk said.

And why wouldn't he be? I was carrying a beaded BJ bag and had on the sweet little black dress I'd just bought at Banana Republic.

'So I wondered if you're interested in Pike Warner?' Kirk asked.

Pike Warner . . . Pike Warner . . . was that the new handbag line from DKNY?

'Well, sure,' I told him.

'Be there first thing Monday morning. I'll phone in a recommendation,' Kirk said. 'Human Resources is on fourteen. You still have my card, don't you? With the address?'

I looked down at the bent, dog-eared business card

I'd spent the night with. Pike Warner was the law firm he worked for. Kirk Keegan was offering me a job there?

I didn't know the first thing about working at a law firm. My knowledge of the law itself didn't extend much past the consequences of exceeding the speed limit, and then only if you got caught, of course. I'd be completely lost. Totally out of my element.

'Sure,' I said. 'I'll be there.'

'Good. Keep me posted. Let me know how it goes,' Kirk said.

The next morning I called in sick at the real estate company where I worked, using the touch-of-the-stomach-flu excuse, a favorite of mine, and drove to the impressive office building in Century City.

The HR lady had only recently arrived on Earth from another planet, obviously, because she took one look at my job history – lifeguard, file clerk, receptionist, and two weeks at a pet store – and decided I might fit in nicely in the accounting department. When I announced I was pursuing my BA, which really meant that the semester after high school I'd enrolled in community college, taken two classes, one of which was PE, she immediately scheduled me for the all-important Pike Warner employment evaluation. A test to see if I actually had any math skills, something the finance department seemed interested in.

Go figure.

I passed the test, receiving, oddly enough, the exact score as the guy sitting next to me, and was brought on board Pike Warner and made part of the Accounts Payable unit.

They gave me a huge salary – well, huge by my standards – and my credit card balances had gone up

proportionally. Christmas was on the horizon. Gucci had come out with a new tote. And there was that troubling miscalculation I'd made in my checking account.

So here I was, sitting in my car, staring at the Holt's sign, shoppers streaming into the store like picnic ants on a sugar high, who expected to be catered to, waited on, and indulged by a minimum-wage grunt wearing an of-course-you-can smile.

Though Thanksgiving was coming up, the store wasn't decorated for Christmas yet, like most stores were. Something about a Holt's tradition, I vaguely recalled from a lucid moment during orientation. But the store was busy. Shoppers filled the aisles, talking loud, letting their children run through the racks of clothes.

Just inside the entry, Julie something-or-other sat at a table inviting customers to complete a credit card application and handing out half-pound boxes of candy for those who did.

Julie was nineteen – five whole years younger than me – small, cute, and bubbly, the perfect person to sell credit, or so I was told. I'd asked for the job myself – you got to sit down and look out the window – but was turned down. Apparently, my of-course-you-can smile needs some work.

The lines at the checkout were long, since only three of the eight registers were open. I made my way to the rear of the store, off the sales floor and into the area that housed our customer service booth, which handled all returns, exchanges, and accompanying complaints, the restrooms, the employee break room, and offices. Working in the customer service booth was a crappy job. It took a special kind of person to handle it.

Just as well that my of-course-you-can smile was subpar, I'd decided on my second day there.

I went through the swinging door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY to the break room. There were tables and chairs, a microwave, refrigerator, vending machines, and posters plastered all over the walls about job safety, our rights as employees, the current Holt's marketing plan, and a teaser about the store's upcoming surprise Christmas merchandise extravaganza.

Rita was in the break room too, standing by the time clock and looking at her watch.

Rita hates me. But that's okay. I hated her first.

Rita was in her late thirties, only slightly taller than she was wide, and had worked at Holt's, apparently, since sometime before the invention of the cash register. She always wore stretch pants and knit tops with farm animals on them. The Dooney & Bourke handbag I carried – not counting the matching watch – cost more than all the clothing in Rita's closet combined.

'I was just about to put your name on the board,' she told me, voicing her approval yet sounding excited at the prospect.

Rita was the cashiers' supervisor. Holt's hierarchy of supervision had many levels. Store manager, assistant store manager, area manager, department manager, department lead, and at the very bottom rung of the ladder, minimum-wage peons like me. All the supervisors were designated by a number and they were forever being paged to a certain department, which also had a number. One-one to four-six. Two-three to seven-five.

It was at this point during orientation that my eyes had glazed over.

Rita was also the time clock monitor. If an employee was late coming in for a shift, Rita wrote the person's

name on the white board by the fridge. Yeah, just like fourth grade. If you got your name on the board five times in one month, you got fired.

That I remember from orientation.

‘And hello to you too, Rita,’ I said, as I punched my time card with a full eight seconds to spare.

‘You’ve already had two lates,’ Rita said, as if my tardiness was some sort of personal insult.

‘Thanks for keeping track of it for me,’ I told her. ‘I’ll let you know when I need an update again.’

‘I ought to tell Richard about this,’ she said.

Richard was the assistant store manager. And, believe me, there was a reason the letters *a-s-s* were in his job title.

‘Tell him what, Rita? That I was on time for work again today?’ I asked, giving her my screw-you smile. That one I’ve got down cold.

I put my purse in my locker and hung my employee name badge around my neck. I’d asked for a name badge that had ‘Sue’ on it, in case someone I knew caught me working in the store and I could claim to be my own identical-twin cousin or something, but apparently that was against company policy. Not that I’m ashamed to work a second job, or a job at Holt’s. But come on, I work for Pike Warner.

‘You’re in ILA tonight,’ Rita said, looking at the schedule on the wall, as if I couldn’t read it myself. She sneered at me and left the break room.

I gave her a minute, then headed out to the sales floor trying to remember what ILA was. They probably covered that in orientation. From the corner of my eye I saw Rita glaring at me from inside the customer service booth, so I strode across the sales floor as if I actually

knew which department I was supposed to work in tonight.

Holt's was a one-story. It was big, but since it didn't have 'mart' in the title, it wasn't big enough to get lost in. Or hide from your supervisor.

'You. Excuse me. You. Over here.'

Thinking it was a customer calling me, I kept walking. 'Holly? Holly!'

I recognized the voice. It was Evelyn in Intimates – Damn. Intimates department. The 'I' in ILA.

I hate that department.

I love intimates – which means 'lingerie' in retail-speak – but Holt's employees, at least the Christmas employees, didn't get to while away the time picking out panties or trying on bras, which takes all of the fun out of lingerie.

Evelyn wound her way through the racks. She was fortyish, neat, trim, and could pass for a junior high English teacher. Her idea of a midlife crisis would probably be switching to hoop earrings.

She took an exhausted breath. 'Holly, if you don't mind, could you please—'

'It's Haley,' I told her.

Evelyn froze and color flashed across her cheeks. 'Oh. Oh dear. I'm so sorry. I thought—'

'It's okay,' I said, because now I was feeling sorry for her. 'What do you need me to do?'

'If you don't mind, could you please recover this area?' she asked.

'Recover' is department store lingo for cleaning up after swarming hordes of customers.

Evelyn looked at the clipboard in her hand and gave me an apologetic half smile. 'You get a break tonight, but no lunch.'

That's because Richard did the employee work schedules and cut everybody's shift fifteen minutes short just to screw us out of a break.

'I'll be back later to check on you,' Evelyn promised.

The department was a mess. Bras were falling off hangers, bikinis, thongs, and granny panties were all mixed together on the display tables, someone had strewn two dozen packs of panty hose on the floor.

Oh well. *That's what I'm here for*, I reminded myself. To work. Make extra money for Christmas. Buy that Gucci tote and the Louis Vuitton organizer. And do something about that concerning miscalculation in my checking account.

I started straightening the panty hose, keeping my head down to avoid eye contact with customers, listening to babies cry and the mind-numbing music on the PA system. Every so often a voice would break in, paging one of the store supervisors to Customer Service, the telephone, or to a register.

A momentary lapse caused me to glimpse a customer at the bra racks. I dropped to my knees behind the panty hose.

'Excuse me?'

Too late. She'd seen me.

I duck-walked around the end of the display, but I wasn't quick enough.

'Excuse me!'

She was twenty, maybe, wearing jeans and a low-cut T-shirt, and waving a bra at me.

I got to my feet. 'Can I help you?'

I tried for my of-course-you-can smile but couldn't quite pull it off.

'This department is a mess! Totally! I can't find anything!'

‘Would you like to complete a comment card?’ I asked.

‘No!’ She shook the bra at me again. ‘I want this bra! In beige!’

I took it from her. Only a 32B. How sad. I might have felt sorry for her if she wasn’t being such a bitch.

I spent a few minutes looking at the style, then examining the tag.

‘We’re out of these,’ I told her.

She huffed loudly. ‘Could you at least go look?’

‘Sure.’

I took the bra, left the department, walked down the aisle past a couple of customers – whom I avoided – and through the double doors to the stockroom.

I loved the stockroom. It was absolutely huge. Towering shelves stuffed with crisp, new merchandise. A different section for each department. There were naked mannequins, signs, fixtures, and lots of racks and carts for moving merchandise. It was quiet back here too. The replenishment team worked early in the morning restocking all the merchandise in the store, and the truck team only showed up when there was merchandise to be unloaded. Almost no one came back here at night.

Just inside the door was Domestics, a rainbow of bedspreads, towels, and sheets. And a comfy place to sit too.

I pulled two king-size Laura Ashley bed-in-a-bag sets off the shelf, sat down, and stretched out my legs. Nice. I leaned back and closed my eyes, letting thoughts of that Louis Vuitton organizer fill my head. I would get it. I just had to figure out how.

After a while I got up, put the bed sets on the shelf, and went back to the lingerie department. The customer was still there, still fuming.

‘We’re out,’ I told her.

‘Fine!’ She stomped away.

I love this job.

I went to the bra racks and, yes, they were a mess. Totally. I spent a few minutes straightening them, then headed for the stockroom. There were racks of bras back there. I’d seen delivery trucks at the loading dock every day I’d been there, bringing tons of merchandise for the Christmas shopping season.

I wound my way through Domestics, past Housewares, and up the metal and concrete stairs to the second floor. A conveyor belt ran alongside the stairs for large items, along with an overhead conveyor for hanging items, and I was tempted to hop on and take the easy way up. But it was early in my employment with Holt’s. No reason to do all the fun stuff right away.

The lighting was harsh and it was chilly as I wound my way through the shelves of merchandise to the far back corner of the stockroom where the intimate apparel was located.

There was Richard, the assistant store manager. I’d heard him being paged on the store PA over and over tonight. No wonder he hadn’t answered.

Richard was facedown on the floor. Dead.