

CHAPTER ONE

I'm not gonna wear it today. I don't have any so I shouldn't have to wear it.

Yolanda stood naked in her bedroom, looking with disgust at her bra. She opened her closet door and looked at her body in the full-length mirror. Nope, nothing had changed; she was as skinny as ever, and her breasts still looked like two angry mosquito bites. Running her hand down her flat stomach, she imagined her hips miraculously spreading, making her look more like a woman. She turned sideways, confirming once again how sad and pathetic her flat butt was. She grabbed it, trying to imagine that it was big and round. But there was precious little to grab—other than skin. Even though she had performed this ritual many times, she still experienced a sense of disappointment.

Sighing, she looked at her bra again. With its pink lace flowers and set in white satin it was pretty, beautiful in fact. But she felt vaguely cheated as it didn't do the job it was designed for—lift, support, define. It did nothing but limply rest on her chest. Putting the bra on, Yolanda once again relived the cruel taunts of the boys in junior high, who would run their hands down the girls' backs feeling for bra strap to snap. But when one of them ran his hands down her back, there was no strap. She was mortified when she learned she was the only girl in her class who wasn't wearing a bra. Yolanda remembered going home and begging her mother to buy her a bra. Her first bra was size 32AA, the same size now. She pulled her white cotton shirt over her head and slipped into her black slacks, cursing her ancestors for sleeping with white women, thus diluting what could have been a thick, curvy body.

"Hey, Precious, baby. You hungry?" Yolanda asked, picking up her cat and rubbing behind her ears until she heard her familiar purr. "Yeah, well I'm hungry, let's go eat breakfast."

She carried Precious to the kitchen and sat her down gently on the beige laminate kitchen counter. It was a small kitchen, more like an aisle really, but it fit her cozy studio apartment perfectly.

"So what do you want to eat today?" Yolanda asked absently, looking through dozens of cans of cat food in her kitchen cabinet.

Precious stopped licking her paws long enough to look at Yolanda blankly.

"Okay, tuna it is," she said, opening the can. She dumped the food into a red bowl, stenciled '*Precious*'. She got a fork from the dishwasher and separated the tuna. She slid the bowl to Precious and watched her eat for a minute. She was a prissy little thing: wouldn't eat if you didn't separate her food and would not deign to eat on the floor.

She then turned to getting her own breakfast. Everyone seemed to be on one of those low-carb diets and was losing weight. But at five feet ten inches and 110 pounds, Yolanda was on a mission to gain weight by eating a high-carb diet. She buttered two buttermilk pancakes and placed them in the microwave. She then put two pieces of white bread in the toaster and poured a big bowl of Frosted Flakes and dug into her cereal; taking big spoons of it, until the microwave beep.

She poured a generous amount of maple syrup on her pancakes, and spread butter and jelly on her toast.

If I keep eating like this, soon all this food will go to my hips and thighs, maybe even my butt.

She always found it funny when she overheard other women's conversations about food.

"I can't eat that doughnut, girl, it'll go straight to my thighs."

"I know. If I eat another one, my butt is gonna need its own zip code."

Now, there's a problem, I wish I had.

CHAPTER TWO

"Dee Dee, this is ridiculous! I would never do such a thing!"

Dee Dee Townsend sat back in her leather chair and watched Sheila Hatch cry, her tears turning her honey-glazed skin a dark red. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy; her nose was running. Dee Dee reached across her desk and slid her a box of Kleenex. *She's a good actress. If I were younger, she would have me fooled.*

"All the evidence before me, Sheila, points to you," Dee Dee said calmly. "Can you give me another reason \$10,000 is missing from the account on the exact day and time that you said you used the business card?"

"I told you, Dee Dee, I was getting supplies..."

"Ten thousand dollars worth? Sheila you know the rules. Anything over \$1,000 must be approved by me. Besides, the salon had already received its supplies for the month."

"I know, I know, but I swear I didn't..."

"Did you also go to lunch that day, Sheila?"

"Yes, but—"

"You spent over \$250 at—" Dee Dee looked down at a brown file on her desk, "Ruth Cris Steakhouse?"

"Oh, that. I can explain that. I took Michael out to lunch to celebrate his promotion. I had left all my credit cards and had to use the business card. I was gonna tell you—"

"When?"

"It slipped my mind. We've been really busy working on our new product line; I forgot to mention it. You can take it out my next paycheck—"

"That won't be necessary," Dee Dee interrupted, closing the file. "Because of your long service and dedication to Behave Hair Salon, I'm going to give you until 5:00 this evening to remove all your things from the premises."

"What!" Sheila shrieked.

"Everything in your office belongs to you, except the computer and furniture. As stated in your contract all business files must remain, as they are property of the salon. Do you understand, Sheila?"

"No, Dee Dee, I don't understand What's going on here? Fifteen years! I've been working here 15 years and you're just gonna fire me?! You can't just fire me like this!" Sheila pleaded. "I know all this looks bad, but I didn't do this! I've counted out over \$100,000 in your hand!! Why would I steal from you? I love you like a mother; why would I bite the hand that feeds me?"

"I love you too," Dee Dee said. Her voice was flat and even, and her brown eyes became cold and hard. "That's why I'm not pressing charges. But if you're on this property one minute after 5:00, you're going to jail. Is that understood?"

Sheila shook her head.

"Who is gonna replace me?"

"Theresa will step in as creative director temporarily, until I can find a suitable replacement."

"Theresa?! Theresa McArthur?! Anybody but her! She's probably the one behind all this mess! She has wanted my job since day one! Dee Dee, please, just give me some time; I'll prove she set me up—"

"No, Sheila, my decision is final. I can't keep overlooking this. In November, \$2,000 was missing; you said you didn't know what happened. In January, \$4,600 was missing; you said you would look into it. Each time your card had been used. You're the only one in the salon whose card has an unlimited amount on it. As much as I love you, Sheila, I can't keep turning a blind eye to

this; it has been happening too long. Sheila, if you needed money, why didn't you just ask me?"

"Because I didn't need any money! I told you—"

Dee Dee raised her hand, motioning for Sheila to stop.

"You have to leave."

Sheila stood up, fresh tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry I let you down, Dee Dee," she said, walking out of Dee Dee's office for the last time.

Dee Dee watched as Sheila closed her office door, finalizing the decision she had made.

I'm sorry, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Yolanda locked the door to her apartment and felt Houston's June heat slap her in the face. She hated that about Houston: the heat and awful humidity. Working in the laundromat in a hot Southern prison couldn't possibly be hotter, she thought.

Some of her neighbors were walking around in typical Houston summer uniforms: shorts, tank tops, sundresses, anything that was cool and let in any whiff of wind. *I wouldn't be caught dead in any of that stuff.*

She pulled her Camry out of her complex and whizzed into Houston traffic, begging it to not be too congested. She saw a lady jogging, in a tank top and bicycle shorts, her Ipod no doubt distracting her enough to endure the unbearable heat. Yolanda suspected everyone thought she was crazy by not conforming to Houston's dress code in the summer, but she couldn't bear it. She always, always wore pants or jeans and long sleeves on the hottest of days. She would be seen wearing a sweater or tunic- anything to cover her nonexistent butt.

Yes, sometimes she would almost suffocate from the heat, but she pressed on, convincing everyone that she wasn't hot, that the sweat on her forehead came from overexerting herself in some way. One of her teachers in high school had speculated that someone in her family was physically abusing her, and that she was using her long sleeves to hide bruises.

"Yolanda, you know you can always talk to me if anything is happening at home? You don't always have to wear those clothes."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Henry?"

"Don't you think it's a little odd to be wearing a turtleneck in May, especially considering how warm it is outside? Now, according to our guidelines, I have to investigate any signs of abuse—"

“Abuse? You think someone has been—abusing me?”

“Yolanda, these things are never easy to discuss, but as long as I’ve been teaching at this school, I’ve never seen you dressed—How can I say this? Appropriately. Even your gym teacher says that you don’t dress in front of the other girls; that you always request to go to a private restroom stall to change into your gym clothes. That definitely sounds like a girl who is afraid to show her body due to bruises.” She lowered her head and looked around the room, although class was over and they were alone. “Now what we need to do—“

“We’re not gonna do anything! This is crazy! I’m not getting abused!” Yolanda blurted, shoving up the sleeves to her sweater to prove it.

“You see?! No bruises.”

“I thought...I don’t understand...Why do you dress like that if you aren’t trying to hide something?”

“Oh, I am hiding, trying to hide this beanpole figure that I was cursed with. Oh, and I change my clothes in the stall because all the girls in gym love to tell me how much I resemble the crackheads in their neighborhoods. The nicknames go on and on, so it is just easier to not give them any ammunition, okay?”

A horn blasting in the distance roused Yolanda from her reverie. She made a quick right turn on Post Oak Blvd. and followed the traffic until she made another right into the driveway of Behave Hair Salon and Spa.

She couldn’t believe how fortunate she was to be working at the most upscale and prestigious salon in Houston in the classiest part of town, no less. The Galleria was the Rodeo Drive of Houston. It was where the rich stayed rich and where the poor watched the rich get richer. She followed the circular drive, glancing up at the three-story salon. It looked like a villa in the south of France, with its rose and caramel-glazed walls and high arched windows that were so wide that traffic could see inside its walls. The grounds were filled with antique statues

of beautiful women looking both graceful and superior, the essence of the image that Behave projected.

She passed the valet stand and parked on the first floor of the parking garage directly adjacent to the salon. You had to be one of two things to get valet parking: be a client or a manager. Yolanda was neither; so she parked and walked to the walkway connecting the salon to the garage.

She entered a narrow hallway that led her directly to the styling area. Soft classical jazz tickled her ears and got her in the frame of mind to work. Forty styling stations were lined up neatly, all facing floor-length, gold-leafed mirrors. The Louis XIII-styled chairs were upholstered in soft ivory suede and had gold inlaid bases. The reception area of the salon was just as luxurious with its wide club chairs upholstered in fine raw silk. Oriental rugs Dee Dee had personally chosen during her many travels covered the marble floors. Everything had been painstakingly designed to provide the ultimate in comfort for Behave clients. From the salon and spa on the first floor, to the café, daycare, and small gym on the second floor, all the pampering needs of the clients were met within these walls. The third floor housed the private offices of the management staff. Yolanda liked to come to work early sometimes and imagine herself up there in her own office. She walked to her styling station and was surprised to see her best friend, Natalie, setting up her station.

She never gets here before me.

"Girl, what are you doing here 35 minutes early?"

"I got dropped off. My dad was having car trouble and had to borrow my car. So here I am, missing out on some much-needed sleep, I might add," Natalie said, laughing.

This week, Natalie Morrison's jet-black, shoulder-length weave was styled in a bouncy, feathered flip. Natalie changed her hair every week, thanks to her

vast collection of weaves and wigs. In a flash, her hair could be short and sassy, be swept up into an elegant updo, or be long and silky straight. Her black wrap shirt was typically *Natalie* and was fitted too tightly around her big frame. Everything was big about Natalie. Yolanda knew that she was well over 250 pounds, but the way she carried herself, her weight was never an issue. Everyone in her family was overweight; in her house, you got *extra* dessert just for cleaning your plate at dinner. Natalie's mother called her glamorous and beautiful every day, and now Natalie had the confidence of a supermodel.

"Girl, something is going on," Natalie said, her eyes wide with nervous excitement.

"What is it?" Yolanda asked, looking around the salon to see if she could see any changes. Other stylists were milling around and talking before the work-day started.

"Everything looks fine to me. It's probably just you."

"No, no, something is wrong; everyone is acting weird. I'm gonna go ask Karen to see if she knows what's up."

"Okay, wait for me. I want to put my purse up—"

"That can wait! I wanna know what's wrong," Natalie said, pulling on Yolanda's arm.

"Now let's play it cool. We don't want to act like we're being nosy. We have to be slick 'cause Karen ain't gonna tell us a thing if she suspects something."

"Why don't we wait for the other receptionist, Michelle, to get here? Everyone knows she can't hold water," Yolanda said.

"I know, but I can't wait, so we're gonna ask Karen."

They walked up to the massive horseshoe-shaped oak reception desk. A master carver had carved *Behave Hair Salon* into the front of the desk. The craftsmanship was excellent and reminded Yolanda of something one would see in

a fine home. They waited patiently for Karen to finish talking on the phone. Her bronze skin and thick wavy hair spoke of her Puerto Rican heritage. Her hands flew across the keyboard as she typed client information for an appointment.

"So your appointment, Pamela, will be with Misty at 1:00 Friday afternoon. Just give us a call if you need to reschedule or will be running late. Have a nice day and we'll see you Friday," Karen said.

Without looking up, she asked, "So, ladies, what can I help you with?"

"Well, um, Sheila left a note on my station that she wanted to see me this morning. I was wondering if you could give her a buzz and see if it was okay if I go into her office," Natalie said.

Karen looked up. "That's strange; she usually gives me her schedule so I'll know about any meetings, and I didn't see your name anywhere on it."

"Well, that's because it isn't actually a meeting," Natalie said, pausing for the right word.

"It's more like, um a gathering!" Yolanda added, proud of herself for finding the right word. She hated lying and she had never been good at it, so most of the time she just told the truth.

"Is this 'gathering' for the both of you?" Karen asked suspiciously.

"Yes," Yolanda said.

"No," Natalie said at the same time.

Karen shook her head. "Nice try, ladies. Look, why don't you try talking to Sheila later today? She is usually not that busy Tuesday afternoons."

Natalie sighed. "Thanks, anyway, Karen." They walked away, defeated.

"I told you not to say anything! Everytime you lie, you mess everything up. You weren't supposed to open your mouth," Natalie complained.

"I'm sorry," Yolanda said, following Natalie back to the styling area.

"I was just trying to help," she added, setting her purse and bag down on her styling chair.

"I know, I know. I just wanted the scoop before it got crowded in here. Anyway, girl, what did you do yesterday? I called you all day."

"I was at my parents' house. Gina was showing off pictures of the baby, and my dad made it mandatory that I be there."

"Girl, that sister of yours.... How old is the baby now?"

"Eight months. And she is so *precious!*" Yolanda added in a syrupy baby voice.

"Your dad still picking on you?"

"Does a dog have fleas?"

Natalie laughed.

"Don't worry, girl. He'll slack up."

"When? When I get a man and get married? Which we both know will never happen."

"Girl, where is your rubber band? You need to pop that thing about 20 times with all that negative thinking."

Yolanda looked through her purse for her stash of multicolored rubber bands, and picked a yellow one, hoping the bright color would lift her sour mood. Natalie had been making her wear a rubber band on her wrist everyday. Each time she thought a negative thought, she would pop it, hoping the sting would change her thinking pattern. She had been wearing them for a week and hadn't noticed a difference.

"Hey, there goes Maxwell. Maybe he's trying to get information," Natalie said.

Yolanda turned her head, trying to get a quick look at him. Maxwell Alexander was chatting with Karen at the front of the styling area.. He was easily

over 6'5" with a muscular body that screamed of early mornings spent at the gym. His smooth chocolate skin stood out against his tailored white shirt, peeking from under his black uniform blazer. All the staff members wore blazers with Behave's logo embroidered in gold on the front pocket. She never knew a man who wore the same thing everyday but still looked so fresh and different. Just then, he laughed about something Karen said, and his beautiful white teeth shone like a brilliant pearl against dark velvet. His dark-brown eyes twinkled with amusement as he looked up in Yolanda's direction.

Yolanda turned away, embarrassed for having stared too hard.

"You think upstairs is as good as everybody says it is?" Yolanda asked.

Because the offices were located upstairs and stylists weren't invited up there unless they were being reprimanded or promoted, the whole third floor was nicknamed *upstairs*. To the stylists everything was better if you could just get *upstairs*. Wearing that jacket with the logo on the pocket instantly made you *somebody*. You were hot stuff if you could handle being promoted upstairs.

"Better. Do you know what they get paid up there? It's probably double what we get paid."

Yolanda had dreamed of working at Behave since she graduated from high school with her cosmetology license. Back then, they were located a few miles away from their current location, but Yolanda still knew that this was the place she would work. *You belong there*, she would say as she drove by. And now, after six years of hard work, here she was—a master stylist no less. But now she felt greedy for wanting more. After six years of styling hair, she was feeling bored and wanted to try her hand at the business side of the salon. Her chances of being promoted were slim to none at best. There were only two reasons people left *upstairs*—death, or getting fired. Dee Dee was a hard woman to work for but her

retention level was extremely high, and everyone *upstairs* was heard to be extremely satisfied of their cushy jobs.

Yolanda looked at Maxwell again. *Most of the women down here gush over him like a bunch of baboons. If I ever do get the chance of being promoted it will be for me, just for me.*

Natalie caught her staring. "I know what you're thinking. Just say something to him," Natalie said, nudging Yolanda's arm.

"Girl, you must be crazy. Besides, I wasn't looking at him."

Natalie threw her a look. "Well, I was looking at him, but not about what you think," Yolanda added.

"Fine. If you won't go to him, I'll just bring him over to you," Natalie said, walking over toward Maxwell.

"Noooo! Don't!" Yolanda cried, grabbing Natalie's arm. Natalie wriggled her arm free and went up to the front where Maxwell was.

Okay what do I do? I could just go hide in the breakroom, or the chemical room...

She chanced a look over and saw Karen talking on the telephone. Natalie was talking to Maxwell and pointing in her direction.

He's looking! I can't hide; I'll look like an idiot. Just play it cool. If he walks up, just smile and try to sound smart.

Just then, Yolanda saw Sheila Hatch rush over to Maxwell, say something to him and then walk out the front entrance of the salon. Maxwell followed her, his steps quick and purposeful.

Natalie walked back to Yolanda, who could tell by her friends's expression that something was very wrong.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Sheila got fired!"