

It Ain't Easy Bein' Queen, dives into the lives of four childhood friends. We follow the journey of these women, as they realize the power of true intentions. Learning that the sovereignty of sisterhood can be lifesaving.

It Ain't Easy Bein' Queen

By ChelleyB

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*It Ain't Easy
Bein' Queen*

When life
tries
to steal my
voice,
Lord give me
the energy to
scream
(a Queen's Prayer)

C H E L L E Y B

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First Edition

Chapter 1

(Noon)

I look out the window and watch the raindrops dance aggressively against the glass. Streaks of lightening illuminate against the wall, creating a ghostly feel. The sound of thunder drums loud and boisterous causing the walls to shake, to seemingly tremble. I peek through the curtains and watch the trees sway and bend to the command of the wind. The storm has knocked the electricity out, so there's candles lit strategically throughout the house. I inhale deeply as I pour myself a drink. The last couple of years has been a struggle for me, twenty-four months of despair, heartache, and pain. A time of pure hell, trying to find ways to remain numb, or the ultimate goal, to forget. Over working, self-medicating . . . but nothing worked or lasted long enough to heal my soul. I gulp down my drink and sigh as I think of the loss I have suffered within what seems like the blink of an eye.

Grabbing a bottle of Belvedere, I grip it by the neck and meander my way to an oversized sofa that's beckoning for my company. Sinking easily into its softness I take another drink, this time straight from the bottle. The liquid caresses my insides. And slowly images of my life begin to flood through my mind. The first image is my grandmother. I can feel myself smiling. She's the one who gave me my name, Noon. She said it was the brightest time of the day. My grandmother was a firm believer in the power of words and thought. She felt your name set a standard of belief for your life. I was taught that with work and effort, all things are possible. And I must admit I expected to be successful. I was a queen in training. Of course, the throne did not come without sacrifice. I had an ulcer by the time I was sixteen. As far back as I can remember I've been fixing and handling other people's shit, even at the cost of my own happiness. As time went on, I had to find a way to cope, some means of escape, something that could remove my own emotions and allow me to deal with the bullshit. It was back then that I learned the benefits of self-medicating.

Once I became an adult, I went to the doctor and ask for something to help me sleep at night. Later, I asked for something to calm me down

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during the day. Before I knew it, it was my normal, or one version of it anyways. But it's not a necessity. I mean, I'm not an addict or anything like that. I don't need these tools, I choose them. And honestly, before the two years of hell, I lived an adored life . . . perfect husband, beautiful children, a successful career.

A career that I now cling to because it's the only thing I have left. I own an online magazine called, *Queen*. It focuses on high-end fashion and includes articles for women on how to be fabulous, sexy, and successful. Every month I dedicate the cover to a survivor, whether it's illness, violence, or just plain foolishness. Each month there's a woman featured with a story to tell. She tells how she got there, and most importantly how she got through it. My magazine has been an escape for me. It's a world that I can control. I'm able to set the tone, create the image and determine the outcome. I have a small group of employees that work out of the actual brick and mortar building. I only go there once, maybe twice a month for financial and strategic meetings. I never miss those. Other than that, most of my time is spent searching for stories. This was my perfect life, until . . .

I've done everything I could to erase the memory of that day, but to no avail. The most graphic details still manage to invade my brain, immobilizing me, causing me to tremble in place.

It was a normal Friday evening, and like every Friday evening, my family and I headed to our favorite restaurant, *Miss Maggie's Downhome Cooking*. Just before pulling off, I realized I didn't have my sweater. Miss Maggie's tends to be a bit chilly. So, I always brought along my trusty sweater. My husband BJ, and our twin sons waited for me in the car. As soon as I stepped in the doorway, I heard what sounded like a bomb going off outside. Terror gripped my heart. I ran out the house and saw a mangled ball of metal that once held the shape of an automobile and now held the lifeless bodies of my loved ones. A drunk driver, who had been arrested several times before, might I add, had lost control of his truck, and plowed into my family's car. I haven't been the same since. The pills were not enough to numb my grief, so I added alcohol. I've gone through so many different emotions. I'm like a rollercoaster of contradiction. I never know what I'm going to think or believe from one day to the next. I was raised in church but was never deeply religious. At one point, I thought maybe that's why this happened, perhaps God was punishing me for abandoning Him. Then I thought, *No! There is no God*. How could there be? I mean what kind of God would allow innocent children to die in such

a horrendous way! I have since changed my mind yet again, I believe, YES, there is a God, *BUT* I choose not to have anything to do with Him.

I lift the bottle to take another drink, but it's empty. I hold it up to the light to confirm its contents. Damn, that bottle went quick. I stumble over to my bag, pour out a handful of Xanax and stagger my way into the kitchen. I find another bottle of liquor, gulp down the pills, and lay my head on the table, waiting for peace. I can feel myself getting drowsy. But before I can doze off, the lights come back on, or at least I thought they did. Yet, when I take a glimpse of my surroundings all the other rooms are still dark. Hobbling to my feet, I take several woozy steps before hearing a loud moan coming from behind me. I turn around and I'm petrified by what I see. It's me, still sitting at the kitchen table, with my head down.

"Am I dead?" I ask out loud, almost expecting an answer.

The lights begin to flicker, and I immediately panic. Trembling, I head for the front door. The living room is dark, and the liquor mixed with pills have my legs feeling like cooked spaghetti. I lose my balance several times, before ultimately crawling my way to the doorway, which now looks like a portal opening and closing at its own will.

The wind is blowing so hard it propels me to my car. I jump inside and grip the steering wheel tight. I press the start engine button and speed off down the street. The storm's not phasing me, I'm in full control, at least that's what my mind is telling me. The strong winds combined with rain is causing my car to rock from side to side. The mayhem outside is like clips from the weather channel, showing signs of an impending hurricane. Trees are bending almost to a breaking point, bowing down, as if to worship the loud boisterous voice of thunder, dancing like shadows to the grand streaks of light covering the sky. Several cars have humbly pulled over to the side of the road. I mentally retreat to the calm inside my car. The rain beats heavy against my windshield and the howl of the wind has intensified. But the air inside the car seems to be filled with a utopic gas, one that has me feeling a calmness that I can't explain. There is a slight sense of fear nestled deep inside. However, the utopic gas seems to have my fear trapped. Caged in an imaginary jail, it can't fully escape. My eye lids are becoming heavy and the car gradually begins to feel like an airplane. I can no longer feel the bumps on the road, it's like I'm flying.

Suddenly, everything goes black. My eyes feel frozen, stuck in place. Eventually my eyelids start to flutter uncontrollably before slowing into a

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steady blink. I find myself laying in the middle of the road, a puddle expanding underneath my body. I hear chaos surrounding me, but I can't respond. There's a stiffness coming over me as the warmth begins to drain from my body. The wind sounds like wind chimes and my mind is hypnotized by the tone. I have a sensation of falling . . . floating. I want to scream but it's as if my tongue is glued to the top of my mouth. I can feel the muffled sounds trapped inside me. I'm surrounded by darkness and visions of the people I've loved are circling around me. I want to panic. I believe I should be afraid. However, I seem to be in a place where I can only remember emotions, I can't feel them. The loud chiming sound begins to cease and now my head is like a radio speaker filled with the noise of words and static all mixed into one sound. Slowly the static begins to diminish, and the words develop into a strange steady voice. The voice causes my body to react. I experience what feels like needles penetrating my skin from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. The pain of it all causes my body to jerk like a wild bull at a rodeo. I gasp inhaling long and deep.

A bright light shines in my face and I hear a voice say, "we got her back, let's get her on the truck." I blink several more times before closing my eyes.

I wake up in a hospital room. There are tubes connected to all parts of my body and one going down my throat. I can't move or talk. I'm startled to see my grandmother sitting in a chair next to my bed. After all, she's been dead for almost fifteen years. She stands and looks down at me adoringly. I have a deep sense of comfort as she rubs my hair. My eyes close and I return to my slumber. My mind continues to flash emotional images, thoughts, and visions through my head. I feel like I'm stuck in some crazy time warp. A place between heaven and earth, while God decides what to do with me. The mere thought should frighten me, but it doesn't. As I fall deeper into my sleep, I begin to dream that I am sitting on a cloud and my three best friends, who are more like my sisters, stand before me giving what sounds like an intimate confession of who they really are. The first person to speak is Margaret.

*I'm Margaret, the one these bitches complain about when we're getting ready to go out. They claim I take too long to get dressed. They just don't get it. All things must be everything when I step out. I play no games. You've heard that saying, *you gotta pay to play*. Well, I only play at the top of the game, so if you're not coming with the best then don't

even come at me. Men on that level understand this sentiment. I haven't paid to have my hair or nails done since I was fifteen. I am a Queen, and I expect all the candy that comes with that title.

As a child, I wanted to be an obstetrician. The idea of helping to bring life into the world amazed me. Then one day, my daddy came to me, sat me on his lap and told me that I was one of the beautiful ones. A girl like me would never need to do anything other than look beautiful, that was my strength, my asset. From that point on, this is what I concentrated on.

My first love in high school was five years older than me. He had his own apartment, the latest gear, and a BMW. He catered to my every need, confirming for me what my daddy said, that any man approaching a woman like me, should already be aware of the requirements. I learned another important lesson as well and that is, men on this level come with a certain temperament. They are aggressive with big egos that must be stroked constantly. Sometimes you may need to dim your light, just so your man can shine.

I had my daughter three weeks before my twenty-fourth birthday. And he was in federal prison doing a 30-year bid. I still believe this was the most important relationship in my life, it taught me what to do and more importantly what to expect in return. He spoiled me rotten, but . . . that nigga was crazy, he was not the type of person you would want to disappoint. But again, I learned early with big money comes big pressures, and I am the perfect woman for men like that.

As for my girls, I love them and all, but I know they're jealous of me. No matter what man I'm with, all I ever hear from them is, *'he's too violent, he's too controlling, you need to leave him'*. Bitches please! When we go out who is the one easily rocking a seventeen thousand-dollar Hermes bag, without any type of nine to five? Exaaaactly!

But then, there are some quiet moments when I wonder . . . what if?

The image of Margaret begins to fade. The next voice I hear is Teekah.

*I'm Teekah. A biochemist with an IQ of 167. And depending on who you ask I'm either a strong wondrous black woman or an overbearing stereotypical one. I believe I'm a little bit of each. I admit I can be loud and boisterous, sometimes bossy and demanding. A large part of that is due to

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my upbringing. I'm the only child of Trinidad immigrants, both lawyers. I was encouraged to be vocal and never hide or sugar coat my beliefs. I was taught to take full advantage of a Western education, to always learn, take in as much as I could, because what is learned and deposited in the brain, can never be unlearned, or taken away. It's yours you own it. That's some powerful shit.

But I can't deny that my family's expectations and Old-World beliefs sometimes caused a lot of confusion in my life and led to some bad habits. I had a cousin, Solomon, who was smart like me, but even more brilliant. However, his behavior was strange, too peculiar. He was later diagnosed with autism. Which immediately caused him to be ostracized from the family. So as smart and outspoken as my parents encouraged me to be. I was also, expected to be their version of perfect. Perfectly normal. The pressure and confusion of what they considered to be perfect and normal, caused me to create my own sort of stability, my own style of regular.

So as overbearing as I may come across to some, to others, I am loving and loyal, if I got your back, you should consider your back fully covered. I'm the wife to a good man, a wonderful husband. He worships my very being. If I wore drawers, I would say he'd love my dirty ones. And while I'm being transparent, check this out, I drink, often. Not everyone is pleased with how much, how often, or even how I behave when I drink. But that's not my fucking concern. And I do a little coke on the side just to keep myself balanced. None of these things affect how I do my job, function as a friend, or care for my husband's needs. Speaking of needs, I am totally committed to our marriage. I am loyal to the relationship. Divorce is not an option. Nevertheless, this does not mean I don't have outside interest. My husband, as good a man as he is, still does not completely fulfill all my physical desires. So, because I am fully committed to our relationship. I don't give up on us and go run to the nearest divorce lawyer. Instead, I care for those physical needs with others. Business only, no emotional attachments. Simple. Life is not that hard, there is always a solution to every problem. And I should know, I do have an IQ of 167.

Teekah's image is now gone. And the only one left is Carrie. She speaks.

*My name is Carrie. I am a 5th grade special education teacher. I love my job. I love children, especially those who are misunderstood. Probably

because I too, face that same problem. It seems that no one truly gets me. I've always struggled to verbalize my true feelings, struggled to be understood. Children are so innocent. They don't ask for much, just your love and loyalty. I don't have any kids of my own. My husband and I have tried everything but never received a healthy baby. This last episode was the hardest for me. It took away my energy, my ability to focus, it's left me walking in a fog. After several miscarriages, we finally went full term. I delivered a beautiful baby girl, who had no heartbeat, no pulse and never took a breath. The doctors could not give any specific reason as to why our baby girl died. They only stated the statistics of a healthy birth and percentages of still births, none of which helped me emotionally. Because in short, they just didn't know. For me, not having a reason for this happening made it even more difficult to deal with. Having a name for the problem would at least give me something to work on. But being told I'm healthy and my husband is healthy, but we can't deliver a baby together is heartbreaking. It's like they are saying our genetics don't match. One doctor explained it this way, person A and B may have trouble having a baby together, but person A and C may not have any issues at all. In my mind, I'm like, 'What?!'

I'm sure that whatever the problem is, it's my fault. My husband is perfect. He has the perfect face, perfect body, and a brilliant mind. He is a stunt coordinator, teaching actors how to do fights scenes and use swords safely in their routines. He is a beautiful thing to look at. Women are always throwing themselves at him. He tries to resist but sometimes he fails. I do my best to rationalize it, to try and understand, but lately it's becoming harder to do. I believe the main reason I hold on to him so tight, is because other than my girlfriends he's the only family I have. My father was a violent heroin addict that eventually overdosed. My mother battled mental illness her entire life. Until one day she obeyed the voices in her head and sliced her wrist to the bone. I was then raised by my grandparents who were already up in age. My grandfather died seventeen years ago. I despised him so much, I couldn't even cry at the funeral. My nana is still alive, but she has Alzheimer's. She lives in a nursing facility that specializes in the disease. I rarely visit her anymore. There's no need, most of the time she doesn't know who I am and other times she thinks I'm my mother. So, I'm left dangling along in this world, constantly searching and wishing for someone to just love me.

Carrie disappears. And I'm left alone, encircled by thick white clouds.

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A high pitch screeching sound begins to generate into the atmosphere. I look around trying to find the source, but it doesn't seem to be coming from one place. The annoying noise is getting louder and louder, it's like fingernails scraping against a chalkboard. The sound is becoming so loud that it's causing my head to ache. I place my hands over my ears, close my eyes and start screaming as loud as I can. My breathing becomes heavy as shock waves invade my body. I lean forward, open my eyes and wake to find myself in my bedroom, sitting on my bed, squinting as the sun beams brightly through the bedroom window. The bed is covered with papers and empty bottles. Filled with panic, I begin to touch my arms and body searching for tubes, needles, or any kind of injury.

"It was a dream," I whisper, with uncertainty.

My chest heaves up and down rapidly, I'm trying to catch my breath. I jump at the sound of someone pounding on my front door. I fumble my way out of bed unsure of what I'll find around the corner. I open the door and there stands Teekah with a scowl on her face. She has one hand on her hip and the other stretched out toward the sky.

"What the hell, Noon?! We have been calling you all morning! The office manager at your magazine said you scheduled a financial meeting for this morning, and you didn't show." She's waving her hands frantically. "And on top of that your phone is going straight to voicemail. I started to call the cops to come do a welfare check on your ass, cause, Lord knows I didn't wanna find no dead body. But then shit, I thought her ass may have some scandalous shit on her. Sooooo, I took the chance to come check on you!" Her phone rings. "Hello. Yeah, I'm here. She's okay, just looking a fucking wreck that's all." She looks at me and frown.

"Hmph!" I say in the background.

She continues, "I will call you back on my way home. Yes, I will tell her. I will tell her I said!" She turns back to me. "As I was saying . . ."

Before she can finish the phone rings again.

"Damn!" She says and turns her back. "Hello. Hey. She's alright. But giiiiirl she looks awful and the house, it is a mess! You would think a tornado hit it!"

"I'm sitting right here!" I yell. "Right here, just a few feet away! I can hear every word!"

She turns to me and sticks her tongue out, going on with her conversation. “You know what I think? We may need to have an intervention with her. Yeah! Yeah, I really think so!”

I head for the kitchen, shaking my head. I don’t have to ask who the calls came from. I already know, the other musketeers. They are irritating as hell, but I love them dearly. I can hear Teekah’s animated conversation clearly in the background as I walk through my house. She’s seriously planning an intervention for me. Tell me how can a coke head alcoholic plan a drug intervention for anyone? She probably has coke in her bag and a bottle of liquor under her car seat as we speak. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. I can’t help but chuckle at the thought. I walk through the living room on my way to the kitchen, taking a mental inventory of what I see. My house does look a bit ransacked, but I would hardly say it could be compared to a tornado. Yet, I have no memory of last night, or no real memory should I say. The things I remember obviously couldn’t have happened, because according to my memory, I should be in the hospital right now with tubes coming out of almost every part of my body. I see an empty bottle of Belvedere sitting on the kitchen table. I toss it into the trash, won’t be drinking that anymore. I walk around arranging items on the table, picking up paper off the floor, basically the physical version of what I’m doing in my head. Mentally I tell myself that this was nothing more than a bad dream, but in my bones . . . in my bones I know it’s something more. Teekah walks into the room, eyeing me suspiciously.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” her voice says softly. “I’m just looking.”

I continue to clean.

“Listen,” she begins. “We were thinking that it’s been a while since we all got together and socialized. Maybe we could meet at the Soul Food Café, like we use to do. You know? Reminisce over old times and catch up on new ones. What do you think?”

“I think that my sisters have enough problems of their own without worrying about mine.”

She sighs, “Noon, I was only joking about the intervention, sort of,” she whispers. “Honestly, your choice of relief is baby food, compared to

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my thang. Which is why we are concerned about you this is all out of your character.” Her voice lowers, “I know you miss BJ and the ki---”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” I say abruptly. “I’m okay. Alright, I admit I have my moments. That crazy storm last night set the mood for me to overindulge a bit, I guess.”

She looks at me, puzzled. “Storm? What storm? Noon, what are you talking about?”

“The storm in my head,” I say laughing, trying to play off the utter confusion in my mind. So, there wasn’t a storm last night? I can feel myself start to panic. I pick up the pace with my cleaning. My mind is racing faster than my body can keep up. I stumble almost falling to the floor. I am truly, losing my mind. Teekah looks at me even more suspicious. Before she can say anything, I ambush her with my own offer. “How about this? You guys tell me the when, and the where and I promise to show up. We could even go tonight if you want.”

She walks over and gives me a hug. “Okay, Nooney-bear, it’s a deal. I have a few errands to run. But I will get in touch with Margaret and Carrie later and we will do a conference call.”

I nod my head. She walks to the door, then turns around. “You know we got you, right?”

I smile meekly. We hug again. I rush her out the door, before I start to cry and not be able to stop.

Chapter 3

(Carrie)

I'm driving home with an unbearable sense of sadness in my heart. My mind is racing, and my body feels sick. I pull over to the side of the road, rush out the car and fall to my knees. Darkness seems to immediately cover me. The sensation to throw up overtakes me. I'm vomiting non-stop, gasping for each breath. My mind is gripped by the fear that I'm going to choke on my own vomit. I don't want to die on the side of the road, in the dark, all alone. I place my hand on my chest fighting to take control. Eventually my body has nothing left to give. I'm too weak to stand even though the gravel is starting to feel like sharp daggers digging deep into my knees.

There's an abrupt clicking sound that's emanating from the darkness. I look up and a shape starts to form. The woman with bright red hair emerges. I can't help but stare. Her long flowing hair is flaming, not like an ordinary flame, but how you would imagine hell's fire to look, a version of red that I have never seen before. She's small and petite yet you can feel her power. She walks with a mature confidence that gives an air of sexiness. But her mannerisms are childlike and make her seem somewhat unstable. She lifts her hand and the ground beneath me begins to spin. It feels like I'm on a ride at the amusement park. All the lights and trees seem to blend into one scene. She sits next to me and we migrate to a place that appears to be in the eye of the storm, all is calm, turmoil is swirling around us but not within our circle, not able to touch us. This is unreal. I must have hit my head when I fell to the ground. Yeah, that's probably what happened and now I'm hallucinating. That must be the reason, otherwise this whole scene would have me freaking out. Knowing better, understanding it's not real, I decide to enjoy the delusion.

The woman tells me her name is Nina. I examine everything about her. I notice how young she is, no older than her early twenties. She said she is here to absorb all my pain. She strokes the side of my face with the tips of her fingers and tells me about all the antics and affairs that my husband is involved in.

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I snicker. "And this is news to me?"

"Maybe not," she says smiling. "But every dog has his day." And this time her smile didn't frighten me.

We sat for hours on the side of the road, talking. She's right, for the first time in a long time I feel absolutely no pain.

She jumps to her feet. "Come on, let's go have some fun."

"Okay," I answer, without any hesitation.

While driving, we pass a hitchhiker. Nina tells me to stop and pick him up. For some reason, I obey. The scruffy little man hurries to the car.

"Where you headed?"

"As far as you can take me. But the next truck stop would be good."

I can feel him staring at me. I can't tell the color of his skin. It's dark and he's dirty. But he has the bluest eyes, they seem to shine through the darkness. He has a long stringy beard and he's probably not much taller than me.

"My name is Carrie and my friends name, is Nina," I say, trying to make conversation.

He turns to the backseat, then back to me. He stares for a moment, seemingly bewildered. He shuffles in his seat. "I'm Rusty, and not that I don't appreciate the ride Ms. Carrie, but I can't help but wonder why a woman like you would pick up a stranger on a dark road, especially when she's driving alone."

"I appreciate the concern, Rusty. But I'm hardly alone. And it was actually Nina's idea to pick you up."

Nina and I both laugh, what a confused little man.

"Who's Nina?" He asks sounding even more confused.

"My friend in the backseat! Bright red hair! Are you blind?" Nina and I laugh uncontrollably.

Rusty's eyes are almost bulging out of his head. "Um, actually you can drop me off right here. I appreciate the ride. I really do but---"

He starts to make a gurgling sound. And his shirt is turning red, as if being magically colored by a crayon. His bright blue eyes are now dim. I can hear myself screaming. I slam my foot on the brake and turn to the back seat. Nina is lying on her back with her legs in the air, kicking with laughter. I see what looks like a machete. It's going from the back of the seat and penetrating all the way through Rusty's body.

"Nina! What did you do?" I yell. My whole body is shaking, and the car is starting to roll.

"Put your foot back on the break!" Nina scolds.

I slam my foot onto the brake and our bodies are thrown forward.

"But why? He hadn't done anything!"

"He was a man, wasn't he? Men will always do something if given enough time. Don't cry for him. We put him out of his misery. Men are awful creatures they all need to be put down."

I couldn't disagree with her. I've never had a pleasant relationship with any man. My father would beat my mother and me whenever he felt the desire. And my grandfather said he loved me, but he would come into my room at night, supposedly to read a bedtime story, all the while fingering me between my legs. He never made eye contact. He read Dr. Seuss and violated my little body all at the same time. To this day, I hate Dr. Seuss.

"Get back on the road," Nina commands. "I will tell you when to pull off. There should be a roadway coming up."

I follow her instructions, driving back onto the road, with a dead body sitting next to me.

Nina squeals. "Oooooo! That's my song, turn it up!"

I continue to do as I'm told.

I look in the rear-view mirror. She's dancing and swooning to the words of Kehlani, not showing any effects of having murdered a man, for simply being a man. She's grooving from side to side and singing along with her song.

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We drive for several miles before Nina tells me to pull off the road. Driving into a dark wooded area, she gets out the car, drags the man's body to the edge of the grass, then blows him a kiss.

"It's done," she says easily. "You can go home now."

Before I know it, I'm in my driveway. My memory is fuzzy, I have no idea how I got here. I sit in the car for a moment, thinking, wondering. Still nothing. Finally, I make my way into the house, walking in a trance like a zombie. Ricky is already asleep. I head straight to the bathroom, feeling the need for a shower. For some reason I feel extra dirty. The room starts to look strange, unfamiliar. I kind of know where I am, but I'm not sure, for some reason I don't trust myself. My vision is blurred, but somehow, I make my way to the shower, turning the temperature as hot as I can stand. It relaxes me.

I lower my head and allow the water to flow through my scalp onto my body. Rubbing my hand down the side of my jaw, I feel a sticky substance, opening my eyes I see that the water is red. I lick my lips and quiver at the taste of blood. Suddenly the bathroom walls begin to shift, opening and closing like a secret passageway. All I can do is lean against the shower wall, hold on, and do my best to keep breathing. What happened tonight? Was I in a car accident? Was I mugged? I just don't remember. The walls around me snap back into place. I put on my night clothes and slip into bed next to Ricky. He never moves, or even acknowledge that I'm here. Worn out, I lay until sleep comes to get me.

Waking up the next morning I have a desire for bacon, lots of bacon. It's strange because I'm a vegan. And even if I ate meat it wouldn't be pork. I look over at Ricky. He's lying on his back. I imagine filleting his skin off layer by layer while listening to him scream. The thought causes my body to jolt. What the hell is wrong with me?

I hear a loud giggling sound, more like the cackling laugh of a witch. All at once, the memories of last night come flooding back. The laughter is getting louder. I have my eyes closed so tight that droplets of moisture have formed a line across my temple. I'm afraid to look, but like a train wreck, you can't help but watch. I decide to take a quick peek. I turn my head and there sits Nina, in my bedroom, her legs crossed, filing her nails. And as always, her hair is flaming.

Then like a strong wind she moves from the chair to the side of my bed, her face just inches from mine. Her movement creates a strong blast of air which causes me to gasp. I feel like a drowning victim coming back to life. She touches her nose to mine and then starts to move her head in a circular motion, like a python stalking its prey. I lay perfectly still, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. She holds up a large butcher knife, then licks her lips at Ricky, *“wanna have some fun?”*

“Noooo!” I scream.

“Hey! What is it babe?”

Opening my eyes, I see a sleepy face Ricky shaking me. I try not to panic but I’m still afraid to move. Lying motionless, I carefully rotate my eyes around the room, searching for Nina. I can feel the sweat outlining my body.

“You have a bad dream?” Ricky grunts.

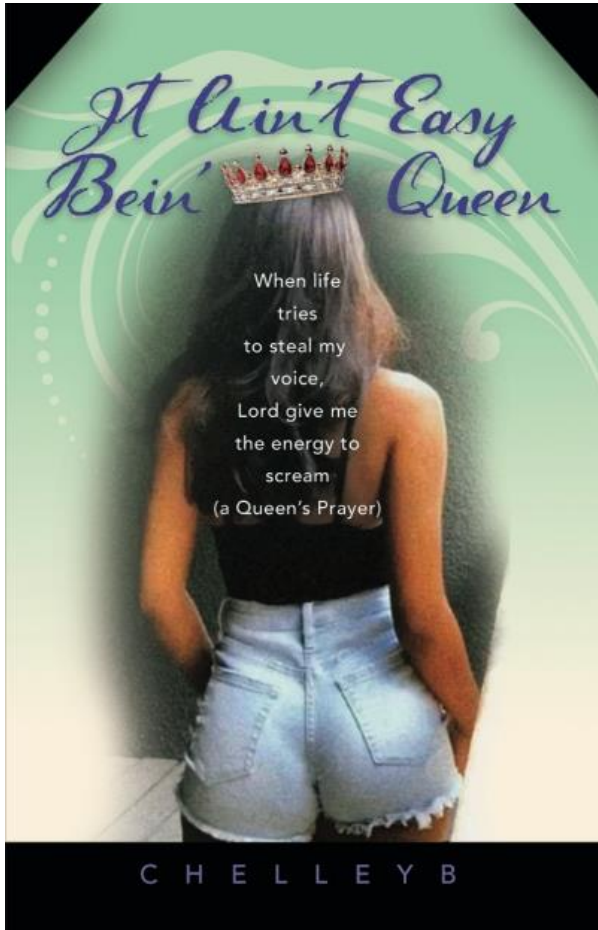
I’m taking long, deep breaths, panting, “I suppose so.”

“Must have had a good time last night.” He stands stretching, slowly walking to the bathroom.

“I guess so.” My mind is racing, trying to make sense of what happened after I left Noon’s house. “Ummm, you wanna do something today? Go to a movie or maybe out to eat?”

“Sorry, babe,” Ricky says, talking and brushing his teeth hurriedly. “Aunt Bethie Ann is sick again, and I gotta go check on her. You know I’m the only family she got left.”

I didn’t respond. Does he really think I don’t remember that Aunt Bethie Ann died five years ago? Still, once a year he uses her as an excuse to stay gone for an entire weekend. I also remember that he basically gave her a pauper’s burial and spent most of the insurance money on himself. His level of disrespect knows no boundaries. For once though, I could not care less. I close my eyes and attempt to get some sleep.



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