

An Excerpt from

Living Well is the Best Revenge

the debut novel from Elle Bailey

Chapter 16
The Breakdown

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Chapter 16

The Breakdown

Kendall was the first to arrive home. She heard the running water and saw a puddle panning out from her mom's room into the hallway. Concerned, she called out to her mom but received no answer. She tried the doorknob but it wouldn't budge and she didn't have a key. Frantically, she pounded on the door trying to get a response from her mom. None came.

Upon entering the house, Nic heard the screaming and pounding. Unaware of the situation, he ran to his sister's aid.

"Kendall! What's wrong? What's the matter?"

She was crying by now.

"It's Mommy," she sobbed. "I think something's wrong," she whimpered. She pointed down, "There's water all over the floor and she won't come to the door."

"Go get some help!" Nic ordered. "Go get Mrs. Evans or Mr. Shaw. Do something! Just get some help!"

While his sister went to get help, Nic started trying to knock down the door.

Kendall ran to the neighbors' as instructed, but neither Mrs. Shaw nor Mrs. Evans was home. She ran back home to report the news to Nic. He was still kicking the door with all his might.

"Nobody's home, Nic!"

"Then call somebody! Call Aunt Lauryn. Call 911," he yelled.

Kendall raced to the kitchen and ransacked two drawers trying to find the list of emergency numbers. She found Lauryn's numbers and started dialing.

Lauryn was at the nail salon when Kendall tracked her down.

"Hello," Lauryn said after activating her ear bud.

"Aunt Lauryn! Mommy's locked in her room." Kendall's voice started cracking. "And there's water on the floor—"

Lauryn shook her head and whispered, *Oh my God, no. No Charlene. Please, no.* Her heart was pounding as Kendall finished filling in the details. She tried to sound reassuring even though she was as frightened as the teenager.

“Kendall, baby. Calm down. Everything’s gonna be OK. Just calm down.”

Kendall was silent.

“I need you to call 911, OK? Can you do that for me?”

Kendall nodded though Lauryn couldn’t see her through the phone.

“Honey, are you still there?”

“Uh, huh,” she sniffed.

“OK, when we hang up, I need you to call 911 and then go help Nic try to get that door opened. OK?”

“Ooookaayyy,” she said feebly.

“I’m on my way,” she ended the call.

“Is everything OK, Ms. Lauryn?” the technician asked.

“Can’t talk now. Gotta go.”

Lauryn didn’t have time to wait for her nails to finish drying. She sprayed nail enamel dryer on both sets of nails then grabbed her purse and sandals and ran out to her car.

When she arrived at the house on Lynnhaven Court, the paramedics were rolling a gurney inside. She parked on the street and bolted in to the house leaving her keys and belongings in the car.

The scene inside Charlene’s home was surreal with flashing lights from the ambulance reflecting around the room and strangers commandeering the place.

Kendall buried her face in Lauryn’s shoulder as soon as she came thru the door. Lauryn walked her over to Mrs. Shaw and left her to be consoled. She made her way to the hall. The carpet was soaked. She could see puddles of water form everywhere people walked. The door was off its hinges. Nic was talking to the paramedics when Lauryn entered the room. She stood by his side and put her arm around his shoulders. There she could see the medics putting Charlene on the gurney.

“Excuse me, but aren’t you going to put something over her?”

“Ma’am, you shouldn’t be in here,” one of them said.

“She’s my aunt,” Nic fibbed.

“And I’d like for you to put something on her before you take her out of here.”

“Ma’am, we’ve got work to do. I’d appreciate it if you let us do our jobs.”

“And I would appreciate your showing her some respect!” She grabbed a robe from the bed. “Now put this on her before you leave this house.”

One of the technicians gave a nod and they put the robe on Charlene before covering her with a thin white sheet and strapping her to the gurney.

“Will you be going to the hospital with her, ma’am?”

“Yes.” She turned to Mrs. Shaw standing in the hallway, “Will you and the kids follow us in my car?”

“Will do,” she said lowly.

“Let’s go,” said one of the medics.

They wheeled Charlene outside and lifted her into the ambulance. Lauryn was hot on their heels.

The driver hit the siren and the procession began. Next stop, the hospital emergency room.

It was a Friday night in July which meant that chaos and confusion were in full effect in the ER.

Lauryn paced the corridors waiting to get some information on Charlene’s condition. None came for what seemed like a long time.

Nic, Kendall and their surrogate grandmother were seated in the waiting area. Nic was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in hands. Mrs. Shaw cradled Kendall with one arm and rubbed Nic’s back with her free hand.

An Admissions clerk finally called Lauryn over to the desk to fill out paperwork for Charlene. When she returned the chart with no insurance information filled in, the situation became tense.

The clerk rattled off a spiel on the hospital’s Admissions policies and procedures.

“I’m telling you,” Lauryn replied. She has health insurance but I don’t have that information with me right now. This was an emergency, a life and death situation. I didn’t have time to think about hospital policies and proper procedures! Saving her life was my concern – not this hospital’s ability to turn a profit!”

The clerk repeated her spiel on their Admissions policies. Then she took it a step further and trashed the form.

Condescendingly, she said, “Listen, there are places that service indigents, minorities, Medicare, Medicaid patients and others who can’t afford to pay for healthcare. I can refer you to one of those places if you’d like to take the patient elsewhere.”

Just as Lauryn was about to start taking names and threatening legal action against everybody and their brother, a voice came out of nowhere.

“Look, bitch! There ain’t nothing to keep me from jumping over this counter and coming after you!”

The clerk’s attitude and tone quickly changed.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry, your sister’s name again?” she asked politely.

Lauryn looked over her shoulder and was relieved to see Kat standing next to her.

“Brazelton. Charlene Brazelton,” she said.

Once the paperwork was in order, Lauryn and Kat found seats in the waiting area.

“How did you know that we were here?” she asked Kat.

“I called you on your cell to see if you wanted to go to the movies. Nic told me what happened so I rushed over here to see if there was anything that I could do. From the looks of things, I’d say that I got here just in the nick of time,” she wise-cracked in an attempt to cheer up her friend.

Lauryn smiled half-heartedly. The gravity of the situation was weighing heavily on her. Kat could see it in her eyes. She could see it in the distant look in Lauryn’s eyes.

After a few minutes of silence, she asked, “So, what happened? What pushed her over the edge this time?”

A wolf in sheep’s clothing. Lauryn was haunted by the memory of her own warning to Charlene. She felt guilty for having encouraged the affair with Barry. A tear fell from her right eye. Soon it was followed by another and yet another, until eventually, she caved on Kat’s shoulder.

When she recovered, Lauryn shared with Kat as much as she knew about the situation. Minutes later, they were interrupted by the ER physician.

“Ma’am. Hi, I’m Dr. Blassingame.”

Kat and Lauryn both stood and shook hands with the doctor.

“I’ve completed an initial examination of your sister. All her vital signs are normal and there don’t appear to be any signs of physical trauma that she sustained. However, I would like to keep her here overnight for observation and possibly to run some tests.”

Lauryn shook her head affirmatively. “OK.”

“Your family and you should probably go home and get some rest. We’ll call you if there’s any change in her condition.”

Again, she nodded affirmatively.

“It was nice meeting you. And, again, do try to get some rest.”

He disappeared behind a set of thick double doors.

Kat followed Lauryn and company back to Charlene’s house. The place was a mess. The mood somber, gloomy.

Though drained, they were too tightly wound to sit idle. Each moved about lethargically trying to keep busy. Mrs. Shaw brought dinner from her home, but no one touched a thing. Kendall cleaned up the mess she’d made in the kitchen. Nic started trying to repair the door. Lauryn searched for a mop to clean the tile floor in the bathroom. And Kat went to rent a wet/dry vac to clean the carpet. When she finished straightening up the bedroom, Mrs. Shaw started cleaning up the bathroom.

It was a long and difficult night for everyone.

The next day, Lauryn arrived at the hospital to collect Charlene. In addition to a change of clothes, she brought along her friend's insurance information and ID in case it was needed.

As she entered Charlene's hospital room, she was greeted by the attending physician.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Thurgood. And you must be—", he perused the chart looking for the emergency contact information.

"Lauryn," she answered.

"Right, you're the sister who had her admitted last night."

"Yes."

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Lieteau is it?"

"Yes, it's pronounced LIE-TOE."

They shook hands.

Lauryn noticed that Charlene was in bed facing the window. She hadn't responded to or acknowledged her visitor in any way.

"Is she OK, doctor? Can I take her home now?"

"Well, that's what I need to talk to you about." He pointed to a chair in a corner. "Please, have a seat."

"No, that's OK. I'm fine standing." She looked over his shoulder towards Charlene. "Doc, what is it? Tell me what's wrong with her?"

He crossed his right arm over his chest and used his left hand to rub his chin. "Physically," he began, right arm still folded, talking with his left. "Physically, there's nothing wrong with her, nothing that I can find anyway. Her vital signs are normal. All of her tests have come back negative. Physically, she's in good condition for someone her age."

Lauryn looked worried.

"Then I don't understand, doc. What's wrong with her? Why is she laying there like a vegetable?"

He delivered the news as diplomatically as possible.

"Now, I'm not a mental health expert, so please, don't take this as the gospel." Lauryn braced herself for the worst as he continued. "But I think your sister may have had some sort of psychotic episode, a mental break, if you will."

The words landed with a thud.

Lauryn was still and silent for a moment.

"Ms. Lieteau? Ms. Lieteau, would you like to have a seat? Can we bring you a drink of water or something?"

She snapped out of her daze.

"No, no, I'm fine." Her gaze slowly shifted from Charlene back to the doctor. "So what do we do? Where do we go from here?"

"Well, we can send her to a place that treats people in her condition. They can evaluate her, prescribe treatment and that sort of thing. That's my recommendation."

She nodded, "OK."

"Good. There are private facilities nearby or there's the state mental hospital in Elgin. It's up to you which way you want to go."

Lauryn was trying desperately to figure out the best course of action.

"Mercyville," she finally said after a period of contemplation.

"I beg your pardon."

"Can you make arrangements for her at Mercyville?"

"In Aurora?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

"I suppose so."

"OK, then that's what I want to do."

"Very well, then. We'll get a nurse or an aide in here to help get her dressed. I'll call the facility to see if they have room for her. And she'll be released to your care this afternoon."

"Thank you. Thanks, doc."

When he left the room, Lauryn used the phone to call her cousin Doris who worked at Mercyville. She wanted to make sure that Charlene would get the best possible care and she knew that Cousin Doris would see to it personally.

Charlene remained catatonic as Lauryn drove out to her hometown via I-88. They exited the East-West Tollway at Route 31. At the end of the exit ramp, Lauryn turned right on to Lake Street. A few blocks later, just past the intersection with Sullivan Road, she made a right into Mercy Center.

As she pulled up the long drive, Lauryn could see Cousin Doris waiting with two orderlies and a wheel chair. The thought suddenly occurred to her that, with very few exceptions, most of her relatives worked in healthcare or the criminal justice system. That they gravitated towards work with crazy people or criminals surely said something about her clan, but she filed that thought away. She'd ponder it another day.

Cousin Doris greeted Lauryn with a much-needed hug. Meanwhile, the orderlies eased Charlene's limp body out of the car and into the wheelchair. They took her inside and admitted her to the facility.

When the paperwork had been squared away, Lauryn gave Doris a run down of the low lights that had brought them to this place. Knowing that a spiritual intervention was pretty much the only thing that could save Charlene at this point, she asked Doris, an evangelist, to pray for her. Doris was more than happy to do so.

As they walked out to her car, Lauryn promised to check in by phone everyday especially while she was on the road. Doris promised to stay on top of things. They prayed for Charlene's peace of mind right there in the parking lot. Then Doris gave her cousin another hug to reassure her that everything would be OK.

Convinced that Charlene was in good hands, the younger Ms. Lieteau thanked her and departed.