

An Excerpt from

*Living Well is the Best Revenge*

the debut novel from Elle Bailey

Chapter 36  
A Star Is Born

*Living Well is the Best Revenge* is available at [iuniverse.com](http://iuniverse.com) and Barnes & Noble

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## *Chapter 36*

### A Star is Born

With One SixtyBlue closed on Sundays and Aria unavailable, Charlene and Derek ventured over to the original Morton's of Chicago on State at Rush Street for Easter dinner.

After a brief wait, they were seated alongside each other in a cozy grotto. Having skipped breakfast, Charlene was famished following the marathon church service. She ordered a hearty meal consisting of a Caesar salad with a lemon twist, Filet Diane, steamed asparagus with Hollandaise sauce, a jumbo baked potato and chocolate velvet cake for dessert.

Derek, on the other hand, ordered from the lighter side of the menu. His selections included Morton's signature salad and a Pacific smoked salmon appetizer. Both requested iced tea with their fare.

"You're certainly eating light today," Charlene observed. "What's the matter? Are you feeling OK?"

"After an inspired service like the one we just had, I'm feeling great," he remarked while taking her hand. "But to answer your question, I'm eating light because I'm coming off my Lenten fast today. And I have to ease back into a regular diet so that I don't get sick."

"That's right, I forgot. I'm so sorry," she apologized.

"No worries," he said.

"Have you always fasted for Lent?"

“No, just for the past few years,” he answered. “Have you ever tried it?”

“Can’t say that I have, unfortunately,” Charlene replied after a sip of tea.

“Would you like to try it,” Derek asked.

Non-committal, she said, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to give it the old college try.”

“Great, then we’ll fast together next year,” he said definitively. “I’ll hook you up with some background information on the season of Lent. I’ll give you a copy of the program that I follow and I’ll coach you through it. In fact, we’ll coach each other through it.”

Charlene couldn’t decide how she felt about his authoritative manner. But she smiled and nodded her agreement just the same.

The server appeared during a lull in the conversation and presented their salads. When he’d departed, Derek blessed the table and they started dinner. Soon after, he put another proposition on the table.

“Iron sharpens iron, do you agree?”

Unsure of where the conversation was going, she simply replied, “That’s what the Good Book states.”

“Well, I believe it’s true for people too. Champions respond to challenges,” Derek said before chomping on a healthy hunk of salad. “Champions appreciate other champions because they enjoy the challenges that accompany fierce competition. And beating the best makes victory that much sweeter.”

At this point, Charlene really had no idea where the conversation was going. Rather than try to figure it out, she busied herself with her salad.

“I know I’m rambling, so I’ll get to the point,” he said.

She made no effort to interrupt him.

“Everything happens for a reason. And I believe that’s especially true for us. I believe we’ve been brought together for a reason.”

“That reason being?”

Derek explained, “I’m a coach and a teacher. So my job is to recognize and develop talent and to inspire people to believe in themselves and achieve things they never thought possible.”

“And that affects me how?” she asked as the server cleared the salad plates and replaced them with their entrées.

“Well, I’m getting to that,” Derek said as he searched for the right words to convey his thoughts. Finally, he recalled a clever anecdote. “I once heard an evangelist say something and I never quite understood it until I met you.”

“What’s that?” Charlene asked as she sliced into her filet.

Derek replied, “*She said, ‘The enemy is not a dumb pirate. He does not try to rob empty vessels.’*”

Charlene chewed slowly as she pondered the profundity.

“I never fully appreciated the power of that statement until I met you,” he added.

“I’m not quite sure I follow,” she said.

“Think about it.” Derek explained, “With all that you’ve been through, it’s clear that the enemy is out to get you. He’s thrown his complete arsenal at you and you’re still standing—battle tested and a little weary but you’re still standing. Ergo, you must be carrying some priceless cargo.”

*Priceless cargo?* Charlene sat back and marveled at his remarks.

“I’ve been thinking about your dream of being a writer,” Derek continued. “Your early years...your life with Pierre...your recovery from those experiences, I can’t help but think there’s a story there.”

Awestruck, she remained silent and still.

“I think writing about it could be beneficial for you,” he said, swallowing a bite of smoked salmon. “For one, it could be cathartic.” He searched her face but it bore no discernable expression. “And two,” he added, “I believe sharing your story may empower other women who are involved in troubled relationships or unhealthy situations. You could be a beacon directing them to the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Instinctively, Charlene started to backpedal and beg off.

“It’s nice that you think so highly of me, honey. But I don’t think I’m the most qualified person for the job.”

Derek was prepared for her resistance. He countered, “God uses the *chosen* and the *called*—not the qualified. And I have no doubt that you have the anointing, the touch of God, on your life.”

With that one statement, he’d all but silenced her. Though she tried desperately, she could not manage one legitimate argument.

Undaunted, Derek continued, “God is wise and very efficient in utilizing His resources. He either produced or permitted every trial or tribulation—the debt, the discord, the divorce, the devastation and despair—to equip you to help others in similar situations.”

Realizing that he was serious, Charlene rested her utensils and gave him her undivided attention.

“Given all that you’ve overcome in your lifetime—humble beginnings, a dysfunctional family, marital strife, financial ruin, a battle with depression and single parenthood—given all that, it’s a wonder that you’re sitting here with me today. A lesser person might have succumbed to one or more of those situations a long time ago. But look at you. You’re still standing. You’re a hero of sorts.” Derek admitted, “Baby, personally, I admire your strength and resilience. And I believe that your story would appeal to people on so many levels. I believe it would inspire and encourage women, and perhaps even men, from all walks of life.”

Charlene was shell-shocked. Never had such words been uttered in her regard. She was taken aback by the experience. After all, a man whom she admired and respected was singing her praises and speaking life to a dream long deferred. Not surprisingly, she hardly knew how to respond. Fortunately, Derek didn’t have that same problem. Rather, he forged right ahead.

“I’ve been doing my homework and I know that agents and publishers tend to shy away from raw talent in favor of artists who can turn a quick profit.”

The P-word, profit, brought her back to reality. Charlene suddenly found herself re-engaged in both the conversation and with her file.

“So chances are we’re going to have to self-publish your book at least until we establish an audience and prove the value of your work.” Like an industry insider, he said, “If we generate enough buzz, there’s a chance that we could attract attention from the literary community and that could lead to a deal with a major publisher.”

The thought of turning her pain into profit and Derek’s pragmatic approach to the process had Charlene feeling energized and optimistic. However, she tried to harness her imagination and emotions before either got the better of her.

“Sweetie, you’ve obviously put quite a bit of thought into this matter. But, you’ve never read one thing that I’ve written. And I’ve never written anything longer than a term paper. How can you be certain that I can write a book?”

“I believe in you,” he said austerely. “I believe that you’re a winner, not a quitter,” Derek said as he finished the appetizer. “If you start a book, you’ll finish it. And it will be extraordinary just like you. I think you just need a boost of confidence to help you get started and a coach to help you stay focused and motivated. That’s where I come in. That’s my job, to guide you through the process and lead you to victory.”

It was obvious that Derek’s words had a positive impact on Charlene as her skin took on a radiant glow and a brilliant cover girl smile crossed her face. His recollection of her childhood dream and belief in her ability deeply touched her. It gave her hope along with a sense of purpose and direction which she sorely needed. It also validated her sense of self-worth. Suddenly, her good day had just gotten better. *Kudos, Derek.*

“Well, Coach, what’s the game plan?”

Derek smiled, relieved that she was on board. “It just so happens that my mother is a retired English teacher. So she can be your editor. And my sister, Deidre, is an avid reader. She’s in a couple of book clubs and she’s got the literary industry on lock. So she can be your critic or advisor.”

Charlene became more excited as each portion of the plan was revealed.

Derek continued, “I know you’ve got a lot of girlfriends, so I’m hoping that you’ll be able to enlist them to help with marketing and promotions.”

She nodded indicating that the idea seemed plausible.

“Last but not least, there’s financing,” he sighed. “Now, I have no idea how much all of this will cost. So we may have to get creative to underwrite this venture.”

“Considering my current situation, I can’t afford to take out a bank loan,” Charlene said.

“I figured you’d say as much,” Derek replied. “If you won’t take out a bank loan, how ‘bout a personal loan from a friend?”

“I already owe several friends and relatives. I don’t need to add another to the list.”

“Then consider it an investment from a partner, if you will.” Derek added, “I’ve been looking for a way to earn a better rate of return on BJ’s college savings and this could be just such an opportunity.”

“Absolutely not!” Charlene insisted. “I can’t let you take money from that baby’s college fund for my sake.” Pensive, she considered the circumstances and shook her head thoughtfully. “No, where God guides, He provides. If this is meant to be, the Lord will make a way for me.”

Silence fell over the table as Charlene finished her meal and Derek now sat dumbfounded. Her refusal to accept money from him, even as a business loan, was surprising to say the least. And the fact that she had put BJ’s well-being ahead of her own earned Charlene a special place in his heart. After all, it was more than Jeanine had ever done. And, it was precisely the kind of move that his mom would have made. It was a selfless one. *Point, Charlene.*

The waiter returned to clear the dinner dishes and serve dessert. Since Derek hadn’t ordered one, Charlene offered him the first bite of her chocolate velvet cake with butter cream frosting. Initially, he refused. However, after watching her skillfully slide a sliver of the confectioner’s delight off the fork and into her mouth, he caved.

Charlene took her time slicing a piece for him. Seductively, she whispered, “Who knows? If my first novel is successful maybe we’ll follow it up with a love story all our own.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said while raising the fork to his lips. He parted them and she rested the tip of the fork on his tongue. “And I know just what to call it?” she added.

Derek swallowed the sample. “Let’s hear it,” he said.

“*Meeting Mr. Wright,*” she replied. “We’ll call it *Meeting Mr. Wright.*”

Derek mulled it over. He appeared unimpressed so she tried again.

“*The Godsend,*” she smiled with an inspired look in her eyes. “That’s it,” she said definitively. “We’ll call it, *The Godsend.*”

He beamed. “Sounds like a winner,” he said while leaning in for a kiss.

And just like that, a star was born.

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With Nic visiting his father's relatives and Derek spending time with his family, Charlene found herself home alone that evening. Feeling revived after the magnificent worship experience and buoyed by Derek's proposal, she decided to float a trial balloon by a trusted associate to determine its viability.

As she reclined on the sofa, Charlene picked up the phone and dialed.

Over in a Lincoln Park pad, the phone rang. The homeowner rushed in from the garage in time to grab it just before the answering machine received the call.

"Hello," Lauryn said nearly breathless.

"Hey, girl. Happy Easter!"

"Heeeey, girl!" Lauryn replied cheerfully. "Same to you." She rested her belongings and took a seat on the chaise in the great room. "What's going on? How was your day?"

"Oh, girl, I had a great day," Charlene said jubilantly. "How was your day?"

"It was cool. I went to church with my mom and had dinner with my kinfolks. You know, the usual holiday happenings. But enough about my day, let's get back to your day. What happened?"

Proudly, Charlene explained, "Well, Derek invited me to go to church with him. So I did."

"Hey, now!" Lauryn cheered. "How was it?"

"The service was amazing, girl. He attends Remnant Church over on the south side and the service was absolutely amazing."

"Yeah, I've never been there myself but I've heard nothing but great things about it. Pastor Loftus, right?"

"Girl, yeah, and he is something else with his little short round self," she chuckled before providing a recap of the service.

As Charlene talked, Lauryn wandered up to her bedroom and liberated herself from hosiery, heels and other ungodly apparel. Minutes later, she slipped in to a floral print robe, cinched it at the waist and sauntered back downstairs where she took a more comfortable position on the lounge. All the while, she *oohed* and *aahed* at the appropriate points throughout Charlene's narrative.

When she'd finished the recap of the day's events, Charlene launched into the deep.



“Girl, I don’t know what to make of Derek.”

“What’s up with Chocolate Thunder or should I say, Mr. Goodbar? ‘Cause he definitely sounds like he could be ‘the one’.”

“Child, please,” she said, trying to dismiss the idea though secretly entertaining the same thought. “He’s got this crazy notion that I should write a book about my experience with Pierre among other things. He says it could be therapeutic for me and it may help other women in similar situations. Can you believe it? Isn’t that the craziest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Absolutely,” Lauryn said. “And I love it! I say, let’s do it!”

“What?!” Charlene asked incredulously.

“Let’s go for it!”

“Girl, you’re as crazy as he is!” Charlene remarked.

“What’s crazy about it? It’s not one of those extreme dreams like climbing Mt. Everest or running a marathon. It’s a much more practical one—writing the great American novel,” Lauryn replied. Convincingly, she argued, “You’ve got the talent. And my girls and I, we’ve got your back.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, for starters, Rae is a marketing whiz, so she can handle marketing and promotions. Peni is a legal eagle. She can vet any contracts that you have to sign. My girl, Jez is Ms. Metromix. She’s got the city on lock. She’s plugged in to every major player in the city so she can put you on their radar screens. And last but not least, I’ve got the all-round business savvy for which companies pay dearly. And I’m offering it to you free of charge. So you can’t beat that with a stick.”

Realizing that she like Derek was serious, Charlene said, “Lauryn, I can’t afford to pay these people.”

“Oh, that’s OK,” she assured her. “They’ll put it on my account. We trade favors that way,” she explained. “And the next time their friends or family need some assistance, I’ll be on the hook to return the favor.”

Hesitantly, Charlene said, “I don’t know, Lauryn. This sounds like a huge undertaking to me and I’m not just talking about the writing process. Derek is talking about self-publishing, so we’d have to do everything ourselves. And I’m not even sure what that would entail. I mean, aside from actually producing the book, it could include everything from publicity and

promotion to distribution and inventory management to accounting and collections. This type of project could easily require a thousand hours of work. And that's a considerable investment of time for little or no return."

Seriously, Lauryn said, "Girl, don't block your blessings. Believe it or not, you can talk people out of blessing you. Until now, I thought the only way to do that was with complaining or ingratitude, the two things that usually talk me out of blessing somebody. But you're coming at it from a different angle. We're offering to help, no strings attached, and you're flat out refusing our assistance. That's insane. We're trying to bless you, but you won't let us."

Charlene asked, "How can you be so certain that the others will be willing to help assuming they're even available?"

"I told you. We have a standing agreement. It's part of the *Savvy Girl's Guide to Being Single*."

"The what?"

"It's a code, a set of unofficial rules and rituals that we single women abide by and observe. And this particular section of the code, the *You Go, Girl* clause, requires that we band together and help a sister out if she's got a chance to live her dream or otherwise get out from under."

"That's all well and good, Lauryn, but I'd feel better if you'd at least talk it over with the girls before committing them to such a project."

"Fine," Lauryn said, exasperated. "Hold on a second." She pressed the FLASH button and placed a call on the other line. As the phone started to ring, she activated the party line.

"Charlene?"

"I'm here."

The other call was answered on the third ring.

"Speak."

"Jez?" Lauryn asked.

"What's up?"

"Are you busy?"

“I’m on the phone with Mama trying to plan a trip,” she answered. “Why? What’s going on?”

“I’ve got Charlene on the line.”

“Oh, hey, girl.”

“Hey, Jez,” Charlene said. “Where are you going?”

“That’s what we’re trying to decide.” Jez explained, “Either I’m gonna drive down to St. Louis to meet Mama and we’re gonna take a bus to Tunica to gamble. Or, she’s gonna drive up here to meet me and we’re gonna take a bus to New York to go shopping on Canal Street near Chinatown.”

In utter astonishment, Lauryn said, “I can’t believe you’re thinking of taking one of those bootleggers’ express trips.”

“Girl, yeah!” Proud of her ‘fabulousness’, Jez exclaimed, “Pirates’ paradise, here I come!” She added, “At least, if I have my way, that’s where we’ll be going. Mama’s leaning towards Tunica and the casinos. Anyway, she’s still on the line. What’s up?”

Lauryn filled in the details about the proposal then asked, “Are you down?”

“Definitely,” she said.

“I figured as much,” Lauryn replied. “Since Rae went home this weekend and Peni is with her family, I don’t want to bother either of them right now. But do you think they’d be down as well.”

“Absolutely,” Jez said. “Without a doubt.”

“There you have it, Charlene. Feel better?”

“I guess so,” she replied hesitantly.

“Cool, thanks, Jez. That’s all I wanted.”

“OK.”

“Tell your mom I said, ‘hi’,” Lauryn added.

“Will do.”

“Thanks, Jez,” Charlene added.

“Uhn-hun, I’ll holler at y’all later,” she replied before leaving the call.

After she disconnected, Lauryn pressed the FLASH button to end the party line then she returned to her conversation with Charlene.

“Satisfied?” she sassed.

“I suppose so,” Charlene responded. “Just tell me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Why are you in such an all-fired hurry for me to do this?”

Lauryn exhaled. She shifted in her seat and gazed longingly out of the atrium window. “Oh, girl,” she started, “I guess you could say that I was born with stars in my eyes.”

Charlene listened carefully as Lauryn confessed.

“A career in entertainment, particularly in music, has always been my dream. Of course, whenever I shared that dream with people, they poked fun at me. They laughed at me and made fun of my dream.” Introspective, she said, “Naturally, it hurt to be ridiculed. So I learned to conceal that side of my self from public view.” With a shrug, Lauryn said, “Over time, either knowingly or unknowingly, I let their unbelief become my own.” Regretfully, she admitted, “I stopped pursuing my dreams and I settled for doing or being what others expected of me. Being older and wiser, I now realize that’s one of the worst things that a person can do because as long as you have a dream, you have hope. And that’s priceless. It’s essential for your sanity as well as your survival.”

As her girlfriend spoke, Charlene was convicted for having abandoned her own childhood dreams.

By her own admissions, Lauryn realized aloud, “I don’t dream anymore not for myself anyway. Instead, I dream for others.” With a distant look in her eyes, she said, “I figure that if I can help another sister live her dream then I can enjoy a measure of her success. I can celebrate her success and experience a sense of accomplishment for having had a hand in it.” Again, Lauryn shifted in her seat. “That said,” she continued, “I guess my interest in this is rather self-serving in that I want it for myself as much as I want it for you.”

Moved, Charlene relented. “Since Derek believes that I can do it and you’re willing to step out on faith with me, I’ll do it. For the two of you, I’ll do it.”

“Yes!” Lauryn cheered. As she leapt off the lounge, the wheels started spinning. She was envisioning the launch party, book reviews, interviews, book signings, online chats and an

all out media blitz for Charlene's yet to be titled, yet to be written bestseller. "Get ready for your date with destiny, girlfriend, 'cause I've got a good feeling about this thing. I've got a really good feeling about this thing."

Charlene wanted to tell Lauryn that she too had feelings about this thing most of which included some element of fear, anxiety, worry, doubt or nausea. But she didn't want to burst girlfriend's bubble. So she remained silent.

"OK, Lena, I've got to run. I'm flying the friendly skies tonight," Lauryn explained. She checked the clock. "Oh my goodness," she cried, "my driver will be here any minute." Starting for the stairs, she declared, "I'll do some research and start drafting a plan to help us launch your new career. Ooohh," she stopped in her tracks, "and just like that I've discovered yet another benefit of this project."

"What's that?" Charlene asked.

"It'll give us something constructive to do as opposed to dining out and dishing about men."

"Restaurant owners across the city beware." Charlene joked, "Each of them just lost a huge chunk of change though they have yet to realize it."

Lauryn laughed, continuing up the stairs to her bedroom. "I'll be in touch, girl."

"All right, be careful, Fly Girl."

"Will do," Lauryn said. "Bye."

After returning the phone to the receiver, Charlene sat motionless for a minute. The verdict had come in and the jury had voted in her favor. As that realization set in, she took a deep sobering breath. Slowly, she lifted herself off the couch. When she'd reached full height, she grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"YYEEESSSS!" She shouted, thrusting her fists towards heaven.

With her arms still extended, Charlene's hips got in on the action. They started to wiggle in a spirited manner. Before long she was dancing. There in the middle of her living room, in a fit of reckless abandon, Charlene danced like no one was watching.