

LADIES FIRST

REVELATIONS OF A STRONG WOMAN

QUEEN

LATIFAH



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REVELATIONS OF A
STRONG WOMAN

QUEEN LATIFAH

WITH KAREN HUNTER

Foreword by Rita Owens

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CHAPTER

1



A QUEEN CREATION

Latifah was born when I was eight years old. It was the late 1970s, and Muslim-sounding names were popular all over the country, but especially in Newark. My friends called themselves Malik, Rasheedah, and Shakim. Everybody had a Muslim name. Winki went by "Jameel."

Maybe it was the spillover from the riots or the resurgence of the popularity of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam among young people that gave rise to the new nomenclature. Perhaps it came from the black revolutionaries and the Black Panther movement that defined civil unrest

in Newark neighborhoods. I think people were looking for a sense of self that went beyond what they thought society had to offer.

For me, *Latifah* was freedom. I loved the name my parents gave me, Dana Elaine Owens. But I knew then that something as simple as picking a new name for myself would be my first act of defining who I was—for myself and for the world. *Dana* was daughter. *Dana* was sister. *Dana* was student, friend, girl in the 'hood. But *Latifah* was someone else. She would belong only to me. It was more than a persona. Becoming Latifah would give me the autonomy to be what I *chose* to be—without being influenced by anyone else's expectations of what a young girl from Newark is supposed to be. Or what she is supposed to do. Or what she is supposed to want.

My cousin Sharonda had a book of Muslim names, with the meaning listed next to each one. So Sharonda and I went through the book to see if we could find something for us. Sharonda picked *Salima Wadiah* for her names. *Mamoud* was already her last name. So she became Salima Wadiah Mamoud. We made up a little song, a chant for her name: "Sa-lim-a, Wa-di-ah, Ma-moud—rocks the house! Sa-lim-a, Wa-di-ah, Ma-moud—rocks the house!" We used to bug off of that all day. "Sa-lim-a, Wa-di-ah, Ma-moud—rocks the house!"

Then it was my turn. I was excited, turning the pages of the book. There was *Aisha*. Pretty, but not me. *Kareemah*. Cool, but common sounding. Then I got to *Latifah*.

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Sharonda's father, my uncle Sonny, was a Muslim. He had a younger daughter whose name was Latifah. I thought that name was beautiful. I loved the way it sounded, how it just rolled off my tongue. So I was already feeling that name, but when I read what it meant, I knew that was me. *Latifah*: "Delicate, sensitive, kind." Yeah, that was me.

Even though I played kickball, basketball and softball, climbed trees and fences, fought boys, whipped their asses, and was big for my age, "delicate, sensitive, kind" accurately described exactly who I was inside. I loved the name. I loved the meaning, and I loved how it made me feel—feminine and special. The people in my world may have been perceiving me as something else, but inside I felt delicate, sensitive, and kind. I knew who I was inside, and I wanted to show a bit of that on the outside—with my name.

The "Queen" didn't come until a decade later. My first single, "Wrath of My Madness" was released before I actually signed with Tommy Boy Records. The 45 just had "Latifah" on it. When it was time to sign a contract, my lawyer asked me what my "p.k.a." or "professionally known as" name would be. When I rhymed, I called myself the Princess of the Posse, because I was one of the only women in my clique. I was thinking about calling myself MC Latifah or Latifah the MC. I even thought about just leaving it as Latifah, but it was too plain, just out there.

Around this time, the late 1980s, the conflict in South Africa was coming to a head. Nelson Mandela was still

imprisoned, and the United States was pressuring companies to divest their interests in the country that made *apartheid* a household word. My mother and I would get into deep discussions about the plight of the South African women and talk about how segregation and racism were alive and kicking right here—in the very country that was opposed to apartheid in a nation halfway around the world. My mom and I revered those African women we didn't know, because they seemed to be so close to the most royal ancestors of all time. Before there was a queen of England, there were Nefertiti and Numidia. The African queens have a unique place in world history. They are revered not only for their extraordinary beauty and power but also for their strength and for their ability to nurture and rule the continent that gave rise to the greatest civilizations of all time. These women are my foremothers. I wanted to pay homage to them. And I wanted, in my own way, to adopt their attributes.

So "Queen" seemed appropriate. Queen Latifah. When I said it out loud, I felt dominant. I was proud. When I said "Queen," it was like saying "woman." *Queen* became synonymous with *woman* for me—the way every woman should feel or should want to feel.

Queen is the ultimate woman.

When I told my mother what my new name would be, she rolled her eyes. "Queen?! How are you going to call yourself *Queen* Latifah?" She couldn't see me as a

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queen—not then, anyway. Maybe she thought *she* was the queen; therefore, I should be the princess. But queen? Nah.

But true to form, she just said, “Okay, whatever” and let me go with it. She didn’t dig it at first, but she got used to it. When she would come to my shows, Digital Underground, the Jungle Brothers, and Public Enemy knew my mother as “Queen Latifah’s mother.” She became like the Queen Mother. And before long, she started to like it.

In many ways, she was the queen who gave me the guts and the confidence to become one myself. She gave birth, physically and spiritually, to Queen Latifah.