

KINGPIN



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Vision and Tablets

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For every Chris in the world

But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.

— Romans 5:20 (NKJV)

Never Fold

The car ride was quiet. Too quiet. Outside, the streets were alive like they ain't know the world was ending today. Kids ran the block, their voices bouncing off brick walls. Mothers leaned out project windows, yelling for them to stay close. Bell Biv DeVoe's "Poison" blasted from a boombox. That was the soundtrack of summer '90 in The Heights.

Corner boys already posted on the boulevard, clothes crisp, gold chains heavy on they necks. Beepers on their hips like badges of honor. The uniform of every nigga getting money in The Heights. That was the dream here. Not college. Not no bullshit nine to five. You either became the nigga everybody wanted to be, or the girl on his arm.

The Heights didn't raise dreamers. It raised survivors. I wasn't surviving. Not today.

I pressed my face to the window, watching familiar corners speed past. The sun trying to break through, but the clouds hung heavy and stubborn, like even God didn't wanna look down on us today. First day of summer, but it didn't feel like summer. Felt like the city was skipping straight to something colder.

My six-four frame felt crammed in the back seat. Usually, it was Jus back here. Today was different. Everything was different.

I watched Asia out the corner of my eye, too afraid to look at her straight. Too afraid I'd see Ma staring back at me. Her small body was drowning in that black dress we bought at Neiman's three days ago. "The only one that looks right for burying your mother," the saleswoman had said. Like she knew exactly why two kids was standing there with crumpled twenties, trying not to cry in the middle of the store.

Asia hadn't said a word since we left the apartment. She just sat there twisting Ma's ring around her finger. A thin gold band with a tiny diamond that wasn't worth shit to nobody but us. Ma gave it to her the night before she died and made her promise to keep it safe.

"That ring been in our family longer than you been alive," Ma whispered, her voice already fading. "Your great-grandmama wore it. Then your grandmama. Then me. Now it's yours."

Asia nodded, tears running down her face, slipping that ring onto her finger like she was accepting a crown she never wanted.

Now she sat silent, working that ring like it was the only thing holding her together. Staring out the window at the world Ma would never see again. The summer she'd been waiting for. The college tours they planned before junior year. All gone now.

Lex caught my eye in the rearview mirror. His usually easy smile was gone, replaced with the same tight look he wore when we was about to handle serious business. But this wasn't business. This was the hardest thing any of us ever had to do.

"We almost there," he said quietly.

Jus shifted in the passenger seat before he finally looked back at Asia. "You good?"

She nodded without turning from the window, but we all knew she was lying.

The church came into view. Holy Shepherd Baptist, sitting on the corner like it had been waiting for us. Stone steps already crowded with black suits and dresses, people fanning themselves in the humid air. The day I'd been dreading since Dr. Martinez said there wasn't nothing more they could do was here. Ready or not.

Lex pulled to the curb behind a line of cars that stretched half a block. People moving slow, like walking through water.

"Y'all take your time," Lex said, killing the engine.

But time wasn't something we had anymore.

Inside Holy Shepherd, the sanctuary felt like a tomb. Warm, stale air being pushed around by old ceiling fans. Flowers lined the front. White lilies and roses, Ma's favorites.

I sat in the front row, trying to look anywhere but at Ma in that casket, but my eyes kept dragging back to her. She looked peaceful for the first time in months. No pain creasing her forehead. No worry lines around her eyes. The cancer had stolen so much from her, but it couldn't touch how beautiful she still was. They did her makeup the way she liked it, not too heavy. Put her in that navy dress she made me swear to bury her in.

For a second, I almost expected her to open her eyes and ask why everybody was looking so sad in the Lord's house.

But she didn't move. Would never move again. She was still. My mother wasn't made to be still.

I pulled at my collar, my tie choking me like a noose. The suit felt wrong on me, like it belonged to somebody else. It had been a long time since I wore anything this formal. It had been a long time since Ma scraped together every dollar she had to buy me them Easter suits with the shiny-ass shoes. I was a different man back then. Before I became everything she prayed I wouldn't.

The pews was packed. Mrs. Rodriguez sat near the back, tissue pressed to her swollen eyes. She was the one who used to let Ma grab groceries on credit when the checks was late, never making her feel small about it. Mr. Williams, the barber who used to cut my hair for free when we couldn't afford it, nodded from the side aisle.

Wasn't all love, though. A lot of people who ain't belong in here. Like our bullshit landlord, Bill Anderson. Sitting there in his cheap-ass suit, the nerve of this motherfucker, sitting there like he gave a damn. No tears. No grief. Just that smug look, his pale face turning red from the heat, like even sweating with us was too much for him.

Same piece of shit landlord who tried to put us out when Ma was too sick to work during her first cancer fight. That's what made me start running for Iron. Nine years later and ain't been a late payment since. I made damn sure he got his money on time every month. Cash. He never asked where it came from, never said shit about it being dirty. Just snatched it up and probably ran back to his quiet-ass neighborhood talking about how he was "cleaning up The Heights." Fake-ass "concerned citizen." Him and them people uptown just like him ain't give a fuck about us. They was just waiting for families like

mine to break so they could jack the rent and fill the place with somebody they thought fit better.

My hands curled into fists before I could stop them. I forced them open, reminded myself where I was. Mars noticed. She slipped her hand onto my leg, her eyes soft, searching mine like she was asking if I was okay. She held me down like she always did, without making a production of it. She didn't say much, didn't need to. That one touch said it all. Her dark skin was warm as sunlight, her beauty the kind that turned heads on any block. But it wasn't just how she looked. It was the way she carried herself. Quiet strength. Steady. That's what made her different. She was what Ma called a good girl. Not like the other girls I'd messed with, the ones who was all flash and drama, like Shawn. Women looking for a come-up.

"She's in a better place now," Mrs. McNeal whispered behind us.

I wanted to turn around and ask her what made heaven better than watching your daughter graduate, or holding your grandkids. But I kept my mouth shut and my eyes forward.

Asia was on my other side, clinging to my arm like a lifeline. Somebody else whispered that she had Ma's complexion and bright eyes. They wasn't wrong. Looking at her was like seeing Ma at sixteen. The same stubborn set to her jaw, the same way she tilted her head when she was trying not to cry.

The preacher started talking about God's plan and eternal rest. I tuned his ass out. Blessings. Crowns in heaven. Where was God when Ma was choosing between rent and medicine? Where was He when she worked herself damn near to death just to keep us fed?

I stared at that cross behind the pulpit and felt nothing but rage. This God of love let good people like Ma suffer while pieces of shit like Anderson slept comfortable every night. Let mothers bury their kids while cold-blooded killers walked free. If He did exist, He musta either forgot He made niggas in the hood, or He hated us.

The preacher carried on about love, but all I could see was Ma in that hospital bed, tubes in her arms, still forcing a smile for me and Asia. If that was love, God could keep it.

The organ started playing, dragging me to that night six months ago when everything changed.

I came in from the block that night, just finished celebrating my twenty-second birthday, clothes smelling like blunts, breath full of Hennessy. Ma was sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water. I thought she was gonna flip 'cause she hated when I did that shit.

"Sit down, Chris," she said.

Something in her voice made my stomach drop, sobered me up quick. I took the chair across from her, noticed how small she looked under the kitchen light. When had she gotten so thin?

"I got my test results back today."

The words hung in the air like smoke. I knew before she said it. Had known something was wrong for weeks, the way she'd been moving slower, eating less, tired all the time.

"Okay," I said. "And?"

She met my eyes, trying to be strong the same way I was trying to be strong for her.

"It's back, baby. The cancer's back."

Cancer. The same disease that had already stolen two years from us the first time, turned the strongest woman I knew into somebody who needed help opening jars.

"But they can treat it again, right? You beat it before."

"It's different this time." She shook her head, and I saw tears she was trying to hold back. "Stage four."

Stage four. I didn't need no doctor to explain what that meant. I'd watched Mr. Patterson from 4B waste away to nothing while his kids prayed for miracles that never showed up.

"How long?"

"Three months. Maybe six if the treatments work."

The kitchen got smaller. The walls moved closer. At twenty-two years old, I still needed my mother more than I needed air. The thought of her being gone, of Asia growing up without her, of me trying to figure out life without the only person we had in the world besides each other.

"We gonna fight it," I said, mind already working numbers. "Get the best doctors money can buy. Whatever it

takes.”

“Money can’t fix this one, baby.” Her voice was gentle but final. “Only God can, if it be His will.”

“What kind of God takes somebody’s mother while niggas who don’t deserve to breathe walk around free?”

Ma’s hand came down hard on the table, glass rattling against the wood. “Keep your voice down, before Asia hears you,” she snapped, eyes sharp. Even sick, she still had that fire. She sat back.

“I want you to listen to me, Chris. Really listen.” She leaned forward, tapped my arm. “This body is temporary. Just flesh. It ain’t the death of this body you should fear. It’s the death of your soul.”

“Ma.”

“I know what you out there doing. You too big now for me to be beating on. Ain’t like that belt ever kept your ass off that corner no how. But hear me, and hear me good, boy. Ain’t none of this worth it if you gotta lose your soul to get it.”

She squeezed my hand. “You better than these streets, Chris. I raised you to be more than what you think you gotta be.”

“What choice I got? You think some McDonald’s job gonna pay for your treatments? You think flipping burgers gonna keep Asia in school?”

“I’m not asking you to stop.” Her voice got quieter, more serious. “I know you don’t see no other way right now. But promise me you’ll be smart. Promise me you won’t let anger make you stupid. And promise me you’ll take care of your sister.”

“I promise.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

I looked in her eyes, tired but still fierce, and meant every word. “I promise, Ma. I’ll take care of Asia. I’ll be the man you raised me to be.”

But sitting there holding her dying hands, I already knew what that promise was gonna cost me.

“Chris.” Asia’s voice brought me back to the present. “I don’t wanna leave her here.” I didn’t answer, but neither did she.

When it came time to carry her out, me and Lex took the front, Jus and some cousins filled in the rest. The casket was heavier than I expected, not just the weight of wood and metal, but everything else. All the words we never said. All the time we’d run out of. All the promises I still had to keep.

Summer heat slapped us as we stepped outside. Hadn’t much changed since we’d been inside. Life kept moving whether we wanted it to or not.

The repast was at the community center on Buxley Street. Same place they held Christmas toy drives and back-to-school giveaways. Folding tables lined the walls, loaded with food no one who really loved Ma wanted to eat.

I posted up on the back wall, arms crossed, watching everybody perform their grief. Cousins who hadn’t called once while Ma was sick now crowding Asia, telling her how strong she was, how proud Ma would be. She played her part, nodding when they touched her hand, but I could read her face well enough to know she ain’t wanna be around these people any more than I did.

Mars slid in beside me. “You holding up?” she asked low, her hand fixing my tie.

“I’m here,” I said, leaning in, kissing her forehead. “I appreciate how you—”

Pop’s big brother, Uncle Leroy, walked up, interrupting my sentence. One of the few family members who showed up when it mattered, not just today but always.

“Gonna miss Pat,” he said, voice thick, shaking his head slow. “She was one of a kind. Stronger than most men I know.” He put a hand on my shoulder, gave it a squeeze. “You did right by your mama and your sister, boy. James would be proud.”

He turned to Mars and smiled. “And this one right here? She held your mama down too. Don’t take that for granted, nephew.”

Mars laughed soft, squeezing my hand. “You always dropping knowledge, Uncle Leroy. He better know what he got,” she said, rolling her eyes as she laughed.

“Nah, Uncle Leroy, you right. I ain’t messing this up.” A lie escaped smooth through my teeth. Mars was wifey, but I had a shorty on the side, Shawn. She was my guilty pleasure.

“Good,” Leroy said, nodding once, the weight of his words hanging between us. Then he looked back at Mars. “Come on, help me start wrapping some of this food so we can get these folks out of here.”

“Alright, I’ll stop by this week to check on you and Asia,” Mars said, kissing my cheek before she followed him toward the tables, still talking with him as they walked off. I watched them go, Uncle Leroy’s voice mixing with the crowd noise as they headed toward the food tables.

Ms. Washington made her way over, moving across the room toward me like she was walking the runway. Perfume hit me before she did. Caramel skin, weave flowing down her back. Dress tight, chest spilling out, nails perfect and polished. A hustler’s dream back in her day.

“Chris,” she said slow, like she was tasting my name. “You your daddy’s son for real. Got that same smile, getting money just like him. Smooth, just like him.” Her eyes ran me up and down like she was already undressing me in her mind.

“Hi, Ms. Washington,” I said, dry.

“I’m a come by this week, bring y’all something to eat. Asia still in school, right?”

She knew damn well wasn’t no casserole she was trying to offer me. And we damn sure wouldn’t eat it even if she did.

“We good, Ms. Washington. We got food at the house, some family brought over,” I lied.

“Well, maybe I can bring something else by. Help you relieve some of that stress you carrying, like a real woman. Not like them little girls you used to,” she said, pressing her body into me, looking up at me like she knew the answer already.

I almost laughed in her face, but wasn’t shit funny. Ma wasn’t even in the ground good, and she was already in my face. Eyes thirsty.

“You bugging, Ms. Washington. Don’t let Mars hear you say that,” I said, smiling, stepping back, putting space between us.

Her smile cracked as I walked off, annoyance creeping up my neck.

I dipped off to the bathroom.

I let the sink water run cold over my hands before I splashed water on my face. I stared at my reflection, eyes showing I was more tired than I wanted to admit. I took a deep breath, still couldn’t believe Ms. Washington was bold enough to press me like that. Ma would’ve lit her ass up if she caught her trying that shit with me. The thought made me chuckle, but it hit just as quick. Ma wasn’t here to protect us no more.

My throat tightened, eyes burning. For half a second, I felt it coming. Tears that had been trying to escape my eyes all day. I swallowed them, damn near suffocated in the process. I gripped the sink so hard my knuckles turned white. Couldn’t fold. Not here. Not now.

I leaned closer to the mirror, eyes hard. “Get it together,” I muttered. “Don’t fold.”

When I stepped back out into the noise, Reverend Collins was right there waiting, like he’d been watching the bathroom door. Wide smile let me know he was about to ask for something I wasn’t giving.

“Brother Chris,” he said, laying a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Your mother was a blessing. We gonna miss Sister Pat something fierce. You know she got that crown, ain’t just get no robe up there. Anyway, we still raising money for that church fund. Be a real blessing if you donated in her honor.”

I looked down at his hand on my shoulder, glanced at his fat rings on each finger, gator shoes.

“You know, Reverend,” I said, voice low but sharp, “speaking of that fund, I heard Sister Daniel’s lights about to get cut off. There should be enough in there to cover her bill, right?”

His smile faded. He stuttered, reaching for words. “Well, uh, you know, Brother Chris, the way these funds work, uh, there’s just so much red tape. Might not be able to get that money out in time. But the Lord sure is faith-

ful. We'll be lifting her up in prayer next meeting."

"Red tape, huh?" I nodded once. "Don't worry about it, Reverend. God ain't gotta take care of it. I will. Consider that my donation to the church fund."

I tapped his chest with the back of my hand, calm but sharp, then tossed the damp paper towel from my hands into the trash on my way past him. Didn't even look back.

Only person eating off that ten percent at Holy Shepherd was Reverend Collins.

I scanned the room for Asia. I found her with Jus, the two off to themselves. He was talking low, eyes locked, and for the first time all day she was listening. Not just nodding to be polite, really hearing him.

"Remember that time Tammie and them girls tried to jump you in fifth grade and Ma beat her moms and aunt's ass," I heard Jus saying as I walked up.

"Yeah, nobody messed with me after that," Asia said, cracking the first smile I'd seen her make all day.

"I'ma miss her," Jus said.

"Yeah, me too," Asia said softly.

I was still standing there watching them when Lex's voice broke through behind me. "Yo, C. Nigga Iron been blowing my beeper all afternoon, like he don't know what today is."

I clenched my jaw. That was the last name I was trying to hear today. Ain't even have time to grieve and Iron was already counting what we owed him in time and money.

I turned back to Asia and Jus. "Y'all ready?"

Asia looked up, eyes red, voice small. "Yeah. You ready?"

"Yeah," I said. "Let's go."

The ride home felt different. Lighter somehow. Like we'd all been holding our breath all day and finally let a little of it out. Lex turned the radio back on, Bobby Brown sliding through the static, and for the first time in days, I almost felt human.

I told them about Ms. Washington pressing up on me at the repast.

Asia scrunched her face. "Eww. She like forty. That's nasty."

Jus cracked up in the back seat. "Yo, she really tried it at the funeral?"

"Like I'm lying," I said, shaking my head. "Shorty was wilding."

Lex laughed, grinning. "Man, I'd knock the dust off Ms. Washington's old ass. She still fine. You bugging, C."

We all laughed, even Asia. For a few minutes, the weight lifted.

Inside the apartment, it still smelled like Ma's perfume, like she'd just sprayed it. Coffee mug in the sink. Glasses on the table. Slippers by the door. Everything waiting for her. I knew she wasn't coming back, just wasn't ready to let her go yet.

Me and Asia ended up in the living room together, sitting in silence. No TV. No small talk. Just us, staring at nothing. Both of us trying to figure out what life was supposed to look like without her.

I sat up, leaned forward on the couch, tie hanging loose around my neck, shirt open. I closed my eyes, but all I could see was Ma's face. All I could hear was her telling me I was better than this life.

Maybe I was. Maybe I wasn't.

But tomorrow, I had to start proving which one was true.