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From the Ashes Rises a Phoenix

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After 10 missed calls, I woke up groggily and grabbed my phone.

“Don? What the hell could he possibly want at this hour?” I thought to myself.

The clock read 2:11 am, and I had no clue why my little sister's boyfriend was calling me. I figured they had an argument and needed me to come intervene, so I hesitantly called him back. The line rang only two times before Don's raspy monotone graced the phone.

“Tela...”

“Hello...What's up, Don? It's late and I've got to work tomorrow, everything okay?” I asked in an anxious kind of tone.

“Kaiya dead,” he responded almost unemotionally.

“Stop playin' bro, that ain't even funny,” I shot back now upright in my bed.

“No, for real bro, she gone,” was all he managed to mutter back.

In that moment, time froze for what felt like an eternity as I dropped my phone and let out a huge scream filled with anger, rage, but mostly undeniable pain. My heart began to beat rapidly, my hands began to sweat, and I began to feel both empty and nauseous. I could hear Don trying to call me through the phone but it's like I was having an outer body experience; both there and not there at the same time. I could not have known then that this was the beginning of a painful journey that would eventually end in healing but also required me to step up to fill a monumental role.

My brief hiatus from my physical body was short lived as I snapped back to my new painful reality.

I grabbed my phone hurriedly from the cold hardwood floor and yelled, "I'm on my way!" Call ended.

I rushed to grab my jacket and made a dash from my apartment to my car, our car. My car was out of commission, so my sister allowed me to share hers. Traditionally, when I made the trip from Duncanville to Irving to see my sister it took about thirty minutes, but today it only took fifteen. As I sped into the apartment parking lot and finished my pleading cry to the Lord to "not take my baby sister away from me," I threw the car in park right in front of their building, not even bothering to use a proper parking space. As I got out the car, I could see an ambulance with no siren on, just the blaring of the lights accompanied by two vacant police cars. My heart dropped to my feet because my worst fear had been confirmed.

Tears, scalding hot against my cold cheeks came racing from my eyes yet again. Before I could enter the home to see my first baby doll, my little baby alive one last time, I had to call our other sister Jordan. I had to call multiple times to get ahold of her, but after attempt number three she finally answered.

"Hello...what's wrong," Jordan answered in a hushed voice.

"It's Kaiya, Sissy--- Don called ten times, she passed away I'm at her house now," I managed to say in between distraught tears and sniffles.

"What?! Tela what do you mean? We just saw her less than twelve hours ago yesterday at Aubrey's party. There's no way," she breaks down.

"I am going to go check Sissy, but that is what Don said. I texted the address and will wait here if you are coming." I replied in an anxious and rushed tone.

"Gimme twenty minutes," she said quietly and hung up.

Twelve steps seem like a short distance to most, but to me, it felt like a mountain top as I climbed to see one of my first partners in crime one last time. As I reached the top of stairway Everest, I could see the door to her apartment was open. Both Don and one of the two officers present tried to approach me to inform me of the details of their findings, but my body was on autopilot, so I walked past them both as though they were fixtures hanging on the wall.

I approached my sister's bedroom door and turned the knob slowly. I only had to take about three steps in to see her once lively body lying lifelessly on top of a pile of clothes. Once by her side, I dropped to my knees and positioned her head in the cradle of my arm and her body across my legs as I had done once before when she was seven. At seven she had an asthma attack, but I at twelve was quick on my toes and saved her by performing CPR until we arrived at our nearest hospital about fifteen minutes away. Not this time, this time there was nothing I could do to bring her back. Life had made its decision, and it was final. While rocking her and having our last one-sided conversation about how her and mom would finally be reunited, Don walked in.

"What happened to my baby, Don?" I cried to him.

"She just fell out. She was having an asthma attack and trying to get ready for the hospital. I saw she couldn't make it and had called the ambulance. I left the room to look off the balcony to see if I saw them coming and when I came back, and she was on the floor," he explained. "I'm so sorry Tela," he said as he began to tear up. He left the room so I could have some time alone with her until the mortician came.

About ten minutes later, Jordan arrived. She didn't speak a word; she just came to my side, grabbed Kaiya's hand, and we cried silently. Eventually, the mortician came to collect Kaiya while Jordan and I watched helplessly in anguish. Our whole life, my mom had always

said, “When I go you three will always have each other.” When she passed, it hurt because one’s mom is irreplaceable, but at the same time, we were prepared for it, and we had each other to fall back on. Nobody prepared us for this. We didn’t have the guidelines for the loss of a sibling, what were we to do? No one is ever prepared to lose a sibling, especially at only twenty-five. We fell back on what we knew, which is family unity in a time of need and taking it one day at a time.

We spent about twenty more minutes outside by our cars discussing what we needed to do over the next couple of days and how to tell the kids. Kids?! Damn, up until this point I had completely forgot my oldest daughter had volunteered to watch Brooklinn. Brooklinn was my four-year-old niece and my baby sister’s only child. Realizing I had to be the bearer of bad news also prompted a new question. Who would take custody of Brook? I drove home with a whirlwind of questions clouding my mind and the weight of sorrow on my back. How do I tell a four-year-old mommy is gone? I had to figure it out quickly because once again, falling into that darn autopilot mode, thirty minutes had become ten and though she was only four, Brook was beyond her years and could feel when something was wrong. Her grandmother and grandfather were too sick to start over with a toddler, and her dad was unable to be in the picture. These thoughts did somersaults across my medulla, and before I knew it, I was at my front door.

“Damn that autopilot setting,” I muttered to myself.

Opening the door was inevitable, so I stuck the key in and let myself in. It was about 5 am by then, and all the kids were still asleep. They usually woke from their slumber around 10 am, so this gave me a little more time to ponder the hardest decision of my life. Time flew by as I cried, reminisced on the good old days via Snapchat and pictures, and occasionally threw stuff

around in a fit of rage. Before I knew it, like clockwork, at 10 am young Brooklinn softly knocked on my door.

I froze for a moment, mentally recited my speech to make sure it was suitable for her age, and reluctantly said “come in.”

“Nannie, are you okay?” she asked me with the sweetest doe eyes I had ever seen as if she was anticipating bad news.

I quickly tried to wipe the tear remnants from my face and responded, “Pooh, I need to talk to you.”

She sat in my lap as was our tradition, and I began my rehearsed script. “Nannie loves you very much and from now on you will be living here with us.”

My hope that she wouldn’t ask any rebuttal questions was soon dashed when she asked, “But why? I’m supposed to be going back to mommy’s today; I want to go home.”

At this point tears were on a constant downpour from my eyes as I told her, “I know little one, but mommy was tired and missed Granny, so she went home to live with her in the sky. Mommy was worried about you before she left, so she made me promise I would take care of you and that’s why you will be staying with us now.”

It was silent for a moment, so silent you could hear a fly rub its legs together, and her face wore a blank expression. Hoping to gauge how she felt I asked, “Is that okay?” She started silently crying, and when I tried to embrace her, she took off out the bedroom. The next two to three days were hell. Not only did I have to help plan my sister’s arrangements, but I also had everyone telling me how big of a responsibility it was to decide what to do with Brook, on top of her giving me the silent treatment. After the third day of silent communication between Brook

and the family, she finally talked to me. She told me how she missed her mommy which I could sympathize with having lost my own mother two years prior. I made sure to let her know I would never leave her side, and I would always tell her stories about her mom, and I would show her pictures so that she would never forget her.

I had three kids of my own, which is why I had to put so much thought into taking custody of my niece. But in that moment, knowing what I knew about how she had lost so much at such an early age, and seeing her heartbreak hearing she would never see her idol again, was more than enough to solidify my decision. This event happened October 10, 2021, and it has been a long road of healing, but I can honestly say I am thankful I did it for both myself and my niece's sake. This event has shown me that though life throws some tough curve balls our way, beauty can come from pain. She gets the mother figure she needs, and I will forever have a piece of my sister though she is no longer with me.

Over the almost three-year period, she has grown into a well-rounded sassy diva, seven going on fourteen, and I love watching her grow up. Both she and my sister are my major inspirations for going back to school. On the one hand, I want to finish what my sister never got the chance to start. On the other hand, I want Brooklinn to see that despite where a person comes from or what they've been through, they should never stop striving to be great! Like they say, when life gives you lemons you make lemonade; I did.