

# Image

A NOVELLA

T.K. FARMER

## NOT FOR SALE

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### IMAGE

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Dedicated to any girl or woman who has ever thought she needed someone else to tell her she is good enough.

In God's eyes, you're good enough.

*If you live for people's acceptance,  
you'll die from their rejection.*

-LECRAE-

## CHAPTER ONE

### Sydney

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Sydney Taylor-Bennett and her live-in mother-in-law, Brenda, planned to hang out that night with Bella, Cam's daughter from a prior relationship. Bella was on fall break and scheduled to stay with her dad, but he wouldn't be around that evening. He'd ended up having to go to a social event hosted by his new Commanding General, so Brenda and Sydney had promised they'd help

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make birthday invitations for Bella's upcoming party. Although she usually enjoyed her time with Bella, Sydney was distracted. Her bestie, Kendra, had texted earlier, all wound up about something urgent. She couldn't get into the details at the time, but she was adamant that whatever it was, it couldn't wait until tomorrow. She'd call Sydney later that night, just as soon as she clocked out. Kendra wasn't known for her calm personality, so Sydney felt pretty sure there was nothing to worry about. That said, Sydney couldn't stop wondering if maybe this time Kendra actually had something real to report, and if so, what it could possibly be. Sydney hoped Bella wouldn't notice how often she was checking the time, or how distracted she was. When Sydney finally heard her phone ring, she was right in the middle of addressing a card to Bella's best friend. Her hand jerked across the envelope in surprise, leaving a thick dark line across the previously tidy calligraphy. She slid her phone from her pocket and excused herself, directing an "I'll fix that when I get back" to Bella before walking outside on the balcony to take Kendra's call.

"Hello." She held her breath. She could feel the nervousness coming on. Something in the pit of her stomach told her this call was legit; Kendra's news wouldn't be good.

"Hey, Syd. It's me. I know it's late and that this is your time with Bella, but I just clocked out and this can't wait until tomorrow. Cam's not working a social dinner at Bar Louie like he told you he would be."

"What? K ... girl, this is crazy. I just got a text from him not too long ago ... checking on me and Bella and making sure his momma was still in one piece. Look

Kendra, Cam's office just got a new boss ... a new two-star general. This social was supposed to be like an introductory event for the staff. Something like that." Sydney rested her elbows on the balcony railings and sighed. First the drama with Bella's mom trying to hit us up for more child support, then Cam's mom living here with us, interfering in our marriage and him refusing to ask her to leave. And now this. Cam lying about where he's going. If he was lying, that is. Kendra had never liked Cam for some reason, and was always looking for ways to find fault with him.

"Sorry, Syd," Kendra went on. "I wanted to call you sooner. I took my lunch break early today and walked over to see one of the shift managers at Bar Louie. He confirmed it: There's no social happening there tonight. But here's the part that pissed me off." Kendra's voice was deadly calm, the way it got when she was beyond angry and entering into "furious" territory. "I spotted him taking the hotel elevator upstairs." Kendra had been the Director of Rooms at Westin Huntsville Hotel for the last five years.

"I could kill him for what he's done ... for what he's doing to you."

"K-girl, I know you mean well, but do you honestly think he's out cheating? We've been through so much just dealing with Jackie trying to stick him for more child support and with his mom moving in. Maybe he was seeing some of the folks he'd mentioned would be coming from overseas." Cam had said something about soldiers and senior civilians coming in from brigades – his command's subordinate units.

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“Syd, stop it. You’re doing it again. Making excuses for him. There was no social event ever planned at Bar Louie. It was never scheduled. That’s the point I’m trying to make. And I don’t wanna see you get hurt.”

Sydney was torn. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to confront Cam and find out if Kendra was right. All of Sydney’s self-doubts were bubbling to the surface, trying to convince her that of course he was cheating. But on the other hand, she and Cam had been through a lot and always stuck it out. True, she and Cam had been seeing a counselor for about two years now, but they were finally working through some of their issues. How in the world – why in the world – could he do something like this? It was also true that Kendra had a mean streak and a tendency to overact, especially when it came to Cam. It was all so out of the blue ... could this really be happening?

“Let me put it this way, Syd: He wasn’t dressed like he was working as a protocol officer. Looked more like he’d just left the gym or something.” Kendra hesitated. “I tell you what. Why don’t you come down here to the Westin? Your old, trifling mother-in-law is still there to keep an eye on Bella for a bit, right? Maybe you can come down and sit at the bar at the hotel ... maybe have a virgin daiquiri or something since you don’t drink. The point is, you can hang out for a bit and just might see what I’ve had a feeling about for a long time.”

Sydney closed her eyes and massaged her temple with her free hand, her hair tangling around her fingers. She’d finally raked up enough courage to wear her hair in natural curls so Bella could see how beautiful a woman could be. With natural hair.

The room seemed to spin around her and her stomach felt like it had been hollowed out by a knife. Surely Kendra was wrong. But if she wasn't, did Sydney really want to find out the truth? Cam was the bread winner in their household while Sydney finished up the last two classes toward her Master's Degree in psychology. She was set to graduate in two and a half months. Everything felt so up in the air. Maybe she did need to get out, take a break from the stress.

"Let me talk to Brenda and see if she'll watch Bella. I'll call you once I get in the car and am on my way."

"Good. See ya soon." Kendra still sounded less than happy, but Sydney could hear the relief in her voice once Sydney agreed to meet her at the hotel.

Sydney hung up and walked back into the house, where she found Bella chatting it up with her grandma. Going on and on about how much she hated her thick, curly hair, and how badly she wanted it straightened like Barbie's on the TV show. Bella would be turning seven next month and already the poor kid was battling self-esteem issues. Sydney remembered Bella commenting once how she thought Sydney was pretty, but that she never wanted to be as dark-skinned as Sydney was. Sydney never admitted it, but Bella's words had hurt. Especially given Sydney's past and all the self-esteem issues she had faced over the years. That she still faced even today.

She smiled at her stepdaughter. "Bella, sweetie, I need to run out for just a bit. You think you will be okay staying here with your grandma?"

Bella walked over to her pink play suitcase and pulled out a doll's hair dryer. "I'll stay with her if she straightens

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my hair. Please Grandma, please. Make it straight like Barbie's hair. All my friends' hair is straight. Mine should be, too." Little dimples popped into her cheeks. She was a spitting image of Cam: Bright skin, hazel eyes, and all.

Sydney glanced at her mother-in-law. Brenda had changed the channel from Barbie cartoons to ABC's hit show *How to Get Away with Murder*, and seemed to be hypnotized by it. Sydney couldn't tell if she had been listening; Brenda's glasses reflected the TV screen.

"Brenda. I need to run out real quick."

"What you crying for?" So she was listening. Brenda turned her head to face Sydney. Thankfully, Bella had walked into the kitchen humming and hadn't heard her grandma.

Sydney touched her wet eyes self-consciously.

"You know what, Brenda?" As Bella walked back into the living room, Sydney stopped herself before she said something she'd regret later. Instead, Sydney begged with her eyes for Brenda to not make the tears so obvious to Bella. Even in moments where a little empathy would have been appreciated, Brenda couldn't bring it.

Brenda shook her head sorrowfully, pulling her glasses to a perfectly perched position on top of her head. Sydney took notice of the dark circles under her mother-in-law's eyes. Already dressed in a peach short-sleeve pajama set, Brenda knelt on the floor closer to Bella, where she was playing as a make believe hairdresser. Deep brown, satin skin. Reminded Sydney of Chris more than Cam.

"I should only be an hour or so," Sydney said. "Hour and a half at the most." She felt her heart sink,

remembering the reason for going out. What if Kendra was right?

The drive to the Westin was about ten, fifteen minutes tops, this time of night. It really wasn't cold enough for heat, yet not warm enough for the air conditioner either. And according to the radio, it was going to stay that way for a while. That was the thing with this north Alabama weather. Seemed it was a constant battle, with summer refusing to let fall happen. As badly as Sydney wanted the temp to drop to around 65, maybe even 60 degrees, the mid 70s and even 80s still lingered.

She wasn't a praying woman, but maybe it would come to that. Prayer. She was clean out of ideas otherwise. She turned the wheel without signaling, almost cutting off another car. Is this what the rest of her life being married to Cam would be like? Always wondering and worrying? What's happening here? she asked herself. In counseling nearly two years now. If this won't work, what will? Maybe there's something wrong with me. I've done everything. Catered to him. Helped him care for his daughter. Embraced Bella like she's my own.

And to top it all off, it seemed that lately, even with all their counseling, Cam almost never complimented Sydney's looks. She hadn't actually brought this up to him; did she really need to? If she had to prompt him to compliment her, then what was the point? She needed Cam to see her. Really see her.

She'd felt ugly growing up as a young girl. Skinny with dark skin. Couldn't get her hair to grow for years. At least not until she found her stylist in Huntsville.

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Today at thirty-six, she was healthy, holding a steady weight of about 150. At 5'6" tall, that size wasn't too bad. But maybe that was it. Maybe Cam wanted her thinner. More toned. More muscular.

Sydney shook her head. She couldn't think of anything she'd done, but nonetheless pondered possibilities of what her contribution to this mess might have been.

Another five minutes and she was coasting into the back of Bridge Street Town Centre, Huntsville's only upscale outdoor mall. She passed the Monaco Theater and pulled over into the Westin parking lot. Sydney parked her car and got out. She passed the first two rows, eyes darting around, and whose Mustang did she see? Cam's. She knew there was a chance Cam would be hanging out at the Westin ... Cam had already told Sydney that much. But according to Kendra, the social was never scheduled to begin with. Why would he lie like this? She didn't know whether to be hurt or angry, but ended up settling for both.

The tears came hot and fast as she turned and walked back toward her car. She'd get back in and leave, wait until Cam got home and confront him there. But then another idea began to form. She had a spare set of keys to his car just like he had a spare set to hers. Sydney would take the Mustang and leave her car for him. If he was up there screwing around ... well, then he sure was stupid. Of all the hotels in Huntsville, what man would choose the one where his wife's best friend worked? What smart man would park his car out front like this and make it so obvious? What man with any good sense would do any of this?

Sydney had no idea whether or not she was doing the right thing. What she knew was the wrong thing, though, was sitting in a hotel bar like Kendra had suggested, just waiting to catch him in the act. That she wouldn't do. She had too much class. Too many good things in life for her to go in there making a fool of herself.

She clicked the UNLOCK button to his car, got in and moved it toward the back of the parking lot. She then moved her car and parked it in the very spot where his had been. She knew her husband well enough to know he kept the keys to her Honda with him no matter what. He was always prepared for the worse ... always careful ... not just about a stupid car but in life. Which really made Sydney second-guess that he could be upstairs doing anything wrong at all. He was such a worry wart, she found it hard to believe he'd slip like this. None of it added up.

Kendra's words ran through her mind on the drive back home. Her cell phone rang. She pulled it out and saw that it was Kendra calling again. She ignored the call. If she answered, Kendra would only tell her how crazy she was for not jumping on this opportunity to catch Cam red-handed. But that was Kendra's style. Her way, not Sydney's. There had to be a subtler way of doing things. And if he was cheating, she had another way she'd put an end to it. Something had to give and if this was the life Cam chose, breadwinner or not, she wouldn't be his doormat.

Ten minutes later, she walked back into the house to find Bella still up chatting. Brenda sat on the couch looking restless and worn now.

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“Look Momma Syd! Look what Grandma done to my hair! It looks pretty doesn’t it? You love it?” Sydney managed a slight smile for Bella’s sake, but all she could think was that Cam’s mother couldn’t even get the simple things done right. She’d straightened Bella’s hair even though she knew how Sydney felt about it. It wasn’t so much a problem that Bella wanted her hair straightened as much as it was a problem of why she wanted it done. The school she went to was predominantly white and Bella had compared herself – her skin color and her hair – to other girls more than once. Why couldn’t her mother-in-law see this too and understand that Bella needed to embrace being just how she was, not for Brenda to make her into something she wasn’t?

“I do. It’s very nice, Bella.” Sydney ruffled her fingers through the child’s dull brown hair. “Just remember that whether your hair is straight or curly, long or short, you’re beautiful. Now let’s get you ready for bed.”

If only she could convince herself to have that kind of self-confidence. Sydney couldn’t even muster another look at Brenda. This whole situation with his mother being in their home, picking at Sydney all the time, trying to tear her marriage apart ... this was something else that would be changing soon.

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