

Image

A NOVELLA

T.K. FARMER

NOT FOR SALE

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IMAGE

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IMAGE is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novella are drawn from the author's imagination.

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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-

PROLOGUE

Christopher

*P*owerhouse Gym seemed to be the remedy for everything these days, especially this time of year, getting closer to Christmas and the second anniversary of Brie's death. It was either work out or go crazy in his apartment.

Christopher Bennett held on to the weight bench for balance to start his first stretch. He pulled his left leg up behind him, close to his butt, holding from above the ankle. He'd do this for twenty seconds and then repeat with his right leg. "One. Two. Three. Four."

He paused, letting his leg drop. It was still so hard to not think about her. He pulled his left leg back up. Keep counting. Five. Six. He pushed himself. Keep going. Christopher was kidding himself. There weren't enough workouts in the world that could blur the image of him coming home to find his beautiful wife bent over their

tub. The Glock 42 they'd just bought for home protection lying on the floor next to her limp hand.

He pushed through, counting to twenty and then switching over to his right leg. "One. Two. Three. Four. Five." Christopher stopped counting long enough to wipe the tears and sweat from his eyes. All because she never thought she was good enough. Never sexy enough or perfect enough.

Both his wife and his sister-in-law, Syd, had been struggling with depression for months. Brie had stopped taking her meds for about ten days. Something about the side effects. Something else he'd learned from her note.

Christopher struggled to clear his mind and got through the rest of the stretches, barely able to keep up with the counts. Picking up a pair of seventy-five pound dumbbells, Christopher moved on to his shoulder workout. He was careful not to grip too tight; he knew the focus had to be on his shoulders, not his forearms. He started out with a lateral raise, ready to do fifteen reps, gripping the dumbbells gently, as if holding an egg or a baby's hand. He lifted his arms and went in.

Somewhere around the third rep, he caught his reflection in the mirror. Long dreads and deep chocolate-colored skin. He must have gotten his looks from his pops, whereas his brother, Cam, got his from some long-lost relative. They were like night and day. Cam was two years older, light skinned with hazel eyes and dimples. For years the family had teased their momma, questioning whether or not she'd cut out on Pops. Christopher managed a slight smile. The thought of how angry his momma would be over those comments

amused him; she'd sometimes get all riled up over the silliest stuff.

He kept a steady pace. No stopping, his arms at a perfect ninety-degree angle. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. At eight he let the dumbbells drop to his side as he caught another image in the mirror, this time of Tawney Hughes, the wife of one of the other personal trainers at the gym. She was flirting with some guy he didn't recognize.

Seeing Tawney jogged his memory back to something even more foul that he'd seen yesterday. Who knew? It might've been innocent. Maybe a college mate. Still, it wasn't a good look.

Christopher began his raises again, this time distracted by the memory of what he'd seen. He'd gone out last night with some of the other personal trainers to celebrate his thirty-fourth birthday and had spotted his own sister-in-law down at P.F. Chang's at Bridge Street with a man that definitely wasn't his brother. Syd had curves, and last night she'd worn a pair of pants so tight they'd left pretty much nothing to the imagination. When it came to the way women dressed, Christopher had always been one to see their bodies like a gift. He remembered saying this to Brie more than once: "No one wants a gift that's already been opened. Baby, let the imagination play its role. And besides, who are you out here trying to impress? You're with me."

Was the same thing that had happened to Christopher and Brie now happening to his brother and Syd? That was something else Brie had put in her note. She claimed that had she been getting the proper

attention from him, she wouldn't have needed to go out looking for it elsewhere.

He clenched his jaw so hard at the thought that he could hear his teeth grinding inside his head.

Christopher couldn't explain it, but something seemed to be sidetracking his sister-in-law. The last few times they'd gotten together as a family he'd noticed that she seemed distant, always checking her phone. He remembered calling Cam up and hinting to him that he needed to keep watch, but as predicted, his brother wouldn't listen.

Christopher pushed through the lateral raises and allowed fifteen seconds before moving to the next exercise.

He was glad to note that his muscles were beginning to tremble from the exertion; that meant he would at least get some gains from the workout, despite his mind being elsewhere. With thoughts of Brie and now Syd weighing heavy inside him, he couldn't help but wonder where God was in all this. Another trainer at the gym, Jamison Wells, had been pushing this hard lately. Going on about how good God was despite what had happened to Brie, and how Christopher could actually use his tragic situation to help somebody else. At first Christopher rejected Jamison's argument. After all, God had let his wife lose her mind. Had her thinking all crazy, that there was no other way out. The last thing Christopher wanted to think about was God. But eventually Christopher began to let Jamison's words break through. Maybe Jamison was right – turning the pain into something worthwhile could not only help someone else, maybe it

would also dull his hurt a little. He started praying, trying to figure out where God was in this mess.

Ten minutes later, after checking his work schedule for the next day, Christopher grabbed his keys off the holding board. There was no question about it: Despite his trembling muscles, tonight had been a waste. His head hadn't been in the workout the way it should've been. He'd have to come back tomorrow and make up for slacking off.

As he headed toward his car, Jamison's words kept running through Christopher's head. The reality was that Brie was never coming back; he'd never see her again. But like Jamison had said, Christopher could use this situation to help someone else. Maybe that person was Cam. Based on what he'd seen from Syd, Cam's marriage needed some attention and repair ... so why couldn't Christopher be the one to do it? God knows he didn't want to see his brother lose his wife, his marriage, over this.

Another few blocks and he was back on Providence Main Street near his townhouse. A thought occurred to him ... something told Christopher the same thing that had driven Brie to suicide might now be driving Syd to desperate measures as well: She was screaming for attention.

As he pulled the car into his driveway, one thought consumed him. As Christopher saw it, he had two choices. Either he could intervene without overstepping his boundaries and help his brother save his marriage, or he could leave it alone. And knowing Syd, that's exactly what she would tell him to do: To leave it alone.

But minding his own business meant letting Syd get sucked up into all the vain, superficial stuff. Obsessing over her looks like Brie had done. Christopher knew he could never let that happen. He'd already lost the woman who meant everything to him. There was no way he was about to let Cam lose his.