

An excerpt from

Mended

Kayla Marie

CHAPTER ONE

STONY SILENCE FILLED the air as Ashley Thomas and her son made their way down the rural highway. Though hours had passed since she'd packed their belongings and forced Emmett into the car, he still seemed to simmer with resentment. She could feel the displeasure radiating from him as he sat like a martyr in the backseat. It didn't take much to set him off these days and he was now an expert at holding grudges. A brew of negative emotions constantly churned inside him and it seemed like everything she did just made things worse.

She was saddened by the turn their relationship had taken. As she watched the expanse of highway ahead of her, she daydreamed about the connection they used to have: cups filled with dandelions picked just for her, curling up on the couch sharing popcorn as they watched his favorite movie for the hundredth time, talking, laughter, hugs. Now instead of joy and love, their interactions were filled with arguments and tension.

He used to share everything with her—no secrets, nothing held back. But, he'd become a stranger to her, a boy who shut her out and treated her like dirt. He acted like she was his enemy when she was only trying to do what she thought was best for him.

Some people might say Emmett was just being a teenager, but Ashley knew it was more than that. He was only nine when the unspeakable incident happened and he'd never been the same since. She'd tried almost everything to help him, but nothing brought back the boy he was before.

Still, she loved him with all her heart. She would do anything for him. Which is why she'd sat in this car for the past eight hours—butt numb, back aching, hungry, tired, and cranky—as they drove toward what she hoped would be the answer she was searching for. Even though he resented her for it.

Ashley studied Emmett in the rearview mirror. He'd been so upset with her when they left he refused to sit next to her in the passenger seat. He was wearing his earbuds, no doubt listening to the disturbing heavy metal music he'd recently grown accustomed to. His auburn-blond hair—messy and too long—hung haphazardly over his hazel eyes as he glared out the car window. His lips were pressed firmly together in that familiar look of disapproval most often found on the faces of sulking teenagers.

He could condemn her all he wanted, but he had only himself to blame. Maybe if he hadn't added new violations to his rap sheet at every opportunity, failed school, or hung out with kids whose greatest achievement was stealing cigarettes and alcohol from the local liquor store, she'd have considered staying.

He'd made his choices and now she made hers. She loved him too much to let him throw his life away. Hopefully he'd understand someday, but she wouldn't hold her breath.

She remembered his shock when she told him to pack his things and get in the car. Shock soon turned to rage, which never led to anything pretty. The appalling and hurtful things he said to her in his desperation would stagger nerves of steel.

Despite his painful verbal blows and empty promises, she stood her ground. His poor life choices forced her hand and she refused to compromise on this. She did what she thought was right for him, even if he hated her for it. After all, she was the parent and he was a thirteen-year-old boy heading toward a life in prison if she didn't take drastic action.

Not wanting to think about her little boy living out his life in a cell, she shook off the thought and turned her attention to the landscape around her. Lush green fields decorated with blooming yellow and purple wildflowers surrounded her. In the distance lay the Appalachian Mountains, their peaks still frosted with snow from the recent winter. The grassy fields below were dotted with grazing cattle and wooden farm shelters. In the distance, off to the right of the two-lane highway, stood a faded red barn nestled among fields of cotton.

Though the scenery was beautiful, she had to admit she was going to miss the amenities city life provided. She certainly wasn't going to be able to get Chinese takeout in the middle of the night where they were headed.

Was she crazy? The city had been their home and she'd left it behind—left Jeff behind—all in hopes of fixing what was broken in her life and putting an end to Emmett's pattern of destruction.

Moving away meant she could no longer visit Jeff's gravesite whenever she needed to. Or trail her fingers over the ridges of his name engraved on his headstone as she cried for him. She knew it was morbid, but it was the closest she could get to touching him. Even so little a connection wouldn't be possible now. Their new home was too far away.

The thought sent a sharp pang through her heart and she curled inward in agony. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes and her throat constricted as she struggled to hold back her grief.

She ached for the life they once had together. It had been the three of them against the world: Ashley, Emmett, and Jeff. *My Jeff*. As she thought of him, she absentmindedly twirled the diamond-studded band she still wore on her finger, letting her tears slide down her cheeks.

He'd been gone four years now. Four painful, troublesome years. She feared she was starting to forget him. Every day she struggled more and more to remember him—the way he smelled, the sound of his voice, how it felt to have his strong, loving arms wrapped around her.

No matter how desperately she tried to hold on, all his idiosyncrasies she'd fallen in love with were fading with each passing day and she was helpless to stop it. Her regular visits to his gravesite were one of the few connections that remained, yet she gave it up.

Ashley gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles as an agonized sob escaped her throat. Her shoulders shuddered and her vision blurred until she could barely see the road ahead. The realization of what she was leaving behind made her ache to turn the car around and go home. Only her thoughts of Emmett prompted her to keep driving.

He needed to get out of there and a part of her needed to as well. It was too painful living so near to the place where her husband had lost his life, the familiarity around them a constant reminder of the life they'd shared together and all they'd lost. With a deep breath, she cleared her throat and brushed her hair out of her wet eyes, willing her grief to pass.

No matter how painful it was to leave their old life behind, she didn't have much of a choice. Living in the city was expensive and she didn't make a lot of money. They could only afford to live in less-than-desirable neighborhoods, which meant crime always lurked nearby.

Somewhere along the way, Emmett had begun hanging with the wrong crowd and making his own criminal contributions. His actions became more and more serious, granting him numerous stays in juvenile detention centers and an extensive criminal record. Once he spiraled out of her control, leaving was the only way to stop him. Even that might not be enough.

On the road ahead was a sign advertising a roadside diner a few miles up. As if her stomach had a mind of its own, it rumbled uncomfortably. The long trip and painful silence helped her work up an appetite and a hot meal would do a lot for her weary body.

She waved at Emmett to get his attention and he grudgingly pulled out one of his earbuds without looking at her. "There's a diner up ahead. I was thinking we should stop to get something to eat."

Emmett tore his gaze away from the window and gave her a disgusted look. His hazel eyes, so much like his father's, narrowed in distaste. "There's no way I'm eating anywhere while we're in the ass-end of hickville. They'd probably try to feed me squirrel or something." His freckled nose wrinkled in revulsion.

"Yum, squirrel, the other white meat," Ashley teased.

Emmett sent her his usual derogatory look that informed her he thought she was the stupidest person on the planet.

"If you're really that worried about it, you could always go vegetarian. There's plenty of wildflowers and grass to choose from. If you're lucky, one of the cows might share some of its milk with you. Do you want me to pull over so you can try? That heifer over there looks pretty docile." She used her hands to milk an invisible cow.

Emmett scoffed and gave her one of his derisive eye rolls before returning his gaze to the window.

"Squirrel diner it is then."

"I'm not eating there!"

"Suit yourself. But I'm hungry so we're stopping. You can sit in the booth with me and drool over my dinner."

A few minutes of tense silence later, she sighed as she gave in to her mother's instincts. Not wanting Emmett to go hungry just because of his stubbornness, she picked up her bag of

cookies from the seat next to her and offered it to him. It wasn't the best thing for him to eat, but it was better than nothing. "Consider it a peace offering."

Without offering a thank-you, he bitterly ripped it out of her hand. She heard the distinct crinkle of the bag opening, followed by the sound of chewing. Deciding not to fight this battle, she swallowed her irritation and continued driving toward the welcome promise of warm comfort food in her belly.

A few miles down the road, Ashley and Emmett sat at a booth in an old roadside diner.

A handful of truckers and other weary highway travelers occupied nearby booths and stools, eating their hearty plates of comfort food. Ashley looked hungrily at the menu while she pretended not to see Emmett taking peeks at his from its place at the edge of the table.

As she contemplated her options, Emmett picked at the yellowed foam padding protruding from the ripped vinyl bench. With an exaggerated sigh, he placed his elbows on the table-top. He scowled as it wobbled beneath his weight and muttered his discontent about it being sticky, along with some other words she pretended not to hear. As usual, Emmett wasn't going to make this easy for her.

When she stood to place her order at the counter, Emmett stayed behind to pout in his seat. Despite his obvious hunger—characterized by the audible grumbles of his stomach—his pride seemed to get the better of him and he ordered nothing. He was so like his father in that way—self-sacrifice for the sake of his pride.

Fortunately for Emmett, Ashley knew how to handle him. She ordered an extra cheeseburger and fries for herself, which she later slid over to him after clutching her belly in fake stuffed agony. She knew he saw right through her, but she also knew he could never resist a cheeseburger sitting in front of him.

After a tasty squirrel-free meal, they were back in the car, ready to hit the road again. As she backed out of their parking spot, she was pleased Emmett had chosen to sit next to her in the front seat this time. She knew from experience he wasn't done punishing her yet, but she'd obviously earned his favor with the whole cheeseburger incident. It was a start.

After Emmett resisted her repeated attempts at conversation, he returned his earbuds to their place of residence and they drove on in silence. Trying not to let his rejection get to her, Ashley turned her attention back to the expanse of highway ahead.

The breathtaking stretch of land—or as Emmett had so gracefully put it, "hickville"—surrounding their car captivated her. It may not be the city, but country life had its benefits: fresh air, wide-open spaces, and less opportunity for hoodlum-induced trouble, all things that could do a boy like Emmett some good. They could build a decent life for themselves here.

She snuck a glance at Emmett beside her. He may not be talking to her, but at least he seemed to be less pissed off at her than he'd been at the start of the day. He'd come around eventually. He just needed to give things a chance.

On the shoulder up ahead was a green road sign with fancy white lettering that read: Welcome to Alabama the Beautiful. It wouldn't be long now. They'd soon find out what their new life had in store for them. She was ready for change; she only hoped the change would be for the better.

CHAPTER

TWO

WADE HUDSON PULLED his truck into the Butterfield Correctional Facility parking lot. Once parked, he turned off the engine and sat in silence for a moment as he examined the prison grounds.

Closest to him was the visitors' entrance—a grey concrete building emblazoned with the Alabama state seal. Cement steps covered with worn, charcoal-colored carpet led up to the steel double doors. Two rows of tall chain-link fence topped with gruesome-looking barbed wire jutted out from the sides of the visitors' entrance and surrounded the prison's perimeter. Tall guard towers with windows on all sides stood intermittently throughout the grounds.

Wade ran his fingers through his hair, making the longer hairs on top stick up at odd angles. Although he'd been here many times before, it didn't get any easier. The familiar knot of guilt forming in his stomach reminded him of what had been lost and of his failure to change the course of events that led to his monthly visits here.

He took a deep breath and stepped out of his truck. As he crossed the parking lot, he instinctively glanced at the sky. It was a grey and gloomy day; the rays of the sun remained hidden behind dark clouds. The bleak weather above and dreary colors of the prison in front of him mirrored his somber mood. With a weight in his chest, he climbed the six steps to the double doors of the visitors' center.

As he waited for his turn to clear security, he saw a number of people sitting in the waiting room beyond. Most portrayed the nervous body language of someone who feels ill at ease—fidgeting, foot tapping, pacing.

Wade understood all too well how they felt. He was always uncomfortable when he came here, although his reasons were probably different from theirs. He was the reason his brother now called this dreary place home. If he'd done a better job, Ford could've been a successful businessman or a mechanic, instead of inmate number 54963.

"Next!"

Wade heard the security officer's shout and stepped up, emptied his pockets, and spread his arms out to the sides.

After Wade cleared security and checked in with the less-than-congenial female officer at the front desk, he found himself sitting at a cold metal table, facing the wall of windows and thick steel doors that led to inside the prison. Despite the fact that the visiting room was full of people waiting to see their loved ones, there was a hushed silence filled with anticipation and unease.

Correction officers wearing khaki shirts, utility belts, and no-nonsense attitudes stood strategically throughout the room. Two of the biggest, meanest-looking officers guarded the exit, blocking the locked door with their rhinoceros-sized bodies, hands poised over their weapons.

With the sound of a loud buzzer, inmates in their denim jumpsuits began lining up in the hallway outside. A few moments later he heard another loud buzzer and the audible click of the heavy door unlocking. The inmates filed slowly into the room, their hands behind their backs like model citizens, while the correction officers watched them intently, ready to take action at the first sign of trouble.

Wade's eyes widened and his breath caught in his throat when he caught sight of his younger brother's face. Patches of purple-and-black bruises, still puffy and swollen from recent blows, surrounded Ford's left eye and jaw. Worse was the line of black stitches holding together the mangled flesh on his neck. He'd clearly been in a fight recently and the outcome hadn't been good.

As Ford approached the table, Wade assessed his features beneath his injuries. His brother's forest-green eyes, once bright and full of life, were now dulled and hardened. At the ripe age of twenty-one, a whisper of worry lines was already taking up permanent residence across his forehead as if relief was no longer a possibility. His jaw, once slack and prone to smiles despite life's disappointments, was held taut in a hard line—a sign prison was taking its toll on his innocence.

The foreign, hardened man who used to be his innocent little brother sat down at the table across from him. "Hey, man. It's good to see you."

Speechless since he noticed his brother's disturbing appearance, Wade cleared his throat to recover. "Hey, Ford. I wish I could say that you looked good, but then I'd be lying."

Ford laughed without humor. "Oh, you mean this," he said, pointing to the bruises on his face. "It's nothing. You should see the other guy. He was in the infirmary for a week."

"What happened?"

"This fool decided I was done with my lunch, but I disagreed. So, long story short, he got his ass handed to him."

"How did you get that?" He gestured to Ford's stitches.

"The guy pulled a shank on me, but I turned it on him and ended up giving him one bigger than mine," he said with a forced smirk.

Rage, horror, and again guilt—the guilt was always there—bubbled up inside Wade and threatened to spill out. He took a few deep breaths and pushed his feelings back down in hopes of keeping them contained. It might add fuel to the fire raging inside him, but he had to know. "So how much time did they add for that?"

Ford shrugged casually. “Six months, but it was worth it. Now that fool and whoever watched me kick his ass won’t bother me again.”

There was something Ford wasn’t telling him. “What about the guy’s friends? I bet they weren’t too happy about what you did to their buddy.”

“Yeah, but they’re too chicken to do anything. Even if they did, I could take them.” Ford spoke tough, but Wade could see what lurked underneath. Ford was afraid. Wade opened his mouth to say something, but Ford continued before he found his words. “So, how’s Dad?”

“Oh, you know Dad. Always drunker than the day before.”

Ford smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, if there’s anything you can count on Dad for, it’s being bombed out of his mind.”

Although Ford tried to hide it, Wade could see his pain. His heart clenched for his sad baby brother who’d desperately wished for a stable home and loving parents. Wade had wanted that for him as well—more than anything—which is why he’d tried so hard to fill the role himself. But, despite all his efforts, he fell short.

“How’s business going?” Ford asked.

“It’s going well. I just finished doing a master bathroom remodel for the Campbells and now I’m putting on a new roof for Mrs. Clemons.”

“Get laid recently?” He couldn’t miss his brother’s smug grin.

“The look on your face tells me you clearly already know the answer to that question.”

“Oh, come on, man. What’s your problem? You need to get yourself some. I’m sure there are plenty of hot, loose chicks with brain damage who are just dying to make your acquaintance.” Ford feigned a serious face. “Wait. Are you gay, bro? Because that would explain a lot. It’s okay, Wade, I’m your brother. You can tell me.”

“Ha-ha, very funny. That joke never gets old. Dating hasn’t exactly been on my list of concerns since you’ve been here. I don’t get why you’re so smug about it anyway. I highly doubt you’re getting any in here. And if you are I’d seriously question your sanity. I know you’ve never played for team sausage.”

“You’re right. I’m a ladies’ man through and through. But if I did decide I wanted a little action I bet I could get laid easier in this hellhole than you could if you hosted ladies’ night in your pants and handed out free liquor and hundred dollar bills.”

Wade chuckled, reveling in the hint of the satisfied smile on Ford’s face. He’d missed this side of him. The funny, cocky kid brother he used to know didn’t come around much anymore.

Fond memories of playing pranks on one another came to mind: putting worms in each other’s shoes, filling the yogurt containers with mayonnaise, putting salt in the sugar bowl, and of course the classic plastic wrap over the toilet bowl. Sometimes things got a little out of hand, but most was all in good fun.

“How’s the work program going? Have you been able to go to any interesting places or learn some new job skills lately?” Wade asked.

Ford shifted on the slick metal bench. “I kind of got kicked out of the work program. Something about my ‘behavioral misconduct’” He used air quotes.

The familiar feelings of exasperation began bubbling up inside once again. He took yet another deep breath to collect himself—he’d needed a lot of deep breaths today. He gritted his

teeth to keep from yelling. “So, what do you plan to do instead? Are you at least trying to get your GED?”

“And what would I do with a GED? In case you forgot, I’m stuck in this shit hole for at least the next four years of my life. The way things are going, I’ll be lucky if I get out at all.”

The fine cord of his control snapped. “Stop saying crap like that. You need to change your attitude. If you’re really motivated, you’ll have the possibility for early parole. Try to better yourself and do your time so you can get on with your life. This doesn’t have to be it for you. You have so much potential and it kills me to see how you keep throwing it away.”

Ford squared his shoulders as he sat up straighter. “When are you going to get it through your thick skull that this is my life, Wade? I’m not you. Mind your own damn business and live your own freaking life.”

“I want more for you, Ford! Why can’t you want it for yourself? When are you going to stop being so irresponsible and grow up? Stop making such stupid choices. Do you want to be a loser your whole life?” The words came out louder and harsher than he wanted, but it was too late to take them back now.

Ford narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice until Wade could barely hear him. “Somehow it always comes to this. If that’s the way you’re going to be, then stop coming around here. I don’t want to see you anymore. Leave. Me. The. Hell. Alone.”

“Ford, come on. I just want what’s best for you. Can’t you see that?” Wade’s question was met with silence and Ford’s averted gaze. “Mom would be ashamed of you.” It was a low blow, but that didn’t make it untrue.

Ford pretended not to hear him, but Wade could see him stiffen at his words.

A correction officer’s booming voice broke the silence: “Visiting time is over. Inmates line up by the door with your hands behind your back.” Without giving him a second glance, Ford stood and walked away.

“If you won’t do it for me or for yourself, then do it for Mom!” Wade called after him, but Ford kept moving toward the line of inmates filing out the door as if he hadn’t heard him. “I want my brother back,” Wade called desperately.

Ford stopped in his tracks but didn’t turn around. When he spoke, his voice was cold as ice. “I’m not sure if I ever had a brother.” With those words, Ford took his place in line and filed out the door.

* * *

Back in the driver’s seat of his truck, Wade let out an exasperated sigh as he thought about the intense visit with his brother. It seemed like he never got anywhere with Ford. They kept having the same conversation to no avail. No matter how hard Wade pushed, Ford refused to change. If anything, Ford was worse since his incarceration last year. He had more attitude and less concern for his own well-being than ever before.

Wade cringed as he pictured Ford’s gruesome new injuries. It seemed like he acquired new cuts and bruises every time Wade saw him, but his most recent ones were by far the worst. The cut on his neck looked serious. He was probably lucky to be alive. Ford needed help, but what

could Wade do? Talking to him never seemed to work. He had to think of something. Giving up on him certainly wasn't an option.

Wade thought about what he'd said to Ford today and wondered if he was too hard on him. He only said those things because he cared about him and wanted him to see the error of his ways, but Ford probably didn't view it that way. Wade was never good at expressing his feelings, but his brother should already know how much he loved him. Why else did he keep pushing Ford to do better for himself? Wade knew he'd made a lot of mistakes with his brother, but caring about him wasn't one of them. If only Ford would see it.

Wade's guilty conscience, always lingering in the back of his mind, shoved its way front and center. If his mom could see him right now she'd be so disappointed in him. He should've been able to keep his brother from a life like this.

The thought of his baby brother, with his dark curls and toothy smile, living out the rest of his days behind bars made Wade shudder. He hoped it wasn't too late for Ford. Pulling away from the prison, he began the long drive home. He needed to find a way to help his brother. At the very least, to knock some sense into him. He had to. Ford's life depended on it.

CHAPTER

THREE

ASHLEY HUMMED CHEERFULLY to herself as she unpacked the last box of their belongings. They'd arrived at their charming southern home in Mason, Alabama last week and she was pleased to be settling in.

Their new home was even more alluring in person than in the pictures she'd seen online. The soft white of the painted wood panels complemented the charming royal-blue shutters that framed the home's double-hung windows. Two wooden patio chairs, matching the ruby red of the big front door, were nestled under the overhang of the wraparound porch. They revealed a perfect view of the beautiful yard.

A blanket of lush, green lawn surrounded the home. Mature magnolia trees, pink with spring blossoms, stood on either side of the porch, framing the house. A huge elm tree stood behind, towering over the roof of the small, single-story home.

From the moment Ashley pulled into the driveway of her new picturesque home and heard the crunch of gravel under her tires, she fell unequivocally in love.

She was shocked when she found out how affordable the rent was. Because she lived in the city most of her adult life, she was familiar with the concept of paying outrageous prices for closets advertised as apartments. In the city, a house this size would cost more per month than she made in six. Not to mention the lot would be a fraction of the size.

With the amount she'd save on rent, she'd finally have money left over at the end of the month. For once she could start saving for the future and even start a college fund for Emmett. She smiled at the prospect.

If Ashley was charmed by her new home, she was utterly captivated by the town of Mason itself. Quaint Victorian and ranch-style homes lined the quiet residential streets, all with impressively sized, unfenced yards. The downtown area was filled with small family-run shops and diners that wafted mouthwatering smells of southern home cooking. The streets of the town were clean and well maintained, and the traffic could be considered nonexistent to a city girl like her.

The people living there were the best part of all. Strangers made eye contact with her, smiled, and said hello as she walked down the street. They stopped to make pleasant

conversation with one another as if they were old friends; in a town this small, they probably were old friends.

All week long people had welcomed them, bringing fresh-baked pies and homemade baked goods to their door. She felt safe here. Time would tell for sure, but she was already confident she made the right decision coming here. A community like this was exactly what they needed.

Their first week in their new home went better than Ashley expected. Emmett helped her unpack some of the boxes and set up their furniture. He went with her to explore their new town with less grumbling and complaining than expected and even participated in some outdoor excursions with her.

Ashley smiled as she remembered the long hikes they took together and the day they spent at the river. They enjoyed most of the hiking in silence, but she hoped it was an appreciative silence rather than an irritated one. Maybe he didn't harbor the enthusiasm he once had when they used to do things like this together, but at least he kept the eye rolling and insensitive comments to a minimum.

She was nearly certain Emmett had enjoyed the day they spent at the river. She relished the memory of seeing his rare smile as they zipped down the river in their paddle boat, and later, when they splashed around in the cool water. She wanted things back the way they were four years ago, but she was willing to accept any improvement he offered. Small successes were still successes.

If she ignored the fact that Emmett spent the majority of the week alone in his room or that his general irritability was now the standard by which all other behavior could be compared, she'd say that they were almost getting along.

Well, as long as she didn't count the fight they were having today. At the very least she could say things were better than expected considering their tense drive down here.

Suddenly Emmett stormed into the room, rousing Ashley from her glass-half-full thoughts and declaring for the third time that afternoon, "I still don't understand why I have to go to some stupid after-school program. I'm not a little kid! I can stay here alone until you get home from work."

"Emmett, we've been over this. The terms of your probation specify that you can't be without adult supervision. So unless you can find some other kind of adult-supervised activity that your probation officer and I approve of, you're going to that after-school program." She wanted to add, "And frankly, I don't trust you to go anywhere without a responsible adult," but her blunt honesty wasn't very well received these days.

"This is such crap." His face reddened. "Why can't I just come home after school?"

Ashley took a deep breath to steady herself. "Emmett, I'm not talking about this anymore. This is what's happening. Accept it and move on."

"This sucks," he yelled as he moved toward the front door of the house.

"Emmett, stop." Her voice rose. "You can't just leave. You need to tell me where you're going."

"I'm just going for a walk. Don't get your panties in a twist."

His disrespectful attitude was downright offensive. Was every thirteen-year-old boy this rude to his mother? She didn't think so and it made her bitter. After a few deep breaths, she

counted backward from ten. When she felt calm enough to avoid yelling, she said, "You may go for a walk but you have to stay in the neighborhood. And take your cell phone with you."

"Whatever." He continued moving toward the door.

"And if you're not home in twenty minutes, I'm calling your probation officer."

"Okay! *Chill out*, Mom." He stormed out of the house and slammed the door behind him.

Ashley's gaze caught the potted houseplant by the door. It rattled in its dish, its leaves trembling as if a train was rumbling past. As she placed her hand on the pot to steady it, she caught her reflection in the mirror on the wall beside it.

Her ocean blue eyes looked weary and troubled and her long golden hair was frazzled from tugging at her roots. Her ivory cheeks were flushed with irritation and frown lines lay between her eyebrows. Life hadn't been easy without Jeff.

Emmett never used to get this angry just because he didn't get his way. He was never one of those kids who rolled on the floor, kicking and screaming when he didn't get something he wanted. Occasionally he'd let out a few whines or an "it's not fair," but most of the time, he either accepted it or calmly tried to compromise.

Lately, though, any little thing could set him off into an overblown fit of anger. At least this time he had the sense to walk away and cool off instead of continuing to scream at her. *I guess you could call it progress.*

After what happened to their family, she understood he needed time and support above all else. He also needed structure and a firm hand, but that wasn't her forte. She was good at being Mom, but still hadn't quite grasped how to fill the role of Dad. If she was certain about one thing, though, it was that no matter what, she loved Emmett more than life itself, and she would never stop trying.

* * *

Emmett stomped down the street with all the fury of an angry teenager in the middle of a full-blown tantrum. *First I had to leave my friends and move to the middle of nowhere and now I have to go to some stupid after-school daycare because my mom thinks I'm some big baby. She's so annoying!*

He kicked the metal pole of the street sign in front of him. A sharp pain consumed his toes and shot up his leg, further increasing his anger. He shook the pole furiously as he let out a yell of outrage, causing onlooking squirrels to scurry away and birds in nearby trees to take to the air in fright.

He continued his outburst until the end of the next street and flopped down to sit on the curb. "This sucks!"

He wondered what his friends were doing right now. Maybe they were skating at the park or lifting alcohol or cigarettes. *I'd kill for a smoke right about now.*

Whatever they were doing, Emmett was sure they weren't sitting on a curb in a quiet, annoyingly picture-perfect neighborhood with nothing better to do. He wished he could talk to them, but of course his probation officer and his mom forbade it.

In spite of the rules, he'd tried reaching them, but his mom had turned on the parental controls on his cell phone and computer, so he couldn't. Just another reason why his life sucked.

Emmett looked up and down the quiet street. An old lady walked—or shuffled—her dog at a snail's pace a ways down the street from him. A middle-aged couple lounged in wooden chairs on their front porch, seemingly asleep. The smell of charcoal burning and the distant sounds of idle chatter and laughter drifted to him from backyard barbecues. What was he supposed to do for fun in a boring town like this?

He admitted the food at the downtown diner was pretty tasty, the hiking wasn't so bad, and he actually had a little fun at the river, but other than that, this place sucked big-time. It could never compare to what city life had to offer. Although, maybe a safe unsuspecting neighborhood like this did have an upside. No anticipated crime also meant not a lot of cops on patrol.

He looked at the grey-and-white house behind him and noticed that the unattached garage was open. Parked inside was a grey, lifted, heavy-duty diesel truck with built-in toolboxes along the sides of the bed. Leaning against the wall were two rusty dirt bikes that looked like they belonged at the dump.

The shelves of the garage held various expensive-looking tools, spare parts, and boxes of unidentifiable things. Emmett had been sitting there for a while now and the occupant of the house was still nowhere to be seen. People were so trusting in a small town like this. That should make this easy.

He looked up and down the street once more. There was no sign of cars and the few visible people appeared to be half-dead. A grin spread across his face. It looked like he might be able to have some fun after all. He stood up and walked tentatively toward the open garage. After scanning his surroundings one last time, he went inside to search for valuables.

CHAPTER

FOUR

WADE RUMMAGED INSIDE his refrigerator for something to eat. It was slim pickings as usual. After deliberating between a jar of pickles and a slice of cheese, he gave up, grabbed his last Coke, and closed the refrigerator. He was hungry for a home-cooked meal, but because his cooking skills were limited to heating something up in the microwave, he was going to have to settle for something else.

It looked like he'd be dining at The Fried Pickle yet again tonight. It was the best place in town for comfort food that came close to the quality of a home-cooked meal. It's not like no one had ever cooked for him. His mom had cooked of course and there were times when he'd been in a few long-term-almost-serious relationships with women who liked to cook.

But, his mom was long gone, and Wade had been too concerned about Ford since he was sent to Butterfield last year to care much about dating.

Sure, Wade could try to cook something for himself, but from his experience that always turned out to be the worst option. Unless his cooking skills miraculously improved or he developed a taste for burned and unappetizing food, he was better off with The Fried Pickle or the frozen foods section at Hardy's Grocery Store.

Wade popped open his Coke and took a long draft. The sweet, fizzy liquid slipped enjoyably down his throat. Since giving up drinking, Cokes had become his replacement. It wasn't the same, but it would have to do.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and he pulled it out. When he saw the number on the screen he contemplated not answering. Whenever Myra called, she either asked him to do something for her or talked his ear off as she gossiped shamelessly about this or that. As it almost always did, chivalry got the best of him.

"Afternoon, Myra," he said into the receiver.

"Wade, it's Myra," said the shaky, raspy voice of Wade's eighty-one-year-old-neighbor.

“Hello, ma’am. What can I do for you today?” He braced himself for what was to come next.

“Well, I was out walking Cocoa a little while ago when I saw this young man sitting out front of your house. Now, I usually don’t think the worst in people but I’ve never seen this boy before and it seemed like he might be up to no good. I’ve heard that a woman and her teenage son moved to town last week. You know, the city folk? I thought he could be one of them. Anyway, I got a funny feeling about this one so I thought I better watch him. See what he did.”

“I kept my eye on him all the way home then sat in my chair and kept on watching because you never know what those city scamps are going to do. Do you know what I saw? I saw that boy walk straight into your garage and start rummaging through your things! Can you believe that? He’s in there doing God knows what as we speak. I was going to call the sheriff, but I thought I should call you first. I figured you could stop him before he had the chance to run off.”

Wade hesitated for a beat as he looked out his kitchen window and saw the lanky boy with the reddish-blond hair, who was indeed rummaging through his garage. Wade had never seen him before, and he knew just about everyone in this small town. Despite the circumstances, Wade thought he looked completely harmless.

“No need to call the sheriff, ma’am. That’s just my buddy’s boy. He’s staying with me while his dad runs a few errands in town. I asked him to get some tools for me so I can fix a hinge on one of my kitchen cabinets,” he lied.

“Which friend is that?” Myra asked skeptically.

“Just a buddy of mine from my early college days. We haven’t seen each other in years and he wanted to come by to catch up. He’s not from around here.”

“Oh, good. I just thought I saw something fishy and I wanted to be a good neighbor. You know me.”

“Thank you for looking out for me, ma’am. Have a nice afternoon.”

“While I have you on the phone, I was wondering if you could do something for me...”

After agreeing to fix Myra’s stuck window and leaky kitchen faucet free of charge, Wade hung up the phone and looked through the window into his garage. The boy was currently rifling through his toolboxes.

He’d better go find out what his story was before the kid took something valuable. To avoid scaring the boy off before he had a chance to talk to him, Wade went around back. When he reached the garage entrance he took a moment to observe.

Up close the boy was taller than Wade first thought but had the scrawny appearance of a budding teenager who was still too young to put on any muscle. The glimpse of white socks in the gap between the bottom of his generic jeans and the tops of his dirty sneakers indicated what was likely a recent growth spurt. His hair was wavy and wild

like that of a nomad. Taking a closer glance, Wade could see styling product held strands of hair firmly in place as if the messy style was intentional.

“Find anything good?”

The boy startled and slowly turned around. He wore a black T-shirt with an angry yellow smiley face. His hazel eyes assessed his chances of escape as they darted between Wade and the space from the open garage door.

“You can try to run if you want, but I’m pretty fast,” Wade said.

The boy’s eyes widened slightly and narrowed in defiance.

“My dad knows where I am, and if I’m not home in ten minutes he’ll come looking for me.” The boy breathed in and out in a rush. “He was in the Marines for eight years and he isn’t afraid to use his gun,” he added hastily.

Wade held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. “Relax, I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk to you for a minute. You are in *my* garage, looking through *my* stuff if you hadn’t noticed.”

The boy shrugged and relaxed slightly.

“What’s your name, son?”

“I’m not your son, but my name’s Emmett.”

“I’d rather have met under different circumstances, Emmett, but it’s nice to meet you nonetheless. I’m Wade Hudson.”

Emmett looked at Wade’s outstretched hand and defiantly stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Wade dropped his hand unfazed. “I haven’t seen you around here before. Where are you from?”

“New Jersey.”

“A city boy like you must be out of his element in a quiet town like Mason.”

“If you mean bored out of my mind, then yes.”

“Come on, now. I bet you’ll realize this place isn’t so bad once you get used to it. Most folks never want to leave once they catch sight of our little town.”

“Well, good for them.” Emmett’s words dripped with sarcasm.

“How old are you?” Wade asked.

“Thirteen. Can I go now?”

“Sure. After you tell me what you were doing in my garage.”

Emmett looked down at his shoes and started kicking invisible stones. “I don’t know. I was just mad at my mom and I was bored and saw that your garage was open...”

“And because you thought you could get away with it,” Wade finished.

Emmett’s forehead lifted in surprise, but he quickly shrugged it off. “I guess. I’ve never really thought about why I do it.”

“Emmett, you seem like a good kid. You’d do better if you stopped doing things like trespassing and stealing.”

"I didn't take anything, I swear," Emmett said innocently.

"Would you have?"

"Maybe. It depends on what I found."

Emmett's arrogant attitude and the smug grin on his freckled face reminded Wade of his cocky little brother. "I think I'm pretty safe to assume this wasn't your first rodeo. Am I right?"

"I've been to juvie a few times, and I've lost count how many times I've been arrested."

"That's nothing to brag about. If you're not careful, you may find yourself somewhere you don't like so much. I'm sure that a lecture from the likes of me is going to go in one ear and out the other, but do me a favor and hear me out for a minute."

He drew in a breath and continued. "I know someone who used to be a lot like you—breaking all the rules, not a care for the consequences of his actions, thinking he was a big shot. He continued down the path you seem to be on, and now he may not have much of a life left to look forward to. Just keep that in mind, will you?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever gets me away from you."

"There's the door," Wade said as he stepped aside.

Emmett's gaze lingered on the dirt bikes in the corner before making his way toward the open garage door.

"You like dirt bikes?"

"I've never ridden one before, but I always wanted to. My dad used to have one, but we sold it before I was old enough to ride it," he said wistfully. "But those look like junk. Do they even work?"

"No. I planned to fix them up with my brother, but we never got around to it."

"Why do you still have them, then?"

"Well, I hoped to still have the opportunity someday, but the way things are going I'm thinking it's most likely not going to happen." The thought tightened Wade's stomach into knots, urging him to change the subject. "I assume your parents are waiting for you so do me a favor and head on home. I have eyes and ears all over this neighborhood so I'll know if you don't."

"You're not going to call the cops?"

"That depends. Am I going to find you uninvited in my garage again?"

"No..."

"Well then, I guess you'd better head home. Try not to rob anyone on the way."

Emmett snorted. "I think I can manage that. Thanks... for being so cool about this."

Wade nodded. "See you around, kid. Take care of yourself, and think about what I said." He watched as Emmett gave him a half smile and walked away.

Nice kid. Hopefully he'd stop making bad choices unlike someone else he knew. Ultimately it didn't matter what he hoped. Emmett wasn't his kid so it was none of his business. Besides, he was sure the boy's dad would straighten him out.

CHAPTER

FIVE

ASHLEY LOOKED AT the clock for the third time in the past minute. Twenty minutes had come and gone, and Emmett still wasn't home. She looked at the clock again. Twenty-five minutes now. Why couldn't he just do what he was supposed to?

She didn't want to have to do this, but she had to hold him accountable for his actions. As she reached for her cell phone to call his probation officer, the front door opened and in walked a much more relaxed Emmett. Not wanting to bring back the yelling and arguing that so often plagued their home, she decided not to tell him he was late.

"Did you have a good walk?"

"Yeah, it was fine," he said. "I'm getting hungry. Can we go to that diner downtown for dinner tonight? I really liked their fried chicken last time we went."

"Sure, if you want. As long as we're back home by a decent time. I want you to be rested for your first day of school tomorrow."

"Ugh, school." He slouched on a bar stool at the kitchen island and put his head down on the counter. "I hate starting at a new school. I don't know anyone."

"Starting a new school can be tough, and it's completely normal to feel uneasy about a new situation. Just be friendly and open and I'm sure you'll make new friends." She rested her hand on his shoulder and he shrugged it off.

"You don't know that."

"You've been the new guy before, and you've always made new friends pretty quickly."

"Back home, maybe. But if you haven't noticed, we're in hillbilly central now. People here are..."

"Different," Ashley finished. She knew "different" wasn't the word he was looking for, but it was a much better alternative than the possible adjectives he was thinking.

"People are different here, yes, but that might make it even easier to make friends. I've felt like everyone has been very friendly and welcoming so far, don't you?"

"Maybe."

“Just don’t joke about drinking milk straight from a cow while you make milking motions in the air. The last time I did that, it didn’t go over so well.”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “That’s because you’re a huge dork.”

“Maybe dorks have more fun. Have you ever thought of that?” She sang, “Dorks, they want to have fuh-un. Dorks just want to have fun!” She was far less musical than Cyndi Lauper.

Emmett pushed himself away from the counter. “There you go again. I’m out of here.”

“Emmett Thomas, is that a smile I see? Did your old, dorky mother actually say something amusing?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mom. I’m laughing at you, not with you.”

“You can try to hide it, but I know better. I see right through you.” She winked.

He tried to hide his amusement with a shake of his head, but she knew otherwise. Her heart felt lighter than it had all day.

* * *

Ashley and Emmett sat at a rustic oak table near the front entrance of The Fried Pickle. The front door was propped open, and she was grateful for the cool breeze from outside. The restaurant was crowded and noisy. The sounds of animated chatter, lighthearted laughter, and bluegrass music from the vintage jukebox in the corner made it feel even more crowded than it was. Ceiling fans rotated above, attempting to circulate the warm, stuffy air caused by so many breathing bodies.

The smells of cooking oil and comfort food drifted to the dining room whenever anyone opened the swinging kitchen door. Delicious, savory smells wafted from the steaming plates of barbecue and fried foods the servers carried out to the tables.

The walls of the dining room were lined with red brick and decorated with framed photographs of the town and its residents. The high ceilings were adorned with exposed ductwork and hanging lights that gave the restaurant a warm glow.

A long metal bar with brown leather bar stools stretched the entire length of the far side of the room. Behind the bar was a wall of mahogany shelves lined with strings of white lights that illuminated the multitude of liquor bottles resting there. Lively music, good food, and an abundance of booze gave the restaurant a fun, relaxed atmosphere.

Ashley looked over the menu options and was impressed by the sheer number of fried foods and food slathered in gravy. Everything looked so good. If she wasn’t careful, she might have to start exercising.

She deliberated between the array of mouthwatering, artery-clogging, happy-in-your-belly dishes and the few more sensible options. Opting to embrace all aspects of their new southern home, she decided to order family-style fried dill pickles, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, skillet corn bread, and coleslaw. If they weren’t

completely stuffed from dinner they might have to try the restaurant's famous banana pudding and vanilla wafer cookies.

As they waited to place their order, a man in a leather jacket and ripped jeans swaggered over to their table. His alluring amber eyes scanned her body up and down, making her feel exposed. He had a short scruffy beard and unkempt dirty blond hair that hung over his forehead. As he approached, he smiled at her seductively in invitation. He looked sexy and dangerous, and he screamed promiscuous bad boy.

"You know what's good on the menu here, Me-n-u." His voice sounded as sexy as he looked, but Ashley had no desire to play along.

"Huh, that's weird. We must be ordering from different menus because I don't see that on mine." She held up the menu, making sure he could see the wedding band on her finger. She watched as his eyes flickered to her ring and then back to her face. To her dismay, he continued his pursuit without so much as a flinch.

"You must be new in town because I know I wouldn't pass up meeting someone like you." His words slurred slightly as if he'd been drinking. "I'd love to show you around the town sometime. Show you all of what Mason has to offer. Maybe we could grab a drink and get better acquainted." As he leaned toward her, she noticed the strong smell of whiskey and too much cologne.

She was getting irritated now. Usually men backed off once they saw her wedding ring. This guy clearly had no shame. "I can see for myself all about what Mason has to offer, thanks."

"Oh, come on now. I think we could have a lot of fun together. All I'm asking for is one drink. Just give me a chance. I promise you won't regret it." On the last word, he leaned in farther and slightly brushed her shoulder with his. He smiled a heart-stopping smile that Ashley was sure had melted the resolve of many women before her.

Not her, though. She made a point of avoiding players like him. Well, all men, really, but especially men like him.

She was about to put an end to his game when a deep, smoky voice with a thick southern drawl spoke for her. "Are you quite finished, Reid? You clearly don't have a chance with her. Look at her. She's obviously way too good for you and too smart to fall for your questionable pickup lines."

"Aw, Wade, you're such a cock-blocker. No matter. Watch and learn. I was just about to ask her if it hurt when she fell from heaven."

"Yeah, yeah, and when God made her he was showing off, right?" Wade said. "Reid, why don't you get us a table and I'll come join you in a minute."

"Fine. But, my game was working and you know it. You're just jealous."

"You got me there. I'm a regular green-eyed monster. I can't stand to see you score with such a beautiful woman when I wish she'd pick me instead."

Reid nodded like this was the most reasonable thing he'd ever heard. "For the sake of our friendship, I won't turn you into a third wheel tonight. I'll leave this angel to her meal."

Reid turned to Ashley and winked. "If you decide you can't live without me tonight, I'll be over by the bar." With that final unwelcome invitation, he turned to leave.

The stranger with the striking, coffee eyes and the dark brown hair looked down at her apologetically. He was tall. Her five-foot-three frame would probably barely reach his shoulders. A thin layer of dark stubble caressed his jaw and upper lip, making his handsome face appear even more rugged and distinguished. She watched as his lips parted and he drew in a sharp breath as his eyes locked with hers.

He seemed to realize they were staring at each other in silence because an embarrassed smile spread across his perfectly crooked lips. "I'm sorry about Reid. He can make an ass of himself sometimes, especially when he's been drinking, but I promise he's completely harmless." He stuck his hand out to her. "I'm Wade Hudson."

His hand was warm and rough with calluses, like someone who worked with their hands all day. "I'm Ashley Thomas and this is my son, Emmett."

Emmett looked at Wade and seemed to stiffen. Eyes wide, he sat still and said nothing.

After a pause, Wade smiled politely and shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Emmett."

"Is that Reid guy really your friend?" Ashley asked.

Wade's jaw tightened at her words. "Yes. We go way back and he's a really good person."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I was just taken aback by his bluntness. He did come on a little strong. The fact that I'm wearing my wedding ring and sitting with my teenage son didn't even faze him."

Wade relaxed almost imperceptibly. "Yeah, sorry about that again. He's always been charming and flirty but never so direct and borderline inappropriate. That's a fairly recent change. Is your husband here with you tonight?"

"No..."

"That's good. I'd hate to see Reid get his ass kicked tonight. Although, that might be just what he needs to knock some sense into him. Well, I don't want to keep the two of you. I hope you enjoy your dinner, and I promise I won't let Reid bother you again."

"It was nice to meet you, Wade. Bye." As he walked away, she noticed his grey plaid shirt covered strong broad shoulders and visibly toned arms. Washed-out jeans hugged low on his hips and continued down to his brown leather work boots. He was fit, rugged, and dangerously handsome. *And he thinks I'm married.*

"Mom. Can we order now?" Emmett's voice startled her from her reverie.

"Yeah, sweetie. I was thinking of ordering family-style fried chicken and sides. How does that sound to you?"

“Good. I’m starving.”

END OF SAMPLE

To read more visit Amazon.com or click the link below:

<https://www.amazon.com/Mended-Southern-Romance-Sweet-Dixie/dp/069280367X/>

For Amazon UK click [here](#)