



**FUDGE**  
*Off*

*Merry*  
*Fudgin'*  
*Christmas*

**ELSIE JAMES**

# Fudge Off

Merry Fudgin Christmas

Multi-author Collaboration

By Elsie James

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# Chapter One Edel

“Edel! Hey, lady. It’s me!”

*Dammit.* Nothing, and I mean nothing goes unnoticed in freaking Findlay. Can’t even walk down a crowded street without someone knowing you.

“I know you can hear me!”

*Ugh, she’s got me there. I absolutely can hear you and that’s why I’m picking up the pace.*

That’s the thing I miss the most about the city. Right in the middle of the hustle and bustle of it all, you have the option of being completely anonymous. No one is noting what you do for work or the last time you went on a date. But in Findlay. With just shy of twenty-thousand people in this town, every private detail is up for public consumption.

The footsteps behind me quicken and I kick myself for not keeping up with my hot-girl walks after work. There’s no way I’m going to outpace that pilates junkie. I take a deep breath and then stop, turning to face my sister.

“Oh hey.” I try for casual. “Sorry, I’ve got a podcast going. Couldn’t hear you. My AirPods.” I gesture to my empty ears.

“No, you don’t.” Everly tilts her head and her silky blonde hair cascades over her shoulder. “I almost thought you were trying to avoid me. That’s fine, don’t worry about it. Anyway, Mom said you were back in town, but I hadn’t seen you, so I didn’t know if it was true. But all of a sudden, here you are.” Her mouth curls into a wide smile showcasing blinding white teeth.

“Yeah, I’m here for good. I’ve officially got a Findlay address... again. I haven’t gotten around to telling many people yet. Haven’t even unpacked yet. I guess it’s hard for me to believe it myself.” I shove my hands into my pockets and clear my throat. “Yeah, so, where’s my nephew?”

“Oh, Spence took him to his golf lesson.” She waves off my question with a flick of her delicate wrist as if every nine-year-old has a private golf instructor. “He’ll be excited to see his favorite Auntie tomorrow night though. You are coming to Mom’s for Christmas Eve, aren’t you? I mean, not that we have much of a choice.”

“Ha, yeah, I know. The whole town will be there. Who am I to no-show Mom on her big dinner or performance or photo shoot or whatever she’s calling it these days? I’ll see you then.” I put a hand on the back of my neck and roll my head around rubbing out my taut muscles. “I should probably get going, have a thing to get to.”

Everly’s thin lips purse into a tight line and her high cheekbones are somehow more pronounced under the white glow of the streetlight. “Look, I know you’re super private, but Mom needs a head count to pass along to the event planner. She asked me to find out if you’re bringing anyone. And since you’ve been hard to get a hold of, she’s hounding me for the information.”

*Here. We. Go.*

It isn’t that I don’t like my sister, I do. In fact, for most of my life, she was one of my best friends. But she’s succumbed to my mother’s pressure and now, it’s hard to see where Everly ends and Mom begins.

I muster every ounce of strength I have to keep my eyes from rolling back into my head. “You can tell Mom that a spot at the kid’s table will be just fine for me. I won’t bring a rando date and reassure her that I won’t bring any of my *food creations* to her party. I know the drill.”

My sister shifts her weight uncomfortably between her feet the way she always has at the first sign of conflict. “Oh, I’m sure she wouldn’t care either way. It’s just that her photographers will be there and you know her brand depends on being featured in the magazines during the holidays, so she has to have every detail in place...”

I hold up a hand in an attempt to put Everly out of her misery. “I got it. You don’t have to remind me about Mom’s

thriving author career, she won't let me or anyone else forget it. I really do need to go, but I'll see you tomorrow for the big day."

"Okay. Did you get the box? Mom sent one for each of us, there are some childhood photos in there that are true gems."

*I got the box. How could I have missed it? It's still there, sealed, just as she left it. I have no interest in rehashing my childhood.* "Hey, I'm sorry I've got to run." I let out a deep exhale and turn on a dime, my feet smacking into the pavement before Everly can get in another word.

The pressure to appear perfect for the Tiding siblings is no joke. And I suppose if I were like my siblings and living a *perfect* life, that wouldn't be a problem. But no such luck. No, my lot in life is to be the only Tiding sibling who is undeniably average. No perfect marriage like my carb-free sister. I'm not the beloved fire captain of Findlay like my brother Everett. And I am most definitely not internet famous like the influencer of the year like the apparently-irresistible Emmett Tiding.

I'm just... me. I'm curvy. I'm crabby and now I'm finding out what happens when even going home doesn't feel like the right thing. I check my phone for the time and pick up the pace. If I don't do anything else right I'm going to make sure I get to the toy store before they close.

Today is the last day to drop off toys for the toy drive at the fire station and I for one have not forgotten where I came from. I remember all the holidays made up of toys donated to our family. That was back before Mom got remarried. I promised the universe that if I found a way out of poverty, I'd return the favor. Now shopping for the local toy drive is the only holiday tradition I don't mind.

I make two more lefts on the street illuminated only by the light of the moon. I don't mind the walk or the cold. But the heel of my boot threatens to give up on me with every icy step. And when I see the glowing lights of the toy store in the distance, I exhale. *At least there will be toys.*



I push my way into the shop and fight through the sea of people frantically scattering about. As I wind my way through the aisles I'm confronted by animatronic Santa and a smug tin soldier. Elvis' *Blue Christmas* piping through the speakers at top volume is enough to make me want to turn around and walk right back out of the doors. I shake my head, *Blue Christmas, of course, it has to be that song.* The overwhelming scent of gingerbread practically bowls me over.

The store is buzzing with energy and not the good kind. It's cut-throat in here. It's practically alive like some sort of Christmas swamp monster coming to steal the last bit of will I have to do something positive in this world.

Parents snap at each other wielding overfull carts and cups that contain, if I had to guess, basic pumpkin spice lattes because... tis the damn season. But that's their business and I leave them to it. My business is getting home to my cat Grinchy as soon as possible. The little place I'm renting is the refuge I need right now. I turn down the aisle toward the dolls, but I can't get to the shelves because a troop of hot firefighters is milling about.

*And this night is looking up all of a sudden.*

I stand here waiting, feeling invisible or at the very least like an outsider. But there was a time when this could have been my life. I could be another Findlay mom rushing around in cowboy boots, too-tight pants, and big hair.

One of these firefighters could have been *my* firefighter. We were so close to this version of happily ever after, but I let him slip away. I lost him and chased my dreams only to have them lead me right back here. The irony makes my stomach swirl with nausea.

When the sea of firefighters finally parts, I find the one Pretty Posie doll left on the shelf. *Thank you old Saint Nick. At least there's some kind of justice left in this world.* I grab it,



shoving it into my cart then dig into my purse in search of the toy list.

My phone's screen is illuminated with a text message from my brother Emmett. He must know I'm back. That isn't a surprise, word travels fast amongst the Tidings. *Hey, Mom's mentioned your back. Just offering to feature your food on my site one last time. Take me up on it.*

I shove the phone back into my purse and go back to looking for the scrap of yellow paper where I jotted down every toy not yet purchased. *Not a chance, Emmett.*

I've spent my whole life being the odd Tiding out and I'm going to succeed or fail on my own accord. I don't need a pity post from my brother. My food, quirky as it is, will speak for itself, eventually. I don't... wait. *What?* My eyes grow wide and my heart rate ticks up.

I tilt my head in confusion. "Excuse me, Ma'am, that's my cart. That's my Pretty Posie doll."

"The cart was unattended." The woman, probably Karen if I had to guess, shoves the doll under her arm and gives me a shrug. Her face is plastered with a thick orange foundation and false eyelashes that should look terrible, but somehow work on her.

I blink and anger bubbles in my stomach. "What in the world? Who does that? Give me the damn doll, it's for... the children." My voice is louder than I expect, and I throw a hand on my hip.

"Now it's for my daughter, a child. It was top of her list. Have you got a daughter?" The woman smiles at me like we're two friends meeting for overpriced coffee and it catches me off guard.

"Me? Well, no, but it's for someone's daughter and besides it doesn't matter, I had it first." I put a hand on the doll and attempt to tug it from the woman's arm. Pretty Posie doesn't budge. *This is unbelievable.*

"Bless your heart, what are you trying to do?" The woman's voice goes shrill bellows above the noise in the store.

“I’m trying to get my Pretty Posie!” I screech. “I will not be giving up this only gift a child asked for to your entitled kid, Karen!”

I tug again and the doll breaks free from her arms, but her pumpkin spice latte comes with it. Probably Karen does some kind of flail followed by a mock fall and lands in a pile of squishy stuffed dogs. I take a step closer to her and peer down. I stand there triumphantly, a true June Osborne, with a doll under my arm and someone else’s cold coffee splattered all over me.

But when I turn, all eyes are on me. I admit I feel slightly less victorious now. My face flushes with heat and I’m a bit embarrassed. Though I shouldn’t be, it’s not like I’m the one who tried to steal a doll from a kid. Then, hot firefighting troop comes out of the woodwork in droves. They swarm Karen and she points a finger in my direction.

Heat flushes my cheeks. My eyes flick across the room. All of a sudden, I can’t breathe at all. I realize I’m not staring at any firefighter, I’m staring at the man who could have been *my* firefighter. Looking directly into the face of my great almost. My first love. My Shawn. My mouth falls open and I let the doll slip willingly from my hands.

Karen is back on her feet muttering something as she turns away from me, but I can’t hear her. I can’t see the people or the tin soldiers or smug Santa. It’s all one, red and green mass floating behind the head of the man I can’t believe is staring back at me.

Shawn looks as handsome as ever. His dark hair and darker eyes complement his perfect smile. He’s got more muscles in the years since I’ve seen him. Plus he’s in his firefighter uniform which is a totally unfair advantage. But the kindness is still there.

I stare, my mouth hanging open. Until Shawn’s hand comes up ever so slightly into a wave and reality crashes down on me. *Oh shit. That’s Shawn and I’m covered in coffee.* I smooth a strand of hair behind my ear and take a step back.

*I can't do this. Maybe there's a chance he didn't see me. Maybe he thought I was someone else. Maybe he just stopped to look at the curvy woman with the amazing ass covered in coffee without knowing it was me.*

Shawn steps toward me and the crowd dissipates behind him. "Edel?"

Or maybe he knows exactly who I am even covered in coffee, even after all this time. Maybe, just like me, he could never forget.

## Chapter Two Edel

“Shawn. Uh, hi.” I cross my arms over my drenched chest.

“Ironic, Blue Christmas was just playing and now, here you are.” His words wrap around me, a tidal wave of nostalgia within them.

“Doing a little Christmas shopping are you?” He smiles and a familiar dimple appears.

I can’t muster a response. He’s gorgeous. A lifetime of regrets cross my mind and I can hardly look into his eyes.

He takes a step closer to me and I feel electricity crackle on my skin. “Are you back home for the holiday? Or is it your mom’s party that brought you?” When I don’t say anything, he continues, “I’m surprised your brother didn’t mention that you were back in town. Not that he would. You must have kids now then, a little girl from the looks of it?” He gestures to the doll at my feet.

“Uhh—”

“Wow, that’s weird to think that you’re a mom. Are you... okay?” He rambles the way he does when he’s trying to warm up a cold audience, but my mind stays frozen. Then Shawn runs a hand down my forearm and his touch sends sparks shooting through me.

I swallow hard. “Hi, yeah I’m fine. These gifts aren’t for my kids, I actually don’t have any kids. But I’m sure you do. You must have the whole picket fence thing happening by now. Lots of babies to shop for and all that.” My words are choppy and turn up at the ends in a way that sounds odd to my own ears. But what do you say to the only man you’ve ever loved?

“I don’t actually. I’m here on official work business. It’s the last day of the—”

“Toy drive. Yeah, I know. That’s why I’m here too.” My heart thuds in my chest. “It’s good to see you, it’s been a

long time.”

“Yeah, too long if you ask me.” He flashes me that signature, irresistible smile and I melt.

*But why is he flirting with me? Is he flirting with me? Or is Shawn just so attractive that everything he says sounds like a pickup line?*

Shawn’s married, and he’s nothing if not loyal. He’s got to be nearly a decade into his life sentence at this point. He and Allison are Mr. and Mrs. Findlay as far as I’m concerned. A perfectly tan, perfectly fit, perfectly matched couple. She’s probably out curing cancer dressed as slutty Mrs. Clause after spending the morning baking him warm chocolate chip cookies. And the worst part is, he deserves her. As much as I hate it, I know it’s true.

Before I can muster the strength to ask about Allison, the Christmas music playing in the background comes to an abrupt stop. The only thing I can hear is my heart beating in my chest. We stand in silence, staring at each other until finally, a deep, radio-announcer voice comes over the loudspeaker. “Ho, ho, ho holiday shoppers. Please take your final purchases to the register, our store is now closed.”

I wince at the announcement. I only let myself think about Shawn in the early hours of the night when nothing other than his memory can soothe me. Now that I’m close enough to touch him, I don’t want this Christmas miracle to end. But I suppose it’s for the best. Seeing Shawn living his best life, a life that could have been *our best life* is just cruel at this point. As it turns out, the distance between us might have been the only thing keeping me together.

I take a step away from him. “Sounds like our time is up. It was nice to see you, but I should go. I’ve got the doll so there isn’t anything left for me to do here. Just came to grab this.”

Shawn closes the distance between us. “Are you sure you can’t stay a few minutes? They’re playing our song and I could use someone to kiss under the mistletoe.” He gestures to a sprig of green tied with a red bow hanging over our heads.

My jaw drops open and I look up at him, suddenly offended on behalf of slutty Mrs. Clause. “Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

I step around Shawn and disappear into the restroom, splashing cold water on my face and trying in vain to get the coffee stain out of my shirt. But I have no luck. In the safety of the isolated bathroom, I remind myself in no uncertain terms that I am the reason Shawn and I aren’t together anymore. Not him. Me. I was the one with dreams too big for this town. I was the one desperate to get away from the Tiding family expectations.

I make a mental list of reasons to let Shawn go once and for all. *First, he’s flirting with me while married, thus making him trash. Or at the very least making him not the man I used to know. Second, well... hmm.* I come up short.

I stand in the bathroom for what feels like a lifetime, waiting for my shirt to dry and waiting for things to add to my list. The buzz of shoppers in the store quiets and still, I hold my position. I fix my hair. I consult Google for reasons to let go of a past relationship, but the reception in here sucks.

I wonder how long the hot firefighters will stay. I answer myself with the truth, *not as long as me.* I get comfortable. Maybe a little too comfortable because all of a sudden, the light in the bathroom flickers. And then... total darkness.

“Uhhh, hi?” I call out to the empty bathroom. Okay, looks like an overzealous employee wants me out of here. “I know you all want to go home but really, cutting the lights? I’ll be right out.”

I use the light of my almost-dead cell phone screen to search for the door handle. When I push it open, I gasp. The entire store is pitch black... and empty too. My mouth falls open. I look out onto the street and see the whole city is shut down. I make my way to the front door and tug on the handles. They won’t budge.

*Shit, I’ve done it this time.*

“What in the world?” My voice echoes off the empty walls. This is some kind of naughty-list hell right here, I know it.

“Power outage.” Shawn’s voice comes from behind the mountain of toys on my right. When his hand lands on my back, I let out a yelp that echoes off the walls.

I shrug away from him, refusing to acknowledge the heat that floods through me at his touch. “You scared me! What are you still doing here? Wait, that doesn’t matter. Are we locked in? And... don’t you need to call your wife?”

“The locks are digital and the internet is dead. There’s no reception in here, the landlines don’t work. Nothing will until the power comes back on. Also... I don’t have a wife anymore.”

## Chapter Three Shawn

Time passes as Edel and I dance around our shared past. There are so many things I want to say, but in the end, pleasantries don't seem big enough. Nice to see you. *How are you? You look gorgeous.* That isn't us. This is me and Edel were talking here. But at the same time, talking about reality seems too big. *I miss you. I think of you more often than I'm willing to admit. I've never stopped loving you.*

"I've thought of you every single time I've ever heard that damn song." A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth.

"Yes, that song is ours. Before that song, we were just two virgins with crushes that couldn't be squelched. Who knew that Elvis was the key? Was it the hip thrust that did it for you?" I chuckle. "Come on, looks like we're settling in for the night."

I wander down an aisle filled with trampolines and pull out two. When Edel is seated across from me, I reach for her hand. She doesn't pull away.

Instead, she inhales and her shoulders fall forward. "Listen, I'm sorry for the way things ended with us. If I could go back in time, I would've stayed in Findlay with you. Somehow I thought being here and in a serious relationship was going to hold me back. But I know now how ridiculous that is."

"No, that isn't fair. We were young. You were right. I had no business proposing knowing I didn't have my shit together yet. I wanted everything too young. I was too serious, too soon. That's what growing up in the throws of chaos will do to you. I was desperate to create the life I never had and I tried to put that burden on you." The air gets lighter as soon as the heavy words leave my throat.

"You are a good man, always have been. You deserved better from your parents and I know you were just trying to create stability for yourself. At least, I know it now."



It feels good to be around someone who has known me all my life. I don't have to explain anything to Edel, she was there. She was a part of me while I was figuring out who I would become.

“That’s exactly what my marriage was about. I still want that life, but only if it’s right. I’ve learned that I can’t force it. You can’t imagine what it’s like to grow up without a family. You’re a Tiding for the love of god. With so many of you floating around this town you’re the exact opposite of alone.”

“Fair enough, but I’d argue that you can’t possibly understand what it is to be a part of something that you simply don’t belong in. People read my mother’s lifestyle advice because she’s created a *perfect* world. On top of that, my siblings have turned out to be perfect. Everly with her rich husband and her sweet kid. And don’t get me started on the world-famous Emmett. Then there’s me.”

“And then, there’s you. Stunning. Creative. Beautiful you.” I bring the back of her hand to my mouth and plant a kiss on it. “With a side of full-on-good-times-crazy.” I let out a laugh.

From there, it’s a blur. One minute, Edel is playfully thumping my chest with her fists scolding me for not telling her about my divorce more quickly. The next she’s shooting foam arrows at me from a dart gun and I’m chasing her through the store’s dark aisles.

I tackle her into Santa’s sleigh display and kiss her beside the inflatable snowman. The best part is, she isn’t pulling away. Instead, Edel is leaning into me. Her round curves make my mouth water. When her lips press into mine, it feels like coming home. Electric tingles fire through every nerve ending and my body ignites. I’ve thought about Edel more than I’d like to admit over the years. But I chalked it up to first love. I told myself that everyone feels that rush of nostalgia when they let themselves get lost in memories.

But now that she’s here and in my arms all over again, I know that couldn’t be further from the truth. Edel is the

woman I've loved all my life. She's perfectly imperfect, the rainstorm to my sunshine and she's the only person for me.

I consider kissing her again and then pause. "Hold on." I stand and turn the heads of the toy soldiers away from my girl. "I don't like the idea of anyone else looking at you."

Edel rolls her eyes at me as I take a seat in Santa's massive, red, velvet chair and try to pull her onto my lap. "This chair is in for the night of its life." She turns to straddle me, her hands clasped behind my neck.

*I like the sound of that.* The weight of her body on top of me has my manhood twitching with desire. When she bounces on me, I lose myself. Edel rocks closer to me, peppering my neck with kisses.

Her breasts bounce in my face and my hands roam from her thighs to the curve of her waist and back down. I plant kisses from her neck to her cleavage. She returns the gesture, slipping my earlobe into her mouth in a way that sets me on fire.

Things move faster from there. Adrenaline courses through me. It's a frenzy of making up for the lost time. I reach around her and unhook her bra. From the way her nipples harden, you'd think the paper snowflakes dangling around us were real. I can't look away. Before I know it, my mouth is on her nipples. My hands are everywhere. My heart is hers... again.

She leans away from me and her fingers dance across my zipper. When she unbuttons my pants and slides them off me, I come undone. My manhood springs up, already rock-hard for her. When she drops down off my lap, she takes my pants with her and loses hers as well. My mouth waters at the sight of her black lace underwear. Santa's reindeer are in for a real show now.

I try to touch between her legs. I try to tell her that I want to take care of her first, but Edel doesn't slow down. My voice hitches when she curls her hand around my cock and starts pumping. I twitch in response to her touch. I can't help but thrust my hips up toward her. I'm desperate for her touch.

Edel looks up at me with a start that says she's just getting started.

I run a hand gently through her hair, twisting my fingers into it and tugging while she takes care of me. My fingers dig into her scalp and my hips jut forward. She swallows my cock until I'm at the back of her throat. She closes her mouth around my tip, hollowing her cheeks as she sucks.

No one has ever known how to touch me like Edel. She remembers my body and already, I struggle to maintain my composure. She leans forward and runs her tongue along my length. She stays there for a lifetime mouthing at me, licking, sucking, and taking me all the way into her mouth. She's hungry for me and fire courses through my veins.

My head falls back and every muscle in my body goes taut. I moan her name and the sound reverberates through the dark store. She bobs her head on me, running her hands over every inch that is not already in her mouth and I beg her to stop. I'm not ready for this to be over.

Edel waits until I'm clenching, straining, and moaning her name to crawl back onto my lap. As soon as she does, I take charge. I part her slit with my tip and thrust inside. Tingles whip through me at the sudden change of sensation. The way she clenches along my length tells me she was ready to be filled.

I roll my hips up shooting my firm rod farther inside of her. I put my hands on her hips and guide her onto me. She's already drenched. Edel is beautiful, tits bouncing, and face flushed with pink. Her head falls back and her eyes snap closed. We stay there for a long while until our bodies become one and our hearts beat in perfect rhythm. Until the halls are officially decked.

A chant echoes in my mind, *I have my girl back, I have my girl back*. She rides me, hips thrusting and breath jagged until her body racks with tremors. It's all I can do to hold on, thrusting into her as she rides a beautiful wave of release.

When she finally arches her back and lets go, she takes me all the way with her. We fall over the edge together. Edel clenches on me. I explode hot streams inside of her. The sensation leaves me breathless. Edel stays on top of me, riding, bouncing, and milking me to the last drop.

When we don't have anything left, she collapses into my chest and I wrap my arms around her. I hold her like she's the only thing in the world that matters because she is. I kiss the top of her head and sweep the hair from her face. This girl, my girl, is here in my arms and I have everything I've ever wanted.

Time freezes just for us and I say a silent prayer that the lights will never come back on. I never thought I could have this much fun in a toy store. I want this moment for as long as I can have it. Every single second counts.

From there, we don't stay on the chair. I take her again. This time we're on Santa's sleigh and one more time up against the gingerbread house display. I'm insatiable. I love Edel in all the ways I've dreamed about for so long.

In the end, we're wrapped up together fully naked in a pile of Santa costumes. I'd like to think that Old St. Nick would happily donate his hat to be draped over Edel's beautiful body. Now that we're done missing each other physically, we get even deeper.

Edel tells me that she moved back because she was lonely and broke. She tells me that she's rented a small place in Findlay, but is somehow *still* lonely and broke. She's on the verge of giving up her dream of being a famous dessert chef and food blogger. She tells me that she isn't sure where she belongs. My heart shatters for her because I've always known where she belongs... and that's with me.

She leans her head into my chest and I run my hands across the back of her hair. She's nodding off in my arms, but not me. I don't want to miss a single minute. I stay wide awake counting her breaths and humming the tune of *Blue Christmas* in her ear.

## Chapter Four Shawn

An hour passes before her eyelids flutter open.

“You’re just staring? Oh no, you know I drool everywhere when I sleep.” She laughs and runs a hand across her mouth.

I chuckle. “You do, but no complaints here. I was thinking that this has to be some kind of Christmas magic. You being here with me, it’s all I’ve wanted for Christmas for years now, and all of a sudden, here you are. Look at that, Christmas wishes come true. Maybe you wished for me too. Maybe that’s how it happened.”

She bites the corner of her lip. “I didn’t actually, sorry. But not because I didn’t want to. More because I thought you were happily married and I didn’t want to ruin anything... I’ve been wasting my wishes on things like, not having to go to my mother’s Christmas party tomorrow.”

I put on my best radio announcer voice. “Ah, the infamous Tiding Christmas extravaganza. The official who’s who in Findlay. Step back baby Jesus, it might be the eve of your birthday, but it’s the Tiding’s party that matters... Gotta love your mom.” I shake my head. “What kind of creation are you showing off at your mother’s party tomorrow?”

“Ha! I’m making a big, old, nothing. You know Mom, my food isn’t fancy enough. She’s all about presentation. She won’t take something full of gluten, sprinkles, and Rice Krispies even if it is served on a flaming pop tart. I know it’s a shock, but my desserts aren’t good enough to display. Not when there will be press coverage.” She rolls her eyes.

“That’s too bad.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” she laughs.

“Not too bad for you. It’s too bad for all the people who are going to miss out on some incredible, inspired creations. I’ve done my fair share of Christmas’ with the Tidings and I have to say that it’s pretty vanilla. Don’t you

think? I mean where are the ugly Christmas sweaters and white elephant gifts? Where are the Two-bite Grinchy Paws?”

Her eyes widen. “What? How in the world do you know about the Two-bite Grinchy Paws?”

“I may have low-key stalked you on social media for a while after my divorce. You’re harder to find than expected for someone making a living as a food blogger or influencer or whatever it is you are these days. You can’t give up on yourself, you’re too good not to have what you want.”

She looks away from me and I see a flash of something on her face that I can’t place. She said she’s having a hard time getting established here. It’d be nice for her mother to be supportive for once.

“I haven’t given up on myself, but I also can’t afford my life. I don’t know what to do, to be honest, but I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ll work at a cafe or open my own food truck. I don’t know. That’s a problem for another day.” She leans away from me, desperate to change the subject, but I’m not ready to move on so quickly.

When I don’t participate in her small talk, we sit in silence. But not the sad kind, the comfortable kind. I don’t know about being broke, but lonely, I understand. All I want is to fix things for her. I want Edel here and happy.

Five minutes pass before I pull her back in toward me and kiss the top of her head. “Hey, I have an idea.”

“Does it involve your candy cane, because I’m in?” She runs a hand between my legs and it makes my mouth water.

“I like where your head’s at,” I growl into her ear. “But I was thinking that I could help get the word out in town about your food blog. That way if you want to open that food truck here in Findlay you’d have immediate customers.”

Her body goes rigid and I take it as a good sign. Edel knows I’m on her side.

“Shawn, I—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I press a finger to her lips. “I can fix this for you. I’m a firefighter, and saving the day is kind of my thing. It’s no problem at all. I could even get the department to commission you to cater desserts at our next event. Even if people don’t think they’ll like your creations, they’ll have no choice but to try them. Then they’ll fall in love with them and with you.” I let out a chuckle at my brilliance.

“They’ll have no choice?” Edel sits up and turns to face me. Her eyes go wide and her mouth isn’t quite curled into a smile the way I would’ve guessed, but I’m undeterred.

“I’ll put in a call today. What’s your food truck going to be called? How about Edel’s Eats? No... Hmm... Wait, I know! How about Blue—”

“Shawn!” She snaps my name through her lips and I stare at her.

“What?” My brows furrow in total confusion.

“No. None of it. I don’t want your help. Why is it that everyone in my life seems to think I’m incapable of doing anything on my own? I’m an adult and I’ve done okay this far, even if it isn’t by Findlay standards.”

“Oh, I...” I start. “So, just get the word out amongst the guys at the station then?”

Her eyes cut into mine and I know enough to stop talking. But before I can figure out where I went wrong, the fluorescent, overhead lights buzz to life. They are white and blinding. The *choo-choo* sound of the toy train cascading around the base of the Christmas tree comes cascading toward us. I sit up with a laugh and Edel scrambles to her feet.

“The power’s back. The doors will open now and everyone outside can see in. We need to get out of here.” There’s an undeniable tension in her voice.

“Right.” I get up.

But as quickly as I’m moving, Edel is already dressed. Whatever moment we were having. Whatever solutions were about to present themselves are completely gone. The delirious, Christmas magic that was in her eyes has vanished.

It's replaced by tight lines and pinched wrinkles that I can't understand.

"Okay, so we'll go." I can't hold back my smile as I pull my shirt over my head.

"No Shawn, I'm going to go and you're going to go, but there isn't a *we* here. I've missed you. And this night with you was so incredible, but I have some things to figure out." Her words are clipped and there's a sadness to them that I can't place.

I take a step toward her, adrenaline propelling me forward. I put a hand on her forearm and turn her toward me. "No. No way. I won't let you do this. We were always going to end up as us. Always. You might need time or space to get there and that's fine. But I know what's right when I see it. There isn't anyone else for me. It's you. So let me help you get things established here, in Findlay. We can build a life together."

Her mouth pulls into a tight line. "You don't get it. I've lived my whole life in the shadow of my last name and I'm sick of it. This business, this food is *my* thing even if I fail, it's mine. My creation, my passion, and I need everyone around me to understand that. Especially the man in my life."

*Click.*

The sound of the door unlocking washes me with sadness because I know what's about to happen. Edel is going to walk through those front doors alone and I'm going to be left standing here with my heart in my hands, again.

And then it does. But as I watch her walk away, calm washes over me. This time our story will have a different ending. Edel and I will finally get our happily ever after even if she can't see it yet.



## Chapter Five Edel

When I get home in the early hours of the morning, one thing is for sure, I can't go back to sleep. I pace my apartment and run my fingers through Grinchy's fur. He swipes at me, and that seems right for a day when I've both reunited and left the love of my life.

I lay down for another hour, but the morning sun blares in through my curtainless window. *Dammit, I've got to finish unpacking.* I bolt upright. "Okay universe, you win. Merry. Freaking. Christmas Eve. You want me up, let's do it. I'm up." Grinchy tilts his head at me. "Don't judge me," I mutter under my breath.

I grab a box cutter and slice open the first box I see. When its contents spill over, I let out a cackle of a laugh. "Of course! Of course, *this box.* Mom's special memories. Yeah, let's do it." I grit my teeth thankful that there isn't anyone here to witness my little meltdown, besides Grinchy of course, but he's seen worse.

I open the lid and bite the bullet. If I'm going to blame being a Tiding for all the misery in my life, I suppose I should give my last name credit for the good things in my life too. But I can't always remember the good things. Maybe there will be some in here.

The cardboard flap opens and a puff of stale air hits me in the face as I peer inside. It's a combination of stale cinnamon and dried clay. Yum.

One by one, I take out the artifacts of my childhood. The first are from my early years, pre-mom's marriage. The poor days. The days when the only expectations placed on us were to get to tomorrow. The pictures show a pre-flatiron me wearing unseasonable water shoes and oversized cartoon sweaters. My teeth are still crooked and in a lot them, I'm cooking with Everly. Warmth blooms in me at the sight.

I keep digging. There's a handmade card from Emmett. I open it and read, *happy birthday, I don't like girls but since you're my sister I do like you, love Emmett.* He was charming,

even back then. The memories aren't as jarring as I expected they might be. Instead, they're comforting. They wrap around me like a warm blanket and I settle into them.

I take my time. I let myself dissolve into the life we used to have. Maybe Mom tried. Maybe it was all too much for her, having four kids and being all alone. Maybe she got married because it's what she could do. Maybe she resisted help for so long that she traded her joy for pride until she had no choice but to marry the first rich dude to come along. My heart softens for her, just a bit. I'll go to her party today and I'll play my part.

As I get older, the time between artifacts gets larger. The next thing I know, I'm looking at middle school Edel. I'm much too polished and put together for my age. My teeth are perfectly straight and my posture is too, but my smile is noticeably forced. These must be the days of Diane Tiding, lifestyle aficionado.

By the time I'm combing through a high school scrapbook, the strangest thing happens. My smile, my real smile, returns.

More tears flood my eyes as I put it all together. There it is, all spelled out in front of me. Shawn, taking me to prom in my homemade dress. Both of us are wearing enormous smiles. Shawn, hugging me at my honor roll assembly in his football uniform. I have a flash of him telling me that he'd rather miss the first half of his game than miss seeing me get my award. Finally, there's me serving a burnt, failure of a dessert to my family. Mom is scowling, but there's Shawn sitting to her right with an enormous grin and an already empty plate.

Every single memory is a testament to the fact that Shawn has always been my rock. He's my biggest cheerleader and I'm... an idiot. He's never tried to take anything away from me. My heart rate ticks up as I run my fingers across the final item in the box.

It's a dried flower attached to a note in Shawn's handwriting. My breath catches in my chest as I unfold the old

paper and read it.

*To my girl... this is delicious. You are the only person crazy enough to pair an orange with chocolate and pop rocks. I can't wait to see what you do next. I'll be here cheering you on. XOXO, Shawn*

There it is, in black and white. Shawn has supported me in the pursuit of my dreams. Every dream that came along, even when I hadn't flushed it out myself yet. Even when my desserts were total garbage. My chest hollows out.

Shawn has always helped me. *It's okay* to let him help me. It doesn't make me any less. Maybe he's not trying to help me because he thinks I'm incapable. Maybe he's helping me because he loves me.

I wipe my eyes and look in the mirror, startled by what I see. Turns out, I'm actually not a cute crier at all. Black mascara streams cascade down my cheeks, let's be honest, they're mixed with snot. It's not a great look for winning back the love of my life.

"I need to make things right. But how?"

I pace and Grinchy looks up at me offering his suggestion, *meow*.

"I know, it starts with a shower." I climb in and my brain twists and turns, Shawn's face running through my mind. *I don't even have his number, it's not like I can just send him a text. I could find him on social media, but that isn't how great love stories start. I could go to the fire station, but that's so creepy. No. I'll have to find him, in person and profess my undying love but not at his place of employment. Yes. Right, that's what I'll do.*

But when I step out of the shower, I glance at the clock. *Dammit*. I need to get my mother's holiday party over with first.



By the time I'm walking into my mother's house for her famous holiday party, I'm sick to my stomach. I can't believe the things I said to Shawn. I'm desperate to find him and even more uncomfortable than usual about the photographers with the cameras in my face. But I think back to the girl in the pictures when it was just Mom and us. I was happy and so, I'm here to do my part.

My eyes make their way around the room. It's very... *Diane Tiding famous author* in here. That's the thing about Mom, she doesn't disappoint. This year is as spectacular as ever. Everything, and I do mean everything, is white. The serving dishes, the lights, the swags of fabric draped from the ceiling, and the candles... all white as snow. The music is classical with a hint of holiday in the melody. The appetizers are tiered and the champagne is flowing.

Nothing is left to chance for Mom's biggest magazine shoot of the year. It's what we live by in the Tiding house. Like a good daughter, I'm here to play my part and so is my brother. Emmett is entertaining, in a crisp white suit, snapping photos and live streaming himself. He's turning on his effortless charm.

Mom is dazzling in some kind of skin-tight white dress with white fur on the collar. She's the host with the most, totally in her element. My sister Everly is standing, staring, with eyes wide as saucers. She looks... off her game and that doesn't track. She's nothing if not dependable. Something must be terribly wrong.

I scan the room, but nothing seems amiss. When my eyes land back on Everly she's staring at me, not blinking. When I take a step toward her, she gives me the slightest nod of her head toward the dining room. I follow her gesture until my eyes land on the table behind her and my heart leaps into my throat.

Colorful pedestals of red and green pepper the otherwise white space. On the top of each pedestal is one of my creations. My jaw drops open. *Oh shit, Mom's going to have someone's head for this.* My heart rate ticks up and I push my way through the well-dressed crowd to the table. I take a

step closer to the pedestals in question. The desserts are poorly executed, but they're undoubtedly mine.

A hand lands on my shoulder and I turn with a start when I see Everly standing behind me, my nephew Preston at her side.

"What the fuck are these doing here?" I whisper between clenched teeth.

"They—" She starts.

"You said fuck? Mom, she said fuck!" Preston covers his laugh with his hands.

"Go, now!" My sister grimaces and escorts her son through the kitchen doors.

Then the classical music comes to a screeching halt and the room quiets in turn. Eyes dart in every direction and when Mom catches mine, I step in front of the offending pastries. *Maybe she hasn't seen them and this is some awful prank. Maybe...*

I stop. The sound of Elvis' Blue Christmas flows out of the speakers and my breath catches in my chest. My jaw falls open when I see him. Shawn walks through the front door without a single reservation. He's in jeans and an ugly knitted sweater. He's topped the look with a Santa hat and his head is held high.

"What is this?" Mom's jaw tightens and her face goes pale as she looks from Shawn to me and my ghastly desserts.

Shawn faces her. "This is a showcase of your daughter's amazing desserts. I didn't do this because she needs the help. I did it because her desserts deserve to be here. She's incredible, creative, and so fucking talented. It's time everyone sees that. Now, I'm not a baker so you can imagine they look better when she does them but..."

"Excuse us." Mom's voice is tight and she attempts to usher the film crew out of the front door.

As Shawn makes his way over to me, I can't help the tears that well in my eyes. "You made these?"

“Terribly, I got marshmallows in places that just should never...” Shawn takes my hands in his. “Listen, I know I’m meddling and I don’t mean to. That isn’t what this is about. I don’t know better than you and I don’t want to take over your life or tell you how to build your career. This is about showing you that I will stand behind you or beside you through everything. I know you don’t need me, but I’m hoping you want me. Because you are all I want in this world.”

“You are all I want too.” I throw my arms around his neck.

Shawn lifts me off the ground and spins me around. He *is* my smile and I’m so happy to have him back. I know that this is it. Nothing will ever be the same. My Findlay happily ever after. My heart swells with joy.

“Please excuse this interruption” Mom’s voice is shrill somewhere behind me, but I don’t care because I’m finally home.

Emmett shoves into us, knocking Shawn and me away from the dessert table. He holds his phone up in full selfie mode. “What’s up guys, checking back in. Like I was saying, my sister made these. She’s a food blogger and hopefully, she’ll get you guys the recipes. They’re pretty incredible...” He takes a bite of a chocolate-dipped marshmallow rolled in caramel.

“Wow uh, sis...” Emmett holds up his phone in my direction.

“Stop, I don’t want to see how many followers you’ve got. Don’t you see Shawn’s here, come on Emmett, don’t ruin this moment for me.” I bite back a giggle and bury my face in Shawn’s chest.

Emmett continues, “No. It isn’t that. It’s that they don’t want me, they want you.”

I look at Emmett’s phone and when I see the number of comments and likes, my eyes widen. “Wow...”

“They can’t have her, she’s taken,” Shawn yells into the phone and wraps me in his arms.

As the camera crew comes back in through the front doors, Shawn and I slip out of the back. He holds me in his arms under the white light of the moon.

He brings his lips to my ear. “It looks like there won’t be any more ‘blue Christmas’ for us.”

## Epilogue, Everly Tiding Ten Months Later

Things aren't always as they seem. When I told my sister that I was getting divorced, her mouth fell open in surprise. Though, I can't imagine what all the shock was about. Things have been hard with my husband Spence and me for a long time. But even when I found out that he had gambled all our money away, I stayed.

I stayed for Spence. Then I stayed for myself. Then I stayed for my son. I stayed for too long. I stopped eating. I wore the clothes. I hosted the parties. I was ready to commit to a life that I hated just like my mother taught me to do. As the oldest daughter, I thought it was my destiny. But when he told me about the other woman, I knew I didn't have any other choice. I left.

Even though I'm the one who filed for divorce, it was Spence who didn't choose me. As it turns out, he didn't choose Preston either and that breaks my heart.

So much has changed for us in the last ten months. For starters, I got my sister back and I gained a brother too. Ed and Shawn got married right away. They don't have babies yet, but they have a ton of cats. More importantly, they have each other. Their relationship is single-handedly responsible for making me believe in true love again.

Edel never did have to open that food truck. Instead, she joined the ranks of Emmett and became a social media phenomenon. She's got a cookbook deal worth way more than the tiny bungalow I bought down the street from them. Preston spends hours running back and forth between the houses. Meanwhile, Shawn is well... Shawn. He's rock solid, dependable, and honest. He's saving lives and making goofy memories with our family. It's so nice to see the love in Edel's eyes again.

I've started loving myself too. I stopped starving my body and let myself indulge. I leaned away from the art of making a perfect home and into the art of creating a happy



one. Best of all, I'm chasing my dreams. Not the appropriate ones that people understand, but the wild ones that just a few months ago I wouldn't dare whisper.

You see, Edel wasn't the one who wanted to open that food truck in the first place. It was me. The food truck life was the place I'd escape in my mind on all those lonely nights wondering if Spence would ever come home.

But now, it's real and I can hardly believe it. This December, I've officially booked my first holiday bizarre. *Jingled* will be officially open for business and everyone is invited. I can hardly wait to see my cookies out in the world.



*Want more of the Tiding family?*

*Turn the page to read chapter one in Everly's story, Jingled, for free.*



*There's more to come for the Merry Fudgin Christmas series! Up next, read Oh Fudge by Piper Cook.*

**These ten women have had it with lots of things this season. They're done with the gimme-gimme customers, the people looking for the "perfect" gift who have no clue what the person likes, and serving the hundredth peppermint latte of the day.**

**They've gone...grinchy.**

**But...**

**They're about to meet a man who is full of the holiday spirit that they've run out of. He's going to help them find their love for the season and in the process, they'll share lots of fudgin' fun.**





## Chapter One, Everly

“Preston, put that down!” I scold, sighing deeply and running a hand down my face. My hands are coated in a layer of cookie dough, but I grab desperately at my son, attempting to snatch the phone from his hands. He giggles and dashes from my reach, a cookie hanging from his mouth.

“But *mom*,” he says, when I finally grab my phone and throw it down on the counter. I quickly wash my hands, then wipe the case of my phone free from the raw cookie dough. “I just want to play games.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, hun. I need it for the recipe.”

Preston stares at me and cocks his head to the side. “You have it memorized, though.”

I glance out the window and toward the bustling crowd outside. I haven’t opened yet, but already people are about, scouting for booths at the famous annual Findlay holiday craft bazaar.

The narrow rows of booths connected by illuminated string lights somehow warm the frosty December air. I straighten my apron and look in the mirror. The dark green fabric has the name of my company stitched into it, *Jingled*. Seeing myself wearing it is surreal.

I smooth my hair behind my ear. This is just another first in a year of firsts. But it’s the realization of a dream and my nerves have not calmed down. “There’s no room for error, this has to be perfect.” I talk aloud to myself.

Preston slouches down in one of the chairs and puts his head into his hands. “What can I do then? You won’t let me help, and there’s nobody my age around. Can I call Aunt Edel and ask her to pick me up?”

“No, she’s out of town.” I close my eyes and think for a few moments, this is one of those times when single parenthood simply isn’t fair. “Why don’t you go out and explore some of the open booths?”

His eyes light up. “Really? By myself?”

“Yeah,” I tell him, drying my hands on a towel. “You’re almost ten now. I trust you not to run off. Just don’t talk to strangers, and you know, be... reasonable. Okay?”

*Ugh, my parenting bar has been significantly lowered by my divorce.*

Preston nods enthusiastically. I know he doesn’t like being cooped up in the food truck for hours on end and I don’t blame him. This isn’t his dream. In fact, being able to smell but not consume all the cookies is more like a nightmare for any kid. But I don’t have another solution. It’s not like I have the funds to hire his nanny back, not without child support and my ex-husband is long gone.

“Wear your jacket!” I tell him when he reaches for the latch on the door.

He tugs it off the hook, smiling sheepishly back at me before sliding it over his shoulders. Preston exits the truck, but stops in front of the window and looks up at me as if this were some sort of trick.

I wave him along, smiling wide. “Go, have fun!” *I hope I don’t regret this.*

Preston saunters off, his hands in his pockets. He’s the light of my life, and he reminds me of everything good in this world. I knew things weren’t going well in my marriage, but somehow I still never thought we’d end up here.

When it comes down to it, I wasn’t given a choice and I’m grateful for that. At the time, I wasn’t willing to lose everything to find myself. Now, I wouldn’t trade it. Being a single mother is *hard*, but it’s all worth it for my little guy.

I finish up the batch of chocolate chip cookies with relative ease, and my stomach flutters as I open up my window. I’m ready for sellers to come and order. The moment I do, my first customer gets in line. It’s pure Christmas magic.



There are a couple more orders within the first hour, and it's thrilling. I remind myself that the bazaar isn't even in full swing yet. More people will be hungry around lunch.

I make all sorts of cookies. Chocolate chip is of course the most popular, but I also bake a few batches of oatmeal raisin as well as some more festive-looking gingerbread. Trees, stars, and little gingerbread men decorate the trays that cool within my rack while I get started on the frosting.

"We've got a nice turn-out this weekend, haven't we?" An older man asks from the window. I peer out, and grin when I see Mr. Wiley, leaning against his cane. He's a gruff-looking fellow, but the kindest person I've ever met and practically Findlay royalty. "Phelma's jewelry is selling out already."

"That's awesome!" I tell him, and grab a bag of cookies to hand him. "Take this to her, will you?"

"Oh, darlin', let me pay you," he says, pulling out his wallet.

"I won't hear of it. Preston loved working on your farm this summer. Consider it my thank you."

He looks hesitant but takes it with a grin. "Why, thanks. Where is the little rascal, anyway?"

"He's out scoping the booths." I reach over and shut off my stand mixer before it over whips the icing. "Hopefully there's something for him to do. I need him to stay busy for now. I'll probably go around sometime later and check everything out."

"Oh, there's plenty. I saw a soap carving booth and lots of samples of baked goods. I hope he stops by the woodworker's booth. I hear he's giving kids some lessons on drilling, carving, or something of that nature."

"Woodworker?" I ask. "I don't remember there being a woodworker here."

Mr. Wiley's eyes light up, as they always do when he knows something someone else doesn't "Oh, you don't know!

That's right, I think you missed the bazaar this time last year."

I raise an eyebrow. "I was here, just not as a vendor... And I looked a little different back then." I run my ringless hand across the curve of my cheek.

"That's right, you look happy now." He lets out a cackle. "I'm sure you've seen him around. This man is extremely reserved and only comes down once a year to sell his work before disappearing back into the foothills. Don't know too much about him, no one does. But he's a part of Findlay's fabric."

"Hmm, seems like quite the mystery," I say, shrugging. I wonder how many other things I'll learn about my hometown now that my eyes are open. "Other than that, are there any new booths around?"

Mr. Wiley glances around. "Dunno. Haven't been all the way around yet. So far it's mostly the same crowd, but you never know. There could be a budding young baker just waiting for an old man to come around to give her a hand in taste-testing the cookies."

I chuckle. "Are you teasing me?"

He raises the hand that isn't parched upon the handle of his cane in surrender. "I would never!"

"I do appreciate all your help, you know," I tell him. "I couldn't tell a bad cookie from a good one without you."

He waves me off. "Oh, you're being modest. Anyway, I should be off. Lots of people to harass!"

I laugh and hand him a second bag of cookies. "For you, I have a feeling that your wife won't get hers."

He winks. "You're right about that. Make sure to stop by the booth at some point, she would love to say hello. Say hi to Preston for me if I don't see him."

"Absolutely," I tell him, and he walks away with the help of his cane.

As I expected, business starts to pick up when it nears lunchtime. Preston checks in a couple of times, asking for

money for lunch or a craft he thinks looks cool. I only say yes to the former, but he doesn't put up much of a fuss. I've lucked out with that kid.

Halfway through my third batch of shortbread, Preston rushes over with a large plank of wood in his hands, smiling wider than I've ever seen despite his pink nose and rosy cheeks. "Look what I made for you!" He says, holding it up to show me.

From the looks of it, he's crudely drilled his name into a slab of stained oak. Still, it's lovely and I tell him so, wiping my hands on my apron and coming out to meet him. It's much colder outside the food truck, but I don't mind.

"Thanks. A man at a woodworking booth was letting a bunch of kids practice, but the line was *so* long." He sags his shoulders for emphasis. "So I took this one to use. It's awesome, right?"

He hands me the wood, and I make a show of examining it. "Incredible. I hope you were careful with the power tools though." I let out a laugh, but stop when my fingers feel something on the back. I flip it over to see a lovely carving of a wolf in a forest. At first, I marvel at the masterpiece, but then my eyes catch a glimpse of the price tag on the bottom. My mouth drops open.

*Oh no, oh no, oh no.* My adrenaline picks up.

"Preston, this is—"

"Cool, right? Flip it back over, that's the part I did. My name P-r-e-s—"

"Preston," I cut him off, my tone becoming more panicked. "Where did you get this? This was for sale. The man was probably letting kids practice on *blank* pieces of wood. You just stole this and ruined a very expensive piece of art. What were you thinking?"

Preston's eyes tear up, and I take a breath to calm myself.

"It's okay, we just need to find whose it is. We'll take it back and apologize."

He snuffles. “I didn’t know it was an artwork. I thought it was a scrap piece, like all the others.”

My heart melts for him. He didn’t mean to, but still... I don’t know what to do. I can’t afford to pay this much money for anything right now, let alone art. I just hope we can come to a sensible agreement.

“Hey, kid!” A man says, walking over to Preston and me. He stops when he sees me holding the item. “Oh, hello.”

He’s the most attractive man I’ve ever laid eyes on. He’s got broad, dark mesmerizing eyes, broad shoulders, and a chiseled jawline. He has messy brown hair and stubble along his jaw that removes all sensibility in my mind. I try not to gawk for too long and hold up the piece of wood. “Is this yours?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah... My name’s Hunter Richards, I have a booth a little over that way.” He jabs his thumb back to where he came. His voice is rough but kind, but I seem to have lost mine.

“Everly Tiding,” I tell him and reach out my hand. He shakes it, and I swear my fingers tingle where his skin touches mine. “I’m Preston’s mom. I’m so sorry, he knows better...”

“How about we chat about it over some cookies?” He gestures toward the food truck. “Unless you have anything in the oven right now.”

I shake my head. “No, just icing, but that can wait.”

“Perfect,” he says, grinning. “What do you recommend?”

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# About the Author

Elsie James is proud to be a lifelong curvy girl. She writes stories about beautiful, strong, women who always find their happily ever afters.

Her books are romantic, sweet, and steamy with a whole lot of heart.

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