

ELSIE JAMES



Dingled

A SINGLE MOM HOLIDAY
FOOD TRUCK ROMANCE

Jingled

Tiding Family Holidays

By Elsie James

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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 toss it onto the counter.

He’s constantly messing with settings I don’t know how to change back. One time, the whole damn phone was in French.

I quickly wash my hands, then wipe the raw cookie dough from my phone case. “Preston, please.”

“I want to play games. This is boring.”

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 bizarre.

The narrow rows of booths connected by illuminated string lights add warmth to the frosty December air. I straighten my apron and look in the tiny mirror hanging inside my trailer. 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 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 in one of the chairs and puts his head in 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 and Uncle Shawn are 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. 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, and I don’t blame him. This isn’t his dream, and part of me feels selfish for making him participate in mine. 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, along with his money, is long gone. I could hardly rely on Spence when we were married. Since we got divorced, he’s given us nothing but broken promises. We can’t depend on him for anything, and for Preston, it’s devastating.

“Wear your jacket!” I call as he reaches for the latch on the door.

He tugs it off the hook, smiling sheepishly 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 is some sort of trick. Even he can’t believe how lax my parenting has become.

I force a smile. “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 reminds me of everything good in this world. How on earth is he so opposite to his father?

I knew things weren’t going well in my marriage, but somehow, I never thought I’d end up here. When it comes

down to it, I wasn't given a choice. Spence decided for me by cheating, and in hindsight, I'm grateful.

At the time, I wasn't willing to lose everything to find myself. I was grasping at the last straws of a life I thought I was supposed to be living. But now, I wouldn't trade it. Even in the hard, lonely moments of being a single mom. Even when my son asks hard questions that I alone have to answer, this life is worth it.

I finish the batch of chocolate chip cookies with relative ease, and my stomach flutters as I open my window. I'm ready for sellers to come and order. The scent of warm cookies wafts onto the cold street. Within minutes my first customer gets in line, and my heart swells in my chest. 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. So I make all sorts of cookies. Chocolate chip is the most popular, but I also bake a few batches of oatmeal raisin and some more festive-looking snickerdoodle. Trees, stars, and little gingerbread men decorate the trays cooling 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. "Phelma's jewelry is selling out already."

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.

"That's awesome!" I 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. “Thanks, dear. Where is my favorite helper?”

“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 out there. I need him to stay busy for now. I’ll probably go around sometime later and check everything out too. But for now, I’m baking.”

“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 and carving or something of that nature.”

“Woodworker? 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 new full curve of my cheek.

“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. You’ve been out of the loop for a while.”

More like forever. When I was in the throws of my marriage, keeping it together was all I had time to think about. “Hmm, seems like quite the mystery,” I say with a shrug. How many other things will I learn about my hometown now my eyes are open? “Other than that, are there any new booths?”

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 waiting for an old man to give her a hand taste-testing the cookies.”

I chuckle. “Are you teasing me?”

He raises the hand that isn’t perched on the handle of his cane in surrender. “I would never!”

“I do appreciate all your help, you know,” I tell him with a wink.

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 your wife won’t get hers.”

He returns my wink. “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 picks 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, 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. His face is beaming with pride and he waves it around with such enthusiasm I worry he might hit someone. 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 all by myself. 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.”

I pause when my fingers feel something on the back. I flip it over to see a lovely carving of an intricate Christmas tree. At first, I marvel at the masterpiece. The detail is incredible. But then I catch a glimpse of the price tag on the bottom. My mouth drops open.

Oh no, oh no, oh no. 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 panicked. “Where did you get this? This was for sale. The man was probably letting kids practice on *blank* pieces of wood. You 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. *There’s no way I can pay for this piece.*

“Sorry! I thought you’d like it. I didn’t know they were different...” Preston rambles, his face flushing red.

“It’s okay. We need to find out whose it is. We’ll take it back and apologize. Maybe there’s a way to save it. Maybe I can use my stand mixer and buff out your name. Or—”

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

My heart sinks for him. This isn’t his fault. What did I expect from a ten-year-old running wild through a craft fair? 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 hope I can return the piece and we can come to a sensible agreement.

“Hey, kid!” A man calls out, walking toward Preston and me.

This dude is undeniably the woodworker. The first giveaway is the flannel. Then there’s his body. He’s massive with broad shoulders, dark hair, and a chiseled jawline. His biceps practically beg to be chopping wood on a hilltop.

My heart thuds in my chest. *Did he have to be smoking hot?*

He's the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on. All sensibility flees my mind when he gets close enough to see his eyes. I haven't talked to an attractive man since my divorce, let alone one I may now owe a large sum of money. It's an awkward, dizzying combination.

I try not to gawk for too long, and eventually, I hold up the piece of wood. "Is this yours?"

Cool, Everly, real cool.

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, and I seem to have lost mine altogether.

"Everly Tiding." I 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 about this. I sent him out there by himself. But he knows better..." I ramble and offer him the piece of wood.

He doesn't take it. Instead, he looks over my head. "I have an idea. How about we chat about it over some cookies?" He gestures toward the food truck behind us.

"What?" I'm taken aback. I'd almost forgotten that *Jingled* was here at all.

"Unless you have anything in the oven right now."

I shake my head. "Just icing, but that can wait."

"Perfect," he says, grinning. "What do you recommend?"

Chapter Two Hunter

As I sit across from one of the most beautiful women I've ever met, I'm completely taken. Who would've thought that losing a piece that took me three weeks to carve would be the best thing to happen to me in a long time?

There's something about Everly I can't put my finger on. It's an odd mix of strength and vulnerability that makes me wonder what she's been through. I'm drawn to her, overwhelmed by the need to protect her. It's an odd sensation. Especially for me, but it's undeniable.

"You know what you did was wrong, correct?" She cuts her eyes at her son, and he dips his head, taking a bite of his gingerbread man. "There's a line for a reason. You've got to wait your turn."

"No harm done," I tell her. I reach out and grab one of the Christmas trees decorated beautifully in icing and sprinkles. I take a bite. "This is delicious."

Pink stains her cheek, and she dips her head. "Thanks, it's an old recipe from my grandmother."

Preston looks up at his mother, a quizzical look on his face. "I didn't know grandma baked."

"Ha, no. Diane Tiding hasn't gotten near a carb in over a decade. *My* grandma. It seems baking skips a generation in our family." A tight smile tugs at the corner of her full lips, and I can't look away.

Preston shrugs.

"How long have you been baking?" I shove the rest of the cookie in my mouth. I generally don't eat too many sweet things, but I could shamelessly gorge myself on a whole tray of these.

"I started when I was a kid, but I took a long break," she tells me. "I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, who taught me everything she knew. When she passed, I decided to keep her legacy alive through my baking. This has always

been my dream. It just took me a while to get here.” She shakes her head at Preston, patting his head and pulling a crumb from his shaggy blonde hair.

My eyes dart to her left hand, no ring. That is a good sign. It’s been a while since I’ve dated, and I’m out of practice, but I know I want more time with her. I take her in while my brain scrambles for the right words. “You seeing anyone?” Is what I settle on. *Dammit.*

“What?” Her face washes crimson.

“You know, dating. Ugh.” I run a hand along the taut muscles on the back of my neck. “Sorry, the mountains aren’t a hot spot for meeting people. I don’t know if that’s out of line, but I’m not sure I care. I want to take you on a date, so I need to know for the record that you’re not dating anyone.”

“What? Gross!” Preston’s face twists and turns before his tongue pops out of his mouth.

On the other hand, Everly doesn’t look put out by my forwardness. She lets out a giggle that lights the shadows on her face. “Oh, um. No, actually. It’s just Preston and me these days. The only people we can rely on are each other and my brother and sister. But I don’t have a ton of free time. Thank you for the offer, though.” She drums her fingers across the table, and I wait patiently. “For the record, what exactly would we do on this date? Something... woodsy?”

I’d guess by the way she fidgets in her seat that she’s out of practice too. It’s adorable, and it makes me want her all the more.

I let out a chuckle. “Perhaps, we could throw some axes or cut down a tree. I know this might come as a surprise, but I enjoy the occasional book or two. It’s the truth, and I have two bookshelves at home to prove it.”

She gives me a sheepish smile. An unexpected vision of Everly and her son at my home in the foothills of Findlay plays in my mind. I’ve always been fine on my own, but something about having them with me is undeniably pleasant.

Clank. Preston drops the wooden plank, and the moment is shattered.

Everly's head turns on a swivel. "Listen, about the art. I'll pay you back," she rushes out. "Every cent. It might take a while, but if you can be patient with me, I'll make sure you're reimbursed."

I lean back in the metal chair. "You know, his technique isn't that bad. Don't worry about it. I've had some cookies. We'll call it even."

She balks, clearly unhappy with this arrangement. "No, you deserve to be compensated. It's a beautiful piece, and I'd hate you to lose out on what's owed."

"Then what do you suggest? Because I'm honestly okay if you'd want to forget about this whole thing. We can move on from here. Let me take you two for lunch at one of the food trucks. There are more than a few good options down by my booth."

Everly puts her head in her hands. "Listen, I feel terrible. I—"

"I could work for you," Preston pipes up.

We both turn toward him.

Everly's eyes widen. "What?"

"I mean... I could work for free until my debt is paid off. I'm the one who did it, so I'm the one who should pay the price. You don't have to worry about it, Mom."

Everly looks up at me from beneath long, dark lashes and back at Preston. "That's sweet, honey, but I'm sure he wants to be left alone."

I like where this kid's head is at, especially since it seems like I won't be getting a real date with Everly anytime soon. "It's not a bad idea. I could use a strong man to help me at the shop. But only if it's okay with your mom."

She opens and closes her mouth a few times before nodding. "Okay. But if he starts to interfere—"

“I won’t,” Preston says, puffing out his chest confidently. “I’ll be good, promise.”

This seems to put her at ease. “Alright. It’s a deal. I’ll drive him up, and maybe you’ll have time to make another Christmas tree carving by next weekend.”

I generally sell through my inventory in a single weekend and wasn’t planning on coming back into town for the next few weeks. But knowing Everly will be here makes me look at the situation differently. I think I’ll be here all of December, and I’m okay with that. I nod. “Sounds good to me.”

I scribble down my address on a piece of paper, adding details such as “*take a left at the large boulder—you’ll know it when you see it,*” as there aren’t exactly any road signs.

Everly hops up when customers approach *Jingled*. It’s time for me to walk away, but I don’t care. I stay there for what feels like hours, asking her every question under the sun in between her helping customers. I notice how her smile comes so easily as she greets people. I notice the dimple on the corner of her mouth. I notice how every person is made better by their interaction with her. In the end, I know far too much about *Jingled*, and I’m completely smitten with its owner.

By the time I head back to my booth, my body is on fire. Heat floods me, and I’m floating on air. I’m obsessed with the idea of Everly coming out to my place. She’s captivating. But it isn’t just her. I’m happy Preston is coming too. He’s a good kid, I can tell. I take a deep breath to steady myself. Can I be falling in love after all this time alone?

Chapter Three Everly

“You’re going to be nice, you’re going to be respectful, and don’t get in his way,” I lecture for the hundredth time. Preston, sitting in the back of the car, groans. “Listen to him when he tells you to do something. Woodworking is dangerous, so—”

“*Be careful,*” he finishes for me. “I know, mom.”

“I’m just making sure,” I tell him. “I’ll give you two space, but I’ll be right there the whole time.”

The rest of the drive is spent with me listening to Preston’s accounts of what happened on his last day of school and explaining how excited he is to spend a few days with a *real* woodworker.

“I told all my friends I’m working over the holidays,” he tells me. “My friends thought it was *so* cool...”

When we eventually pull into the driveway, I’m in awe of the majestic property. For being in the mountains, it’s large and wooded, with a massive red shop at the end of the long, icy driveway. I notice the drive continues further into the woods, but I can’t see what building lies within.

I park off to the side in a spot I think will be easy to turn around. I shut off the engine, and Preston flies from the car, his backpack in hand. I follow suit, albeit more gracefully, stepping out onto the shoveled walkway and trying not to slip on the patches of ice.

Hunter pokes his head from his shop and smiles. “Hey, kid.”

Preston skids to a halt a few feet away and sticks his hand out. Hunter shakes it rather formally, then looks up at me.

“I’ll be hanging out in my car with a book and my tea,” I say. “Thanks again... for everything.”

“Stay. It’ll get chilly out there,” Hunter says.

Preston shakes his head, and I could certainly use the peace and quiet. So I refuse.

Hunter nods once, dipping his head politely. “Okay, we’ll have fun. Once he gets *really* good, he can open his own shop.”

Preston’s eyes light up at this, and he nods furiously. He launches into a hundred questions at once, telling Hunter he’s done some research but doesn’t understand how to hold a chisel. Hunter beams and tries his best to explain everything quickly to my impatient child.

I get back in my car and sit for a moment, thinking quietly and smiling to myself. Hunter seems like a great role model... perhaps he would agree to more sessions with Preston if this one goes well. Even when Spence was around, he didn’t make Preston a priority.

Watching Hunter with Preston makes me acutely aware of all that Preston is missing out on by not having a father in his life. An hour passes, and I watch the two of them side by side behind a power tool. They drag lumber. They start a fire. Then Preston runs toward my car.

I make quick work of wiping away my tears. “All done?”

“No, we have an hour left. But me and Hunter made you a good fire, and he pulled up a chair. He says you can read out here and enjoy the forest. Gotta go!” Preston bolts away.

I look from Hunter to the fire and back again. I try to think of a single more thoughtful gesture anyone has ever done for me, and I come up short. Without thinking, I gather my book and coat and sit by the roaring flames.



The next day, Preston’s even more excited to see Hunter.

“You know,” he tells me, “Hunter said he’s going to teach me how to use his chisel today if you say it’s okay. He told me it’s really, really safe. There’s nothing to be worried about, Mom. I promise I was good. Hunter said I’m a natural at

sanding, which is what he had me doing all yesterday. It's simple once you get the hang of it."

"So you had fun," I say with a chuckle.

He's been chatting non-stop about how much fun he had. He and Hunter seem to have hit it off. I find myself looking forward to seeing Hunter too. He is nothing like Spence, that's for sure. He's rugged and sexy. He doesn't care what anyone thinks. At the same time, he's shown us so much kindness.

"Yes," Preston says and takes a deep breath before launching into another story about how Hunter can lift seven logs all by himself, whereas he can only lift two.

I try to stay as engaged as possible in the story while navigating up the steep inclines toward Hunter's place in my car. I alternate between wondering if I should've taken more time on my hair and being thankful I have snow tires.

When we arrive, Preston jumps out of the car with even less restraint than yesterday. His excitement is contagious, and I find myself grabbing my keys from the ignition and making my way over to the shop.

Preston opens the door, letting himself inside, and the smell of sawdust hits me. There aren't any light switches, but the curtainless windows allow enough light for me to look around. Every workbench is piled high with pieces of wood in various stages of completion.

"This is the one I was at yesterday," Preston says, pointing to a tool in the corner. It's one of the few without any saw blades or other dangerous-looking tools, and I appreciate Hunter's caution with my son. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Why don't we go check by his house?"

"Okay," Preston says, skipping back toward the exit. "I know where it is. He went inside to get hot chocolate yesterday and the chair for you."

Preston leads me by the arm up the long driveway between the trees crowding the path. The winter birds chirp and sing above, annoyed that we're disturbing their peace. Our

boots crunch in the snow, but beyond that, the forest is peaceful and quiet.

When the clearing comes into view, I'm awed. Hunter's house looks entirely hand-built, if the architecture is any indication, and it sits in the middle of a small clearing. A small pond is frozen over to the left, and what looks like a barn out back.

"He grows vegetables in the spring," Preston explains wisely. "How *cool*, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

I knock on the front door. Inside there's shouting. Hunter's voice can easily be heard, but there's another similarly male voice whose temper is rising exponentially. I share a glance with Preston, and he shrugs. I knock again.

The door swings open, and a man who *looks* like Hunter but clearly isn't appears. He glares down at us, then shouts, "Must be for you."

He storms out into the cold, starting down the long and winding driveway. He disappears beyond the tree line, and I turn around once more.

Hunter stands in the doorway, staring after the other man. "Sorry about my brother. He's not usually like this. Daniel is... well, he's in a mood."

I nod, completely understanding. "Preston is ready to work, and I'm ready to head to my car. Thank you for the fire yesterday. It was so peaceful."

"No fire today. You're staying with us," he blurts, then coughs. "I mean, I was planning on making skewers for lunch, and I know Preston would love to show off some of his work. Have a seat. We can bring it to you."

I look down at my kid, who beams up at me and nods. "Uh, so I'd be in your house the whole time?"

Hunter shrugs. "Make yourself at home. We shouldn't be too long."

In the end, I relent. I tell myself it's only because of the wide, doe-eyed look my son gives me, but deep down, I want it too.

Hunter leaves, an eager Preston trailing off behind him. Seeing him so happy with another adult is an odd but welcoming sight. I can almost see their bond as if it were a physical thing. I hope Hunter doesn't break his poor little heart. Preston can't take much more disappointment.

I take some time to look around. Though the outside of the cabin is lovely and the interior is neat, it looks somewhat bland. Everything looks solely purposeful, with not a single decorative item in sight. *This is a dude's house if I've ever seen one.* The TV is massive. The couch is leather. The beautiful, handmade wooden shelf is empty.

It seems like such a shame. The longer I sit, the more I notice. Without giving it another thought, I'm on my feet. I slip out the front door and pluck a patch of green flowers surviving in the snow. I open the cupboard, fill a beer stein with water, and put them inside. I take a blanket wadded on the ottoman and drape it across the couch for good measure.

"Looks better already," I say to myself.

When I pop into the shop to check on Preston, I find that he and Hunter are hard at work. Hunter tells me they're putting a few final touches on the project, so I make my way back inside.

I poke around in the cabinet, and by some miracle, I find enough ingredients to make some simple sugar cookies, Preston's favorite. I use a serving spoon and an old metal bowl. It doesn't take long to beat everything together and form them into balls. Before I know it, they're ready to pop into the oven.

While they cook, I make my way over to his bookcases and run my finger along the spines. I recognize some titles, but many of them are a complete mystery.

"So are you my brother's fling, then? 'Bout time he got one," a voice says from behind me.

I jump. Daniel stands in the doorway, banging his boots off and slipping them off his feet. He's leaner than Hunter but has a similar face and stance.

"No," I say honestly, albeit a bit forcefully. "He's teaching my son some things."

"Are those cookies?" He raises an eyebrow toward the oven. "Hunter never bakes."

"Really? He had all the ingredients."

Daniel shrugs, walking into the kitchen area and sitting on one of the stools. "Beats me. I'm Danny, by the way."

"Everly," I say with a small smile. I move to the kitchen and start mixing up a batch of icing. "So... you're Hunter's brother."

He smirks. "And you're *not* his girlfriend."

Instead of answering, I add another cup of sugar to the bowl. I can't find food coloring in any of the cupboards, so the icing stays an off-white tone.

"And you've got a son, eh? Where's the father?" The charm in the Richards family did not get evenly distributed.

"Excuse me? I'm a single parent if you must know."

"That's too bad." Danny cracks his knuckles. "Kids need both parents, is all. Lucky he's got you, though."

From how he says it, I assume Hunter and Danny are in the same situation as Preston, with only one parent. However, I don't pry. If Hunter wants me to know, he can tell me himself.

"Where were you yesterday when I came? Preston didn't mention you."

He purses his lips and thinks for a moment. "I was... around. But if I'd known we had company, especially company that looks like you, I'd have come in Sunday best."

It's then I realize how opposite the two brothers are. I don't say anything and simply pull the cookies from the oven.

They still need time to cool before I start dipping them in icing.

“You’re too good for this place, you know,” he tells me, reaching for the tray. I smack his hand away. “Ooh, feisty. I like that.”

I swallow hard. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?* I’ve brought my son to some cabin with a man, or as it turns out, *men* whom I don’t know. My throat runs dry.

“I thought I told you to stay away, Daniel,” Hunter’s voice booms from over my head.

When I turn, Hunter stands in the doorway, knocking off his boots like his brother did earlier. He holds the door open, and Preston rushes inside. His face is pink from the cold, but he jumps up and down excitedly.

“I was getting to know Everly here,” Danny says, gesturing toward me. “She tells me you two aren’t together.”

Hunter lets out a sound between a sigh and a grunt before walking past me and to the sink. He washes the dust off his hands and flicks them dry but then makes room for Preston next to him. “She’s right.”

“She is?” Preston asks, looking up at Hunter and then at me. “You don’t want to date him?”

Heat flushes my face, and I’m sure I’m as red as a tomato. “I didn’t say *that*—”

“Don’t wait around for him,” Danny advises, shooting a smirk in my direction. “You can do *so* much better. Like maybe, someone younger.” He lets out a wry chuckle.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Hunter says, walking over to his brother.

Daniel holds up his hands in defeat and walks out of the door with a smirk.

Hunter closes it behind him. “Sorry about him. He doesn’t have a filter. He’s got a cabin on the other side of our property.”

“Right. That’s okay,” I tell him. “I was thinking it might be time for Preston and me to get out of your hair anyway.”

Hunter ignores this last part and walks toward the oven, mouth gaping. “You made cookies?” He steps back and looks around, surveying the living room since there are no walls dividing the two rooms. “You also decorated the house.” He chuckles.

Immediately I’m hit with guilt. I’m bad at this whole dating thing. “Yeah... I hope it’s alright. I can change it back if you’d like.”

He shakes his head, and a grin spreads over his face. “No, I love it.”

He holds my gaze for a few moments longer than necessary, and my cheeks burn up again. I turn away.

For the next twenty minutes, Preston gushes about everything he and Hunter made together. I love seeing his enthusiasm. When Hunter offers to make dinner for us, I insist on heading down the hill for the day.

Hunter takes it in stride, walking us to my car. Preston clambers into the backseat amidst protests, and I close the door behind him.

When Hunter walks around the car and puts a hand on my door handle, he hesitates. “How would you like to come to dinner tomorrow?”

I jolt, looking at him startled. “Are you asking me...?”

“On a date, yes. For the second time, if you’re counting. I didn’t like the sound of us not being an item when Dan asked, and I want to change that.”

My heart flutters in my chest. Hunter is too good to be true. *Am I ready to date? Do I want to open this door? Can I depend on Hunter? Will he be a better man than Spence was? Can I trust my judgment?* There’s so much at stake here. It isn’t just me. I’m making decisions for Preston too. When I look into Hunter’s eyes, he’s staring at me, and it drowns out all my worries.

“Say yes.” Hunter inches closer.

My heart beats out of my chest. “Yes.”

Chapter Four Hunter

There's still half an hour before Everly arrives, and I'm quaking. I've never been so jittery before, and the knowledge that I'm nervous only makes me *more* nervous.

It's just a date.

But no matter how many times I think it, I know it's so much more. I've fallen hard for Everly and her boy. Now I'm having a hard time imagining our lives any other way. Preston's a kind and chatty kid with so much love to give. He reminds me of myself when I was younger. And Everly, well, what's not to love? She's gorgeous, and everything she touches turns to gold.

I pace my house until she finally walks up the driveway, clad in a knee-length black coat and tall boots. Her hands are shoved into her pockets, and her mouth is turned up in a lazy smile.

I open the door when I see her coming up the porch. "Hey. Was your drive okay?"

She nods and enters. Inside the cabin is exactly how she left it, from the stein of flowers to the platter of cookies on the island table. The only thing I've done is clean and light some candles throughout the rooms. I had to get them out of my emergency supply storage, but I thought they'd be a nice touch.

"I'm making pasta. I hope that's alright." I scramble to usher her inside and take off her coat.

"I love pasta."

I exhale, releasing some of the tension I've been holding. "Good. I made the dough myself from scratch."

Her eyes light up. "I didn't know you could cook."

I rub the back of my neck and lift the pot to the sauce I'm making. I stir it with the wooden spoon before turning up the burner and covering it again. "My father taught me. His mother was Italian, so he was quite the chef."

“Tell me more about your family,” she requests, sitting down on the stool and placing her chin in her hands.

“Well, you’ve met Danny. Our mom passed away when we were little after Danny’s birth, so it was just our father and us growing up. He worked long hours, so Danny and I spent a lot of time alone. Danny’s had a bit of a rough go. Spent some time in jail for theft, you know, things kids do when they’re trying to fill a gap.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “That must have been hard on the two of you.”

I shrug. “I guess. Danny always took it much harder than me, hence the criminal record.” I inhale deeply and confess, “I always felt bad. I was responsible, but I led him astray.”

Everly reaches across the counter and puts her hand on my forearm. Heat sears through me at her touch, and I come alive. “You didn’t lead him astray. You did your best. Sometimes it’s all we can do.”

“He gets pretty reclusive sometimes. I worry about him.”

“Ha, that’s something coming from you. Some people might think you spend a lot of time on your own too. I’ve lived in Findlay all my life, and we’ve never met.”

I nod. “I’ve never minded. It’s peaceful up here, but it’s better now you’re here.” My words make her face flush a deep crimson that crawls down her neck. I wonder where it stops. “You know what we’re missing? Wine.”

I rummage through the cupboard before I find the bottle I’m looking for. I take out a few glasses and wash them in the sink to remove any accumulated dust over the years.

A half-hour later, we’re on our second glass of wine. Everly takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. We talked about our families and her marriage. She tells me about Preston’s early years, and an overwhelming sadness hits me that I wasn’t there to experience any of it.

From there, we’re on a roll. The conversation flows, and I can’t tear my eyes away from her. We’ve talked about our fears. We’ve talked about each other. I thank her for trusting

me to have a relationship with her son. She tells me I better not break his heart. Everly can't see it now, but she has nothing to worry about. I will never let her down. I will come through for her and Preston for as long as she lets me.

It turns out she's also a good painter, which explains the level of detail in the cookies with icing or other designs. I tell her how I like to read anything I can get my hands on, which she chuckles over and tells me I'd like anything that comes from a tree. She's not wrong.

The fireplace crackles and sputters in the background when we sit down to eat, casting a relaxed glow over everything. The dimmed lights overhead add to the atmosphere.

Everly twirls the pasta around her fork and puts it into her mouth. As soon as she starts to chew, her eyes close. "Hunter, this is *good*," she tells me, gesturing toward the plate with her fork.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's honestly the best pasta I've ever had, hands down. What's your secret?"

My eyes narrow playfully. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?"

She goes on, "Oooh, a man of mystery. I like it. I'm thinking it's sage, no extra basil. Am I right? I know I am..." She rambles on, and I can't take my eyes off her.

I spend every night here at this table by myself. I've always felt fine. But now, nothing will compare to tonight. I realize that my house is suddenly a home with Everly in it. When she stops talking, I lean in close.

"*You* amaze me," I whisper in response. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Everything about you. From your talent and passion to how you've put your whole self into raising a magnificent little boy. Everything you do puts me in awe."

She shrugs off my compliment and digs into her dinner. That cute little blush finds its way to her features, and she

shakes her head slightly.

By the end, after dessert, neither of us can bear to end the date. So we cuddle up on the couch, and I flick on the television. After some brief deliberation, we end up watching a classic Christmas movie we've seen hundreds of times.

"It's not Christmastime without it," she says, shoving some popcorn into her mouth. She's curled up into my side with my arm draped over her. "I mean, seriously!"

But I'm not paying attention to the movie. I'm watching her instead. I notice the way her body curls onto the couch. The way her mouthwatering curves look wrapped up in my thin blanket.

Eventually, she catches my stare. "What?"

"You're so beautiful," I tell her. I don't understand how any man could leave. She's perfect; the perfect mom, the perfect *her*.

Everly smiles. Then she leans close to me, puts her hand on my jaw, and plants a kiss on my lips.

Her mouth is soft against mine, and heat spreads over my entire body. I never want this feeling to end. Eventually, she pulls away. She stares into my eyes intently, questioning. But I can't think. All I know is she was meant to be mine.

Chapter Five Everly

Kissing Hunter is a rush of emotion, and I can't help but giggle. He makes me feel like a teenager in love. He's electric. But my laughter quickly subsides as he stares into my eyes.

In an instant, he's pulled me on top of him. My legs straddle his lap. I feel him growing hard beneath me. The heat radiating from his body this close to mine is surreal. I've never felt anything like it, and I'm lost in the moment.

I lean in toward him. I can't stop myself as I press my lips to his. I don't just want to kiss Hunter, I need to be with him. His tongue eagerly explores every corner of my mouth. His touch is fierce and intense. His lips blaze against mine and make my body ache in ways I'd all but forgotten. I savor every second.

He tangles his hands in my hair as he pulls my face closer to his. I grind against him, and the bulge under his jeans grows more prominent. Something in him seems to give way. Hunter sits up and tugs my shirt over my head and then my bra. The rest of our clothes aren't far behind. He lays me on my back on his leather couch and climbs up my body. Hunter's mouth folds over a nipple and he suckles as my bud springs to life. His every movement feels like fire coursing through me, and still, I beg for more.

His hand finds its way between my legs, and I'm already drenched. He works me open, and my breath catches in my throat. Hunter knows exactly what he's doing, and I squirm beneath the weight of his body.

My head falls backward, and I moan into the cabin. He works on me until I'm bucking against his hand and begging him to slide inside me.

"Shhh, sweetheart. We have all night, and I'm going to take care of you."

He puts a heavy hand on the inside of my thigh, and I let my legs fall all the way open for him. Hunter slides a finger

across my slit, sending tingles whipping across me. He traces circles on my swollen nub until my body trembles. He pulls the orgasm out of me, and I ride a wave of release like I've never experienced.

My legs clench. My stomach tightens, and I let go. Rather, Hunter pushes me over the edge. I spasm, clenching around his fingers. The sensation forces his name through my clenched teeth. He presses his mouth to mine, claiming every whimper and sigh as he should because they belong to him.

When I finally still, I pant and catch my breath. Then I set my sights on him all over again. I rock my hips up and kiss Hunter. I take my time, exploring his neck all the way up to his earlobe.

His tip knocks against my opening, wet, pulsating, and hungry for me. My body vibrates with anticipation, shuddering with delight. When he finally presses his hips down onto me, I take him all the way in.

He's huge, but my body stretches to accommodate his girth, and he fills me. The pain is pure, white-hot bliss as Hunter worships every inch of me. Sensation washes over me until an orchestra of pleasure rings through every nerve ending in my body.

When he rocks into me, it's slow and gentle. He keeps his lips on mine, our tongues dancing. He kisses me in a way that leaves me breathless. All the pain gives way to a rush of pleasure. Our bodies meld together in a harmony so sweet that I never want it to end.

As he pushes me closer to the edge, I break off our kiss to moan his name into the night. He grunts as he slams into me, filling me with warmth. We stay here for what feels like a lifetime. Hunter loving me, and me giving in to him. Time stands still, and I realize I feel like a woman for the first time in a long time.

Every muscle in his body tightens, and Hunter grasps handfuls of my hair. I clench along his length as he thrusts into me one last time. I let go again, and this time, he comes with

me. I ride Hunter as he fills me, completely lost in the moment.

When it's over, we lie there for what feels like hours. I've never felt so cherished, so taken care of in all my life. I never want this night to end.



Hunter has me two more times as the sun comes up. Then I reluctantly make my way down the mountain in the early hours of the morning. By the time I pick up Preston from my brother Emmett and make my way to the bazaar, I'm still reeling from the after-effects from the night before.

Now Preston's sitting in the corner, his book propped up on his lap. When I asked about it earlier, he told me that since Hunter likes books, he does too. It melted my heart. But I still have a job to do. I walk around the food truck, frantically trying to get everything ready before I open. However, I don't feel quite as stressed as usual.

Between batches of chocolate chip cookies, I take out my phone and text Hunter quickly, asking him when he's coming to the bazaar. I wait a few minutes for his reply, but when it doesn't come, I shove it into my pocket after ensuring it's on vibrate. Sometimes the reception at his place isn't the best, but I know I can count on him.

I hum to myself and realize I'm the happiest I've been in a long, long time.

Chapter Six Hunter

“Sorry, kids. I’m taking a break. You can come back later if you’d like to finish your artwork and take them home,” I say, glancing around at all the young faces surrounding the booth. Some of the children groan, but most of them nod with understanding.

“You’re so good with children,” a mom says, running her hand down my arm. “Do you have kids of your own?”

I move away from her touch and don’t have to think hard about the answer. Perhaps it’s a bold claim, but I feel fairly confident in saying, “Yes, I have a boy.” My chest swells with pride.

“Are you single?”

“No,” I tell her more harshly than I intended. “I’m not.”

“Oh.” She backs up a few steps, and I don’t give her a second glance before leaving my booth and disappearing into the crowd.

It’s not hard to navigate all the craft booths and find Everly. Her baking truck smells divine, and nearly everyone in the vicinity has lined up for some of her cookies. Yet still, she makes time to stop and chat with each person individually. Her smile is contagious, and I find myself grinning.

I queue up behind a young couple holding hands as they whisper to each other. When I finally reach the front, Everly doesn’t recognize me right away; her brain is on autopilot.

“What can I—oh, Hunter! How’s business so far today?” Her smile lights up her entire face, and a blush creeps onto her cheekbones.

“Pretty good. Not as crazy as this, though.” I gesture to the line. “You’re popular!”

She chuckles. “Yeah, it is pretty insane. I think it’s my new macaron recipe. You didn’t have to line up, though—you could have come straight to the front.”

“That takes all the fun out of it,” I tell her, pulling out my wallet. “I’ll take some of those famed macarons if you have any to spare.”

We go through the transaction, her protesting and me insisting on paying. In the end, she hands me a bag full of raspberry macarons, and I give her a hefty tip.

“When’s your break?” I ask, stuffing my face with the carefully balanced sweet-yet-tart dessert.

She leans back to check the clock inside. “I’m thinking in about an hour and a half. Why?” I wiggle my eyes suggestively, and her blush deepens. “Hunter!”

I laugh. It feels good to tease her and watch her mouth turn up into a reluctant smile. “Get your head out of the gutter! I was going to say we could go for a walk and check out some of the other booths. What do you say?”

She pretends to think about it but eventually concedes. “I’d love to.”

“Great. Is Preston around?”

“Yeah, he’s hiding out back here. Preston, Hunter is here. Go say hi.”

Not long after, the small boy rushes out to greet me. He flings his arms around my waist, and I pat him on the back. I step out of line and allow the next customer to go to the window.

I kneel so we’re on the same level. “I’ll have to clear it with the boss lady first, but would you want to come help me at my stand next weekend? I’ll give you a commission for everything you sell. That way, you won’t have to hang out in the cookie booth not eating cookies.”

His eyes widen, and a grin spreads across his face. “I’d love to help!” Then, his eyes narrow in confusion. “What’s a commission?”

I think for a moment. I’ve never had to explain it before, and I don’t want to confuse him more than necessary. “Every piece you manage to sell, I’ll give you money from what it’s

worth. So, say you sell something for fifty dollars, I'll give you five. Deal?"

He nods. His face drops to seriousness, and he sticks out his arm while puffing out his chest. I stand and shake his hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Hunter," he says, lowering his voice a few octaves. I see his mouth twitch while he fights to keep himself neutral. "I'll see you next weekend, then?"

I fight to keep my own face neutral. "Affirmative, partner. I'll see you then."

With that, Preston steps into the food truck. From the open window where Everly currently works, I hear Preston's squeal of delight as he tells his mother about the entire encounter. I smile at the kid's happiness.

And maybe, just *maybe*, I smile because of my pure delirium.

Chapter Seven Everly

By the time the weekend rolls back around, I can hardly wait to see Hunter. We're taking things slow, giving each other space to maintain our lives. But that doesn't mean I haven't thought about him every minute since I last saw him.

"*Mom*, drive faster!" Preston complains for the fifth time this morning. He can hardly sit still, wiggling excitedly. Usually, it's me dragging him out of the house on the mornings of the bazaar, but at three o'clock, he came bursting into my bedroom, a cup of coffee in his hands. He then pulled me out of bed before I could take a sip.

"I can only go as fast as the speed limit. Don't worry. We'll be there soon."

I look in my rearview mirror and see he's crossing his arms and scouting out the window, craning his neck to survey the horizon.

It's the last day of the bazaar until a year from now. Hunter promised my son he could help at the woodworking booth, and Preston hasn't forgotten. It's all he's talked about this week, and it feels good to see him happy.

My heart soars at the prospect of Preston having the father figure he has always deserved. Someone who he can depend on and won't leave at the first sign of struggle. My brother Emmett has stepped in where he can, but it's an unfair burden to put on someone busy building his career in social media. Besides, Hunter is stable, confident, and firmly rooted. He's the kind of man I hope Preston grows up to be.

When we finally pull into the parking area, Preston nearly jumps out of the vehicle before I can put it in park. "I'm going to go check if he needs help setting up!" he calls back to me with a wave over his shoulder.

"Be careful!" I tell him, but he's already disappeared into the crowd.

I make my way to the front gates and sign in as a vendor. Since my food truck is already inside and set up, I don't have

much on me except an extra bag of flour and my purse.

I thank the man at the desk and proceed into the main area. I head over to Jingled, pull out the key to unlock the door, and climb in. I start up the ovens to get them up to temperature and make the first batch of cookies.

I'm not expecting Preston to come back for some time, so when I hear the front door open, I nearly jump out of my skin.

My son enters, a grim look on his face. "He's not there."

"Oh, well, there's still time," I assure him. "The cutoff for entry isn't for another two hours yet. He might be running behind."

Preston nods, but I can tell he's not convinced. I've seen this face before. It's the look he gives me every time Spence lets him down. My adrenaline picks up a bit out of protectiveness for my boy, but it's for nothing. I know Hunter will be here. My job is to trust my decision and distract Preston.

"Do you want to play on my phone? I downloaded a few new games for you to try."

He slumps into a chair. "No thanks."

I wash my hands in the sink, dry them, and kneel to face him. "Really? It looks pretty fun."

He nods, still not looking me in the eye. "Yeah, that's fine. But I hope he hurries up. I was going to make so much money today."

"You know what? Things are ready here. How about I take you out to look at some other booths? You can show me around everywhere you've been so far."

His face lights up. I pull out my phone and go through my contacts until I find Hunter. I send him a few mildly threatening text messages to get himself over here as soon as possible before sliding it back into my pocket.

"Done," Preston says, jumping down and pushing the stool back with his boots. "Now, you *have* to see what Mrs.

Wiley has done with her stand. It's amazing! Anyways, there's also this one I think you'll like..."

Preston and I do two full laps around the bazaar in an hour. When we finally make it to the woodworking booth, it's still abandoned. The booth is empty, and there's no sign of Hunter. I quickly lead my son away with the promise he can buy something nice for himself.

"Hello, Mr. Wiley," Preston waves to the old man sitting at a booth with his wife. We cross the aisle near the old couple and their jewelry stand.

"Hey, it's my main man."

I turn my eyes to the racks of earrings and necklaces that his wife, Phelma, is displaying.

"I'd like to know if you've seen Hunter Richards around," Preston says.

Mr. Wiley strokes the stubble on his chin. "Richards... Richards... Is he that woodworker?" Preston nods. "I'm afraid he only comes one weekend during December. Though I was very surprised to see him twice, I doubt you'll see him again until next year."

Preston shakes a little, but I don't step in. I talk politely with Phelma, but my ear is tuned to Preston's conversation.

"He told me he'd be back this weekend. I was supposed to help him with his booth." Preston's voice turns down at the end.

Mr. Wiley's brows shoot up. "You were? Sounds like you're close with him." He sends a look in my direction at this, and I get Phelma to wrap up a dainty blue necklace for myself. I try to pay her the amount listed on the tag, but she refuses. Eventually, we settle on half.

"I guess we're close," Preston agrees. "He and mom went on a date last week."

"Alright, Preston, time to go!" I say loudly, grabbing my son by the shoulders and leading him away.

“What? You did,” he says, looking up at me when we’re out of earshot.

“I know,” I say with a chuckle. “But Mr. Wiley doesn’t need to know that.”

His eyes widen, and he nods, finally understanding. “I get it. Sorry, mom.”

“No, it’s quite alright.” I pat him on the shoulder. “You’re just an incredibly honest kid.”

On our walk back to Jingled, I check my phone. No response from Hunter. My blood starts to boil.



The day winds on, and by the afternoon, Preston is slumped into a chair with a scowl plastered on his face. Meanwhile, I’m busier than ever. The line doesn’t stop, but neither does my anger toward Hunter. I check my phone between customers, and when I don’t see a reply from Hunter, my chest tightens a little more.

How dare he break a promise to my son? How dare I bring another man into Preston’s life who will only let him down? Will my brother be the only man I can truly depend on all my life? Was it the sex? Hunter got what he wanted from me, and now he’s ghosted me? Am I a terrible picker of people?

Chapter Eight Hunter

When I pull into the bazaar parking lot, it's an hour from being over. I make my way around the event, nodding politely to everyone who stops to say hello. But my mind isn't on any of them. Only two people matter to me right now. All I can think about is finding Everly and Preston

I spot Everly's food truck, and based on the queue, she's busy. Instead of lining up, I skip ahead and walk right up to the window.

"Wait your turn," a man says, but I ignore him.

Everly's head pops out the window, and her eyes narrow when she sees me. "Where have you been?"

"I'm sorry," I pant. "Did you get any of my texts?"

"No, I've been checking all day." She thrusts her hand out the window and hands a woman her change. "I didn't get anything. Now go away before Preston sees you."

"If you'll let me explain—"

"I'm working, and there's nothing to explain," she tells me, her jaw clenched.

I know I've messed up. I turn to face the line. "Ladies and gentlemen, Jingled is sold out. Please leave the money in the jar." I reach inside the window and slide out a tray of cookies.

"What the hell? You can't do that," Everly protests, but the crowd is already moving in a frenzy.

The first tray is empty in a matter of seconds, and her tip jar is overflowing. She reluctantly passes me the remaining trays one by one until she really is sold out.

With that out of the way, I attempt to reach in and take her hand. Everly wants none of it and jerks away from me. Her face is drowning in sorrow and disappointment. I'm devastated to know I'm the man who put her in this position.

“What’s going on?” Preston’s small voice asks from inside the truck.

“Hey, buddy!” I call out. “Come out so we can talk, okay?”

“No,” he says, and I look up to Everly.

She shrugs. “He makes his own decisions. If he doesn’t want to see you, he doesn’t have to, and I don’t blame him. Do you know how excited he’s been all week? Do you know he told all his friends he wants to be a woodworker like you? It’s a lot of pressure for something new. I’m a package deal, but I thought you understood that when you signed up for me, you got my son too. And when you lose one of us, you lose us both.” There’s no bite in her words, only sadness.

“Please let me explain before you make up your mind?”

Everly takes a deep breath, then disappears from view. It doesn’t take long before she opens the door to the truck, stepping down and closing it behind herself. “You can talk to me. You’ve already hurt Preston enough. We don’t need you, Hunter.”

“That was *not* my intention. I sent you a ton of messages. You didn’t get any of them?”

She crosses her arms but doesn’t say anything. “That’s what you’re going with?”

“I may be a lot of things, but I’m not a liar. I sent them. The regular route got snowed in, and I couldn’t make it on time. It took me hours to dig out and come around the backside of the mountain. I’m sorry, Everly. I’ll make it up to him, I swear.”

“He *trusted* you,” she says as calmly as she can, though I can tell she’s fuming. “He trusted you, and you let him down.”

“Please, give me a second chance. It was out of my hands, I swear.” I spread my arms and gesture to myself. “Besides, I’m here *now*, aren’t I? When you didn’t respond, I knew I had to get here somehow. Doesn’t that count for something?”

She snorts and looks away, but based on the loosening tension in her shoulders, I can tell I'm getting through her resolve. I test this by placing my hand on the door handle, and she doesn't say anything.

I open it. "Preston? Please talk to me, buddy. I'm sorry I couldn't make it on time."

"I heard," he says, sniffing. "You got snowed in."

"You could hear us?" Everly asks, shaking her head.

"No." He comes around the corner, holding his mom's phone. "I figured out why we didn't get your texts. The other day I must have accidentally put it into airplane mode. I'm sorry, mom." He looks over my shoulder when he says the last part, and I turn to see Everly enter the truck and close the door behind herself.

He rushes forward and envelops his mom in a hug. When he pulls away, he hands her the device. She taps on it for a few moments, and I watch my messages flood the screen as they come through.

Hey, apologize to Preston for me. I'll be late to the bazaar... got snowed in and have to take the long way down the mountain.

The next message comes through. *I'm sorry again. I swear I'll make it up to you. On my way now.*

Another. *Look, I don't know if you're getting my messages, but know I'm not just sorry to Preston. I'm sorry to you. I swear you can depend on me. Got half a dozen cars stuck in the road ahead of me, but I'm pulling them out one by one, and then I'll be back on my way.*

More messages come through. Dozens float across the screen, and I rub the back of my neck. "Sorry for the spam. I didn't know if you were getting any of them. I was sort of desperate."

She waves me off, and I continue to read over her shoulder. I can't see her face, but I can tell she's smiling.

How can a few feet of frozen water cause so much havoc? Then, I love you, Everly Tiding. You and your family mean everything to me. Don't think this changes that fact in the slightest. I'll make it up to both of you. I'm not going anywhere.

Her eyes read the same message several times before finally looking at me. "You love me?"

I nod. "With everything I have. You don't have to say it back, but I wanted you to know."

She flings her arms around my neck and plants her mouth on mine. This startles me for a moment, but then I kiss her back and pull her, so our bodies are flush.

"Ew, don't kiss!" Preston complains.

Everly flings out a hand to cover his eyes. I look down at her, and I'm sure bliss is written plainly over my face.

"I love you too," she tells me.

Keeping her hand over Preston's eyes, she kisses me again.

Epilogue, Hunter

One Year Later

“Careful, buddy,” I say, flinging my arm out in front of Preston. Moments later, a truck drives by, hauling a trailer. “You have to make it *to* the bazaar in order to help me sell stuff.”

He smiles sheepishly. “Sorry, Dad. Got a little carried away.”

It’s been a year since I found my family and six months since Preston started calling me his father. My heart leaps every time. It started unprompted. One day, he came home from school and said they were doing a Father’s Day ceremony and wanted me to come. I obliged, and since then, he hasn’t referred to me as “Hunter” once.

“Do you know where your mom wanted to set up?” I ask, scanning the crowd. Everly came early to organize and pick out the best spots while I took Preston out for breakfast and picked up her present from my shop. She isn’t aware of the latter. “Can you see her?”

He shakes his head, holding the massive box awkwardly in his arms. He insisted on carrying it himself. “But if I had a phone, I could text her...”

That’s his thing right now, asking for a phone. “I think your mom was pretty clear you have to wait until you’re older.”

His shoulders slump forward. “But I’m eleven now. That’s plenty old enough to have a phone.”

“No promises, but I’ll talk to your mom about it again—ah, there she is!” I point, and Preston follows my finger to the woman currently setting up my booth beside her famous truck. She smooths out the tablecloth and adjusts some carvings, ensuring they’re perfectly aligned for people to view.

“Mom!” Preston yells. He starts to run forward but stops and looks both ways. When he’s certain the way is clear, he continues to run over with the large present in his arms.

I hope she likes it. It was Preston’s idea, and we’ve been working on it for three weeks. Brilliant, that kid is. He puts the box on the table and wraps his arms around her. In the past year, he’s grown like a bean and now comes up to her chin.

“What’s this?” Everly asks, and I wrap an arm around her waist. I kiss her, then look at Preston expectantly.

“Well...” he begins shyly, toeing at the dirt. “Dad and I thought we could do something nice for you on the one-year anniversary of our meeting.”

He pushes the box forward, and Everly looks between us, tears in her eyes. “You guys didn’t have to do this!”

“We wanted to,” I say. “Open it.”

She tears into the paper and opens the box. When she peers in, she gasps. Reaching her hand inside, she pulls out a flawless wooden tier tray. It has wood-burned carvings along the edges and is sealed in a dark-colored food-safe paint with a resin finish. Preston did most of the work under my instruction and is turning into a fine young woodworker. After all, he did spend the entire summer working for me at the shop.

“For displaying your cookies and baking,” Preston says. “Do you like it?”

“I love it!” she says, wiping her eyes. She pulls Preston and me into a hug. “Thank you.”

Everly gets to work plating cookies and brownies onto the various tiers, and Preston pulls out some more items to display at our booth.

I can’t believe I’ve found such a beautiful family.

Epilogue, Everly

Two Years Later

The log cabin has become exceptionally more decorated since Preston and I moved in. Hunter took an entire summer to renovate and add two bedrooms, one for Preston and another for the guests. By guests, I mean my sister, Edel, and my brother, Emmett. Even my mother has, on occasion, graced us with her presence.

Danny has made a habit of popping by and interacting with us as a family. He says we've created the home he's always wanted. We're a perfectly imperfect family, and I can't get enough of this life we've built together.

I couldn't be happier. Hunter has been the perfect father, and it elates me to know my son finally has someone to depend on, someone to look up to and talk to.

"I'm not wearing that," Preston says, pointing to the shirt I've laid on his bed.

"Please?" I look up at him with wide, pleading eyes.

Now twelve, Preston's a whole three inches taller than me but still hasn't caught up to Hunter. He groans. "No, don't try to guilt me. I can't wear that. It's embarrassing!"

I stare at him, pleading. "Think of how cute it would be."

He glares but relents and snatches the shirt off the bed. "Fine. But no pictures, and we're not going out anywhere."

"Deal!" His eyes narrow further, and I can tell he's skeptical. I sigh, pulling out my phone and handing it to him. "How can I take pictures if you have my phone?" I ask, sticking out my tongue.

Not long after Preston's changed into the shirt, I hear the familiar sound of the front door opening. He and I share a look, and I give him a curt nod. It's time to shine.

Hunter makes his way into the kitchen, opening and rummaging through the fridge. "Do we have anything that's

sugar content isn't higher than half?" he asks, pushing aside what I know to be a few layers of cake cooling before I can ice it.

I glance at Preston and jerk my head toward where Hunter is bent over. He sighs but relents and walks over to the kitchen. He sits at the island counter, and I'm thrilled to note that most of the shirt is visible due to his height.

"Hey, Dad," Preston says a bit too casually. "Do we have any waffles?"

"Ask your mother," he says without looking up.

Preston looks at me, and I wave my hands frantically, egging him on.

"But you make them *so* much better."

Hunter sighs and closes the fridge, standing straight to look at our son. He opens his mouth to say something, but his eyes snag on the shirt. "What are you wearing?"

Preston straightens, but Hunter looks over at me, standing in the corner of the room. "You're—"

I nod, biting my bottom lip. "I'm pregnant."

He runs over to me, pulling me in and planting his mouth on mine. My arms tighten around him, and I never want to let go.

When he pulls away, there are tears in his eyes. "We're having a baby?"

"You're already such a great dad to Preston. This wasn't planned, but... I'm happy. Are you happy?"

"Beyond," he says and kisses me again.

Preston clears his throat, still sitting at the island. "Can I take off this stupid 'I'm a big brother' shirt now?"



Dear reader. Want to come to Everly and Hunter's New Year's Eve wedding? You are officially invited. Read all about it in [Toasted](#), available 12/15. In the meantime, laugh out loud with the grumpiest Tiding sibling, Edel, in [Fudge Off](#). Happy holidays and happy reading! Xoxo, Elsie



Toasted, Chapter One Emmett

As far as weddings go, this is one hell of a party. It sets the perfect tone for New Years Eve. Hunter sure has had an effect on my sister, Everly. It's not stuffy, and there's a healthy balance of people dancing and jumping in the middle of the floor, and those that like to hang out near the outer edges, chatting and snacking on the food laid out on the tables.

I'm part of the latter group, which isn't unusual, especially these days. Though I suppose I'm not really here as a guest. I flip the chicken breast skewers on the grill top, hearing the satisfying sizzle as the moisture hits the element. I smile at my videographer, Derrick, who is busy focusing the camera down at my hands.

But as my eyes flick across the room, there's only one thing on my mind. And surprisingly, it isn't just how much my followers are going to love this footage. Instead my thoughts are on Selena, who seems to be the only person in Findlay who isn't here.

I pick up my cup half-filled with some sort of cocktail and raise it to my lips, sipping slowly on the carbonated, fruity alcohol without taking my eyes off the crowd. Nope. She's definitely not here. I'd know if she was here, I'd sense it.

I feel a hand on my arm, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I turn to see Everly, my older sister, staring up at me with a huge grin on her face. Over the music she shouts, "what do you think?"

"It's great," I mouth in response.

And it is. I've never seen the farm house so glamorous. Crystals hang from the ceiling, and little lights dance across the walls. Everything seems to either have a gold or silver hue to it, apart from the brown rustic furniture. Usually I'm not incredibly picky about the space I'm partying in, but even I can appreciate great decorating.

"I'm just so glad you could make it in time," she tells me, gripping my arm harder. "My wedding wouldn't be the

same without my little brother.”

I just smile in response. I’m back in my hometown for just three months, then I’ll be off again. My new tour is already in-the-works, as I’m planning on driving across the country while living out of a van. Seeing the sights, touring the country, and generally living a free and care-free life all to the delight of my more than a million subscribers.

I’m lucky, right? I mean, what else could a guy want?

I bite my tongue from asking about Selena. Everly stands on her toes to peck my cheek, then waves to Derrick and steps away to mingle with her guests. The train of her white dress billows around herself as she narrowly escapes bumping into a table.

I use my towel to dab at the sweat beading at my brow, and turn down the heat on the grill. The skewers are nearly finished and ready to be added to the pile. I can barely keep my eyes on the task, however, as I keep looking up and around, searching for one of the many reasons I decided to come back for a while.

“Can we get some more close-ups?” Derrick shouts, suddenly appearing by my side. He’s a hippie sort of dude with long blonde hair that is rarely tied back and out of his face. We might have looked alike, however I always try to keep my hair as short as possible without looking like I’ve joined the military. After all, it’s more sanitary for cooking.

“Yeah,” I say, and try to return to the task at hand. I pause briefly to set down my tongs and push up my gray sleeves that had started to fall down my arms. I wipe my hands on the silver apron tied around my waist, then grab the tongs once again.

As slow as I can, I move the skewers from the grill and onto a plate. Derrick follows every movement with his camera, pushing the lens closer and closer to get the perfect shot.

“Oh. My. God,” I hear someone say over the music. “You really are Emmett Tiding! I thought I recognized you during the ceremony.”

I glance up, my eyes wide. A girl, perhaps in her twenties, comes over and braces one hand against the wall while batting her long, dark eyelashes. I don't recognize her, but even people in my hometown tend to be star struck from time to time. She tucks a few strands of black hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, sure am." I flash her a smile.

"My friends told me you used to live in this town, but I didn't believe them. That's so crazy. I mean, I follow you on everything!" She's definitely slightly intoxicated and I am definitely not interested. "I thought you lived in Europe now."

I nod. "Yep, that was me. A whole year in Europe was great, but I'm glad to be back on US soil." Even if the tour company had paid me a bucket load of money to do brand endorsement deals with them. "I'm now doing a segment called Grilling on the Farm, so I'll be around small town America for awhile." I gesture to Derrick. "The first video should be up sometime this week."

She nods, furiously. "That sounds like *so* much fun. You know, I'd love to hear more if you're interested." She jerks her head to the side.

"No thanks." I swallow hard. There's only one woman on my mind, and that's Selena. It's been a year since I've seen her last, and our communication has been... strained to say the least.

She shrugs. "Your loss." The girl turns on a dime, sauntering off her hips swinging back and forth.

In another life, I might have gone for it. Despite my terrible track record with girls, I try to put myself out there, just in case the next one could be *the one*. It's just turned out so far that most women I speak to ultimately all want the same thing.

Everyone, perhaps, except Selena. The two of us have been best friends since childhood, having grown up only a few blocks from each other. As we grew older, I soon developed

feelings, and *hard*. Though it wasn't until last year where we finally actually did anything about it.

One hookup later, and suddenly she's being weird over call and text. At first she'd only reply a few times a week, then not at all. There's not much I could do about it from Europe. I'm not sure if it's because of something I did, or if there's something else to it. I've been hoping to figure that out today because she's it for me.

"Are we going to put anything else on?" Derrick asks me, and I realize that I've been standing motionless behind an empty grill.

We probably should, just to be safe but I'm not in the mood. "No," I decide, shutting off the grill. "It's just for the intro, right? We should have plenty to work with. And if not, we can piece together footage from the other videos we have lined up."

"You're right," Derrick says, staring down at the pile of relatively untouched skewers. "It seems like people aren't really hungry at the moment."

I shut off the burners, letting it cool off before I attempt to scrub it clean.

As I look up one last time toward the entrance, I catch something. A head of brown hair moves through the crowd, her back toward me. My heart jumps in my chest, and the whole world seems to slow to a halt. I can't see her face, but I know without a doubt it's her.

When did Selena arrive? How did she slip inside without me noticing?

Finally, she turns in my direction, but doesn't seem to see me. *She has to see me though, right? She must know that I'd come to my sister's wedding.* I'm secluded from everything else, and it's not like I've been tucked in a corner. I debate waving to her, but I pause when I notice something off about her.

She's stunning. She has always taken my breath away and she's still the same Selena, though now her face is slightly

more rounded, and her eyes seem droopy and tired. Even from here, I can see the new stress lines appearing in her forehead. Normally this girl is walking sunshine.

I shrug it off. It's likely a combination of not having seen her in ages and the fact that Selena has always made my head spin. As she stands there, clad in a beautiful gold dress with a black sash around her waist, I can't think of anything except for her.

Selena has always been a mystery I can't seem to crack. Even though I've known her almost all my life, sometimes it feels like we're still complete strangers.

I don't hear what Derrick says to me. My legs start moving, and suddenly I'm heading in the direction of Selena Ryan.

[Read Toasted](#)

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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 after.

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

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