

CHAPTER 5

CAROLINE

“She’s got you doing lights!” Harley calls as she takes out a tray of coffee for a small group of tourists.

“Lights . . . ?”

I lean over the counter, reading the list of stuff Edie left for us to do before she headed home after the breakfast rush.

Next to my name, written in red ink, is *Hang Christmas lights up outside.*

Outside? I grimace and peek out at the steadily falling snow, my hands still just barely warming up from the drive over.

I’d admittedly noticed the lights weren’t out yet, but Edie hasn’t exactly been in the Christmas spirit the past few years. It’s only two weeks out from the big day, and as I gaze around the diner, I can feel the shift from past years inside, too. This place used to be full and merry, abuzz with holiday cheer by early November. Now, at a table by the jukebox, Mrs. Tucker tries not to cry about her stationery store going under.

Now, Barnwich is struggling to hold on to what it once was.

“They’re in the supply closet,” Tom says, sticking his balding head out the serving window. “Top shelf.”

Tom has worked in the kitchen since I was a kid. He’s the only other person Edie trusts with a spatula. He nods toward the front door. “Ladder’s in the back of my truck. The hooks should still be there from last year, so you just gotta . . .”

He does a looping motion with his spatula that means nothing to me.

“*Lights, Edie?*” I mutter as I grab my jacket and pull it back on, then clomp to the supply closet. I throw open the door and climb over mops and brooms and buckets to get to the shelf where a spool of Christmas lights sits on top of an open box filled with decorations covered in a thick layer of dust.

Arden’s favorites. A dinged-up glowing Santa Claus. A blow-up reindeer. A wreath we made in fourth grade.

Edie’s full display hasn’t seen the light of day since Arden left, I realize.

I head outside with the lights, pull my hat on, and crane my neck back to see the hooks Tom mentioned trailing the entire length of the place. I let out a long exhale that sends my breath swirling around me before grabbing the ladder from out of Tom’s beat-up red pickup truck and dragging it to one corner to get started.

“Of *course* I forgot gloves today. . . .”

I climb cautiously up the ladder, nearly slipping off a metal rung. Once I’m sure I won’t face-plant, I stretch to hang the first few feet of lights, but the cord slips off the hook about eight times before finally staying put. Teeth chattering, I slowly but surely make my way back down the ladder, move it, and start all over. I repeat this again and again along the row of windows,

until finally I reach the last two hooks on the opposite side.

I hear a knock on the window and look down to see Harley holding up a steaming mug of hot chocolate, the top overflowing with whipped cream, a tantalizing reward waiting for me at the end of this string of lights. She gives me a thumbs-up and I try to return it, but my hands are too numb to fully commit.

I peer up at the final two hooks and stretch to loop the strand of lights around the first. But when I try for the second, it's *just* out of reach.

"Shit." I *really* don't want to move this ladder yet again. My mind is already on the hot chocolate I'm about to drink.

I scooch toward the edge of the ladder rung and stand on tippy-toes, my arm outstretched as I strain, trying to hook it, and—

Yes!

Wait.

Fuck.

The ladder starts to sway underneath me, and before I can stop it, the whole thing topples to the right, dumping me into a snowdrift left over from when the parking lot was plowed.

I lie there for a few seconds, letting snowflakes collect in my eyelashes as I stare up at the sky and . . . *Arden James?*

"Hi, Caroline," she says, the right corner of her mouth ticking up into a shockingly familiar lopsided smile.

Jesus. How hard did I fall? I must have smacked my head on the way down.

But then she kneels and holds out her hand for me to take, and when I squint at her face, framed by her dark brown hair, the long eyelashes overtop even darker eyes, I realize it's the same

but . . . different. Older. *Prettier*, a voice whispers somewhere deep inside me. I look at her extended hand, note her rings and painted fingernails, but it's the tattoo I've never seen before peeking out underneath the sleeve of her denim jacket that convinces me.

She's . . . here. Actually *here* in Barnwich.

I brush her hand aside as I stand up and fix my hat.

"What . . . *what are you doing here?*"

"Home for Christmas," she says like it's obvious, slipping her hand back into her jacket pocket. "How would you feel about being my girlfriend?"

I push her into the snowdrift.

As Arden flails around in the pile of snow, I dust myself off, then plug the lights in so Edie's bursts forth in a small attempt at holiday cheer. Nodding with satisfaction, I force myself to focus on my hot chocolate reward instead of whatever the hell is going on here.

I return the ladder to Tom's truck and move to head inside, but Arden chases after me.

"Caroline, *listen*," she says, catching the door as I push through it. "Do you know Michael Bianchi? The director?"

Of course I do, my brain answers immediately, but I ignore her and keep walking into the diner. Heads turn and eyes widen at the sight of Arden. The few tourists stop eating to pull out their phones and snap pictures, which only makes me angrier, but she just continues talking.

"Okay, so there's this movie. This role. My *dream* role, right? And I crushed the audition, but he's looking for someone a little less, uh . . ." Her voice trails off as I push through the doors to the back.

“Of an asshole?” I supply as I rip my hat and jacket off. Arden just snorts.

“I was gonna say less messy and controversial, but yes, sure. That works too. Tom! Hey!” Tom comes over to scoop her up into a hug while I pull my hair into a ponytail and tighten my apron. I use the distraction to push back out of the kitchen and away from her.

I’ve barely dropped off waters and menus at a table before she reappears, trailing after me. “He’s looking for someone who’s more ‘genuine’ and ‘homegrown.’ So my agent, Lillian, came up with an idea. Technically a, uh, lie, I guess, but to show the truth that I do come from a small town.”

I grab a bin and start clearing off a table while she stops to say hi to Mrs. Clemente, our second-grade teacher, and signs one of the paper place mats for her granddaughter.

I push the silverware, plates, and napkins into the bin and try to steady myself, but all I can think is *there she is*. Actually *here*. I cast a sideways glance to see her leaning casually against the booth, all charm and warm smiles, her undivided attention on Mrs. Clemente, making her feel like she’s the only person in the entire room. Her hands move as she talks, her nose wrinkling, her head tilting. So much the same that it makes my stomach twist.

As I begin to clean the next table, Arden, still half a foot taller than me, pops up beside me and continues the one-sided conversation like she never left.

“She told Bianchi that I’m from the Christmas capital of Pennsylvania. And that there’s going to be an article in *Cosmopolitan*, my first feature, all about the twelve magical, snowy days I’m spending back home with my, uh . . . my longtime girlfriend, Caroline.”

I drop a handful of mugs back onto the table, my eyebrows shooting through the damn ceiling as my head swings up to look at her.

Arden nods with the gleam of a scheme in her eyes. It's all too familiar in that painfully nostalgic sort of way.

She wants *me*, Caroline Beckett, to pretend to be her supposed longtime girlfriend? If I wasn't so pissed off, I would be rolling on the floor laughing right now.

Even Mrs. Clemente, who still doesn't know how to turn on a computer, let alone go on Instagram, has probably seen a picture of Arden shit-faced and stumbling out of a bar with her newest flavor of the month. Or week. Or hour. Who's going to believe this?

She must see my expression, processing all this bullshitery, because she begins to clarify. "At least, that's what *Bianchi* thinks the truth is. To the public, it'll be a change brought about by my, uh, finally requited love for my childhood best friend."

Finally requited?

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

She leans closer to me, her face inches from mine, and I hate the fact that after all this time she smells the same. Warm and rich and earthy, not like some expensive perfume she bought on Rodeo Drive.

"Listen," she says, her voice softer now as she looks past me at the room of people. Her eyes land on Mrs. Tucker by the jukebox. "Don't do it for me. Do it for the town! Think about what great publicity it could be. A wintry fluff piece like this will have everyone flocking here for their holiday cheer! Even just driving down Main Street, I can tell there's been a bit of a drop-off. Barnwich isn't what it used to be."

I pick up the bin and head back toward the kitchen, my heart hammering angrily in my chest that she's using *this* as a tactic. My love for a town that she abandoned.

Arden follows. "What do you want? I could pay you some—"

That's the final straw. I slam the bin down on the counter and whirl around to face her. "Let me get this straight. You disappear *four* years ago. You don't call me. You don't text me. You don't come home *once*, not even for Christmas like you promised you *always* would. And now you drop back in, thinking you can bribe me into agreeing to be your *fake girlfriend* and telling the whole world about it?" I laugh and shake my head. "Are you out of your mind?"

She doesn't answer. The two of us stare at each other for a long moment before I turn around and grab a rag to angrily wipe down the already-clean counter.

When I stop scrubbing and look up at her, I'm not sure what's more a ghost of themselves, Barnwich or Arden James. She might have the same face, the same smell, the same voice, but I don't even *recognize* the girl across from me.

"And how dare you pretend you care about this town and the people, Arden! Have you even seen Edie yet?"

She looks down for a fraction of a second, which is answer enough. I shake my head, throwing the rag into the dirty water.

"That's what I thought."

Arden opens her mouth like she's going to say something back, but before any words can come out, she seals her lips into a straight line, turns, and makes a beeline for the parking lot, leaving just as suddenly as she arrived.