

The Great Greek Christmas Battle

The crisp, new pages of the novel flipped between Mia's fingers before closing the book softly and setting it beside her. She heard her sorority sister coming up the creaking steps of their old, but well-loved sorority house to grab the basket of laundry that sat in Mia's room beside her wooden dresser. It was a snowy, Sunday evening, the night before the last week of classes began, before Christmas break, and the sunset glowed through her window. Mia stretched her arms above her and swiveled her body to one side of her bed. Sinking her feet into her cotton-lined slippers, she stood and took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet smell of cinnamon coming from her wall plug-in. Lorelei knocked softly on Mia's door and tiptoed in, trying not to bother her. She whispered,

"Hey Mia, does your basket have all the clothes you need washed for this week in it?"

"Yes, everything is in there. Thank you so much for bringing it downstairs," Mia said softly, in her slight southern accent, removing her laptop and sticky note-filled book from her backpack.

"Of course! I know you're trying to get that paper done for class and I was already heading down to the laundry room."

"I can't believe this is our last Greek Christmas Battle. How is it that we are already halfway through our last year of college?" Mia asked.

"I have no idea! But you're already way ahead of all of us. You got yourself a big girl job at a PR firm in Atlanta, that's amazing," Lorelei told Mia, before picking up the laundry basket and bringing it down to the laundry room.

Mia shouted from the top of the stairs, catching Lorelei before she walked into the laundry room,

“Well it’s all thanks to you and your amazing interview skills. You helped this little introvert ace her interview!” Giggling as she turned back into her room to gather her shower supplies and crisply folded, white towel.

Twenty minutes later, Mia stepped out of the shower and brushed her curly, chocolate-brown hair. She slipped into her silky, gingerbread-patterned pajama shorts and an oversized, gray shirt that used to be her dad’s old baseball coach tee shirt. Before starting a ten-page paper, she took a moment to sit in her desk chair, bowed her head, and prayed like she did every night. She prayed for her own sanity, for the next five days during the sorority/fraternity holiday battle, and for a good last upcoming semester of college, and most of all, she prayed that her dad would be proud of her, for scoring that big-girl job at Murphy & Ross.

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The next morning, Mia woke up just as the sun rose above the horizon, full of energy like always. The other girls in the house hated how much energy she always had, but deep down, she knew they envied her for it. She stepped onto the cold, wood floor in her bedroom and quickly headed towards the bathroom to tie her messy hair up, brush her teeth, and get dressed. Walking back into her room, she turned the speaker on that sat on top of her dresser, behind the endless pile of jewelry. Michael Buble’s Christmas album echoed as she spun around her room. She decided on a perfectly ironed, long sleeve tee, a white puffer vest, a dark wash pair of jeans, and a dainty, silver pair of hoop earrings. Grabbing her backpack and filling up her water bottle, she quickly slipped on her bright white Vans, and slid the keys off the counter and into her hand.

“Bye, ladies. See you after class!” Mia shouted to some of the sisters who were sitting on the couch, on their laptops.

“Good luck on your exam!” Some of the girls said simultaneously.

“Piece of cake,” Mia waved with a soft smile before shutting the back door tightly behind her.

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“Hey girlie! Happy Monday!” Mia shouted to Sierra from her silver Honda, with reindeer antlers attached to the front lights, as she parked in front of Sierra’s sorority house, Delta Epsilon.

“Mia, how do you always have this much energy? I don’t even have that much energy and I down a venti iced coffee every morning!” Sierra shouted, shoving the tumbler into the cup holder.

“I don’t know, I guess when the sun is up, so am I,” Mia said.

“You’re adorable. Reagan is coming, but if she is any slower, we will be late for our Chem final,” Sierra said, slinging her long, shiny blonde hair back with a scrunchie.

Reagan hurried down the front stairs of the sorority house, apologizing to Mia and Sierra while telling her siblings that she loved them on the phone.

“Alright, I’ll see you guys so soon. One more week. Love you,” Reagan told her younger brother and sister.

“Bye, Reags,” they said over speakerphone. Reagan hung up abruptly and shoved her phone in her bag.

“Ugh, alright let’s go. Even though I *really* am not prepared enough for this. I barely studied,” Reagan said, approaching Mia’s car.

“Oh, c’mon *Reags*,” Sierra said sarcastically.

“Shut up, please don’t call me Reags. I hate it when they do it and I don’t need to hear it from y’all too,” Reagan responded to Sierra’s mockery after flipping her off.

“Hey, I didn’t say anything. Can y’all please stop fighting! It’s Monday and it’s a beautiful, winter day. Three more days until the Great Greek Christmas Battle officially begins and one week until winter break. Can we just go one week without arguing? Please?” Mia pleaded.

“*Fine*. Okay.” Sierra and Reagan looked at each other, sharing the tiniest smile.

“Alright, so this chem final. Are you guys ready for it?” Mia asked, after popping a bubble with her gum and pulled her car into the lot outside of the science building.

“Not at all. I am just praying I can whip out at least a C,” Reagan said, tying the loose laces of her black Doc Martens before getting out of the car.

“Okay, let’s run through some material real quick. I’ll quiz you guys,” Mia said, shifting her focus to the entrance of the parking lot as a white BMW convertible pulls into the lot, whipping fast past the spaces and past the girls, blaring *Bazzi*.

“Who was that?” Mia asked.

“I don’t know, but I wanna know,” Sierra said.

“Sierra, shut up, you have a boyfriend... But I don’t,” Reagan said in a sing-songy way.

“Guys, oh my god. Stop drooling over him. It’s probably just... yep, it’s Arden,” Mia said, rolling her eyes, walking towards the front door, pulling Sierra and Reagan’s arms. The

same Arden that had tried to get her to sleep with him since their sophomore year math class together. Sierra's boyfriend, Conner, walked up behind them and covered Sierra's eyes.

"Guess who?" Conner said.

"Hi babe," Sierra said before standing on her tippy toes to kiss him. Reagan stuck her finger at the back of her throat, making vomit noises.

"God. Did you guys see Arden swing into the parking lot? He almost hit me," Conner asked with one arm around Sierra's shoulder.

"Yeah, your girlfriend was gawking," Reagan said, teasing Sierra.

"Shut up, Reagan. No I wasn't! Babe, all I said was that I wasn't sure who it was at first. I just wanted to know who would have the nerve to drive in here like that, until I realized it was none other than *King Hanes* himself. That's it. I don't care about him. I only have eyes for you," Sierra said, smiling and giggling. Conner kissed Sierra's forehead and Mia and Reagan both groaned and rolled their eyes.

Once again, shifting their focus to the BMW, waiting for Arden to come out. Once he finally did, he flipped his chestnut brown hair out of one eye and adjusted his Ray Bans sunglasses. His black backpack was slung over his left shoulder, laying over a denim jacket, and it was as if he was walking in slow motion towards them.

"As much as I hate to admit it, he is too perfect," Reagan said.

"He's an ass," Conner said.

"Come on guys, can we please just go take our final," Mia stressed as she entered the front door to walk towards Dr. Rhett's room. Before she could get to the classroom door, she slipped over a small puddle of water that leaked from the fountain and dropped the two

notebooks she had in her hands. Bending down to grab them, a pair of pristinely white Converse high-tops stopped in front of her.

“Hey Mia, let me help you with those.” That voice. She knew it. *Arden’s*.

“No, no, it’s okay, I’m fine,” Mia looked up, quickly, as he did too, both beginning to stand up, facing each other.

“It’s no problem. Here’s your pencil,” he said.

“Um, yeah, thanks...”

“So are you ready for Sigma Zeta Phi to absolutely destroy Zeta Beta Alpha in our last Great Greek Christmas Battle?” He asked, smirking confidently.

“That’s not gonna happen, Arden. The Zeta Beta’s are fully prepared this year to crush our competition and get that title back that was wrongfully ripped from us last year by you guys. Now, we really need to get to this exam sesh,” Mia said, turning abruptly away from him and into the classroom to her seat. He raised his voice a little as she walked away,

“Alright, well I guess I’ll see you later then?”

“Maybe,” she said with a fake smile.

Sierra and Reagan looked at each other after catching the whole encounter and squealed with excitement. They quietly rushed into Dr. Rhett’s room where Mia was sitting.

“Mia! Oh my *God*. Arden clearly still has a thing for you, and you never even give him a chance,” Reagan said.

“Stop. You guys. He’s still the same smooth talkin’ asshole he’s always been. He will never change,” Mia said.

“Oh, come on! Mia, he is gorgeous. And he picked up your books. We saw the way he looked at you. Maybe you should just give him a chance. Could be some Christmas magic brewing. You never know,” Sierra said, with a hopeful sigh.

“Oh please, I wouldn’t give him a chance if he and I were the only two in Hampstead. We are rivals in this competition. We always have been. I just need to stay focused. As the president of Zeta Beta Alpha, I need to make sure we win back that title from them,” Mia whispered as Dr. Rhett handed the exams out. Mia mouthed to Sierra and Reagan, “good luck”. Looking at the first question, Mia smiled to herself and began writing out the simple equations.

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After the exam, Mia dropped Reagan and Sierra off at their house and rushed home to get ready for work. She tied her hair up and changed into her Keds, then filled her bag with her book, a notebook, and refilled her water bottle.

“So I heard you ran into Arden Hanes today? Was he talking trash about us?” A freshman member asked Mia. Her name was Lilah Peterson, she had seen Arden around in her first month at Hampstead and had a crush on him, until she joined ZBA.

“Hey girlie. Yeah I did. Ugh, he psyched me out before my chem exam, but don’t worry, we will win this year. I’m sure. Since I am running the competition for the Zeta Beta’s, I know the tactics the Si Phi’s always use, but they won’t get away with it this time. We are going to give their jingle bells a twist. I have a few tricks up my sleeve,” Mia said confidently.

“Amazing. I’m excited for my first Greek Christmas fight at Hampstead,” Lilah said.

“Good! You should be! It’ll be fun. Alright, make sure you’re ready for chapter tonight, I’m running through the activities for the competition for everyone, but I gotta head to work now.

I'll be back by 7:30," Mia told Lilah before walking out the front door and down to their little town bookshop, The Fiddleleaf.

Mia had worked at the Fiddleleaf Company Coffee and Books since last summer. She always had a love for books, especially the old, dusty books at the Fiddleleaf. It had always been her favorite bookshop, really the only one in the small town of Hampstead. She shared this love of reading, and books in general, with her father. As a little girl, her father would take her to the shop once a week and let her pick out two books. They lived about an hour outside of Hampstead, North Carolina, but they both loved this shop the most, so they made the drive down every week. The summer before her junior year of college, she stopped by the Fiddleleaf like she usually did every Friday afternoon, but this time, asked for a job application. Edith Baker, who owned the shop alongside her husband Frank, had watched Mia grow up and knew how much she admired the shop and how she cared for every book inside. They, of course, were thrilled when she asked to work there.

"Oh sweetheart, no need for an application. You're hired!" Edith had said with enthusiasm.

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Mia arrived at the Fiddleleaf around 1:40pm, 20 minutes before her shift began. She was welcomed in by Frank, who had been decorating the front window Christmas tree.

"Well hello Miss Mia, how are-"

"Ugh, Frank. Today has been so stressful," Mia interrupted Frank and dropped her bag on the desk, venting to him how frustrated she was about the Great Greek Christmas Battle this year. She sighed loudly, visibly distraught before Edith called over to Frank.

“Hey Frank, could you grab me the, oh hello dear! I didn’t hear you come in! I was just training a new boy to work the coffee area,” Edith said as she wiped her hands with a stained, fraying dishrag.

“Hi Edith! No worries, I’ve only been here for like five minutes. I was just venting to Frank. I can’t believe you’re training someone for the coffee area.”

Mia tried to see who the guy Edith was training was. He was facing away from her, but she felt like she knew him. He was rather tall and had dark brown hair that wisped over his eye a little on one side. His skin was naturally tan and...*Oh no. It couldn’t be.* But it was. Arden Hanes. He turned around and caught her staring from the front of the shop and smiled charmingly, laughing ironically to himself. Mia unconsciously blushed, rolled her eyes, and looked down at the scratched up wooden floor. Edith noticed their encounter. She glanced over at him, then back at her.

“Do you know Arden, Mia? He is a senior at Hampstead,” Edith asked.

“Yeah, we already know each other. How could you hire Arden? We are rivals in the Greek Christmas Battle, Edith. I’ve talked about him before and how much I *hate* him,” Mia gestured, whispering to Edith and Frank.

“Oh, well now, young lady, I’m sorry you feel that way, but we needed someone for the coffee area. He needed a job, and we were hiring. That’s good you already know him though, I think y’all will learn to work together just fine,” Edith said with a wink and rubbed her shoulder. Mia walked with Edith to where Arden was sitting on the edge of the coffee counter, adjusting his round, tan glasses on the ridge of his nose. *Those are new. He’s never worn glasses before.*

“Arden, well I suppose you already know that this is Mia Fitzgerald. She has lived in Hampstead her entire life. And I’ve had the pleasure of knowing her since she was about this big. She is just wonderful,” Edith said.

“Well hey there, Mia. It’s nice to see you again. I actually got the pleasure of hearing a lot about you from Mr. and Mrs. Baker before you got here. More than I thought I would ever know about you, heh,” Arden said, laughing.

Mia, shocked, looked at Edith with wide eyes and then back to Arden, her hands crossed and clasped in front of her. Ignoring Mia’s embarrassment, Edith tells him to call her and her husband Edith and Frank and that Mia and him should learn to get along better since they will be working together.

Edith made her way through a few groups of people to help Frank decorate the tree and hang garland around the front door. Mia and Arden could faintly hear Edith make conversation on the other side of the shop with neighbors and friends in the community, wishing them a happy holiday as Perry Como played through the speakers. They stood across from each other, leaning on either side of the counter for a few moments before Arden tapped on the counter with his fingertips in awkwardness and asked her a question.

“Soooo,” Arden asked.

Mia tucked a couple strands of hair behind her left ear and narrowed her eyes.

“Sooo what?” Mia asked, with attitude.

“I’m just trying to make this better for the both of us, but you’re not working with me.

Why do you hate me so much? What have I ever done to you?” Arden asked.

“You’re just so smug about everything. Your car, your hair, your *perfect* life. How you’re president of Si Phi for the second year in a row, making my life even more stressful this year while I try and win back the title that is rightfully ours. Just admit it, you guys cheated last year. I know you did,” Mia spat out, almost interrupting him.

“We did not! You’re just mad we stole the title from you. And my life is *far* from perfect,” Arden said. Breaking eye contact, he pushed his glasses up the ridge of his nose.

“Zeta Beta is going to wipe the floor with you guys this year. I have plenty of amazing ideas that will win us the trophy back, and the money for our philanthropy. Just wait. The competition is ours,” Mia said.

“Is that so?” Arden stepped closer to her.

“You bet,” Mia stepped closer, their faces close for a moment.

“Excuse me, can I please order?” A middle-aged woman with a child on her hip asked. Startling Mia, she backed up and walked back to the front desk. A line of customers in need of their Christmas-flavored coffee piled in.

“So, I’ll talk to you later?” Arden said with a hopeful, closed mouth grin, trying to help their situation.

“If you think you can handle all these people,” Mia pointed at the line and laughed to herself before picking her bag off the ground, “you’ve got another thing coming, pal.”

“Oh please. With my eyes closed. Watch this,” he said confidently as he adjusted his apron around his waist. His eyes followed her as she set her bag behind the counter the registers were on, to the left of the front door to the shop and clocked in. Mia sat on the ripped swivel chair and attempted to cover her soft smile with her book. She couldn’t believe herself. She has

always been undeniably attracted to him, because he *is* objectively attractive, but still had a million doubts about his intentions.

And why did he get a job here? Of all places. God, Edith and Frank knew. They had to have known that he was the one I've been complaining about for the past year and a half I've worked here. I've said his name before, I know I have. He is the reason I don't trust men in college. I didn't trust him, but I trusted Ronnie? Why am I such an idiot. Men are the worst... Ronnie was the biggest mistake. Why am I even thinking about him right now? Focus, Mia. Foc-

She looked up and they made eye contact. He chuckled to himself, looking at her amidst the chaos of brewing coffee and lines of people in need of their daily caffeine fix. She shook her head and rolled her eyes. Spilling a couple cups on himself and having to remake a few, he attempted to work a highly technological espresso machine that Edith went over how to use at least three times, but he still burned his finger. He pulled his hand back fast and shook it. The line of people wondered what was taking so long as Mia covered her mouth, but she couldn't help laughing at him. He shrugged, laughing back with his finger in his mouth. Eventually he made it through his first rush of people. Sighing, he wiped his hands on his apron and threw the rag over his shoulder.

“What did I tell you, Mr. ‘with my eyes closed’?” Mia air quoted and shook her head in disapproval.

“Oh, don't listen to her. You did fine, kid. I think you'll do just fine here, don't you worry. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, sir. Hey Mrs. Baker, could you please teach me one more time how to work that darned machine? I burned my finger like twice on that thing. I don’t know what I’m doin’ wrong,” Arden asked.

“Oh, bless your heart, of course I can. Also, please, call us Frank and Edith! We are glad to have you here through Christmas break.”

“You’re working here through break?” Mia asked, eyes wide.

“Sure am,” Arden responded.

“Jesus,” Mia mumbled under her breath and chuckled in disbelief.

Mia walked swiftly to the back of the store and set her bag down. Heading back up to the register, Mia found a wrinkled gum wrapper, folded neatly near the computer. She looked around before opening it. It read, “Today’s been fun so far. Thanks for making my first day here a *latte* fun. Get it? Sorry that was awful. But you do look *brew*-tiful. Okay I’m done. -Arden.” She looked up from the wrapper to see Arden casually nod to her as he washed a mug at the sink. She glared at him with a half-smile and an eye roll, raising her eyebrows.

“Wow, that was so cheesy,” Mia shouted to him, leaning over the desk.

“What can I say? I gave it my best *shot*.”

“God, you think you’re just *so* hilarious don’t you,” Mia said snarkily.

“Punny, actually. And I don’t think, I know.”

Mia walked quickly to Frank who was fixing the same Christmas tree he had been a half hour ago.

“Gosh, did you see that, Frank? He even wrote me this stupid little note, I mean who writes notes anymore?” Mia whispered.

“He might be a little smug, but guys don’t just willy-nilly write notes to girls. Especially these days. He’s a little old-fashioned, someone is raising that kid right,” Frank said.

“I just don’t understand why he’s even trying to flirt. Why me?” Mia paused, before realizing. Her eyes widened.

“Wait a minute. I see what he’s doing. Of course, lure in the competition and pretend to fall for me so I will lose focus.”

“He seems genuine to me. Especially since you’ve said he liked you, even before this silly competition. You are such a catch, my dear. He would be stupid not to. Give him a chance, Mia,” Edith whispered, walking over with a stack of books.

“See you did know who he was when you hired him. I knew it. And this competition isn’t silly. It’s a Hampstead Greek tradition, Edith,” Mia said, frustrated. Edith smiled. Mia grabbed her water bottle and tucked the gum wrapper into her backpack.

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Nearing the end of her shift, Mia had rang out several customers, while Arden took on the espresso machine four more times, band-aids covering a couple fingers. Arden walked over to the check-out counter.

“So, this is where we check-out?”

“Yep.”

“Good, because that’s what I’m doing. Checking you out,”

“Shut up,” Mia laughed, shaking her head.

“What? I’m sorry. I’m just trying to break the ice. Honestly, I like talking to you. This afternoon was fun, like I said in the gum wrapper I gave you earlier.”

“Okay. I know, Arden. But it’s just hard to believe what’s coming out of your mouth. Remember sophomore year? Yeah, you tried to get me to sleep with you at that Halloween party. I know your games,” Mia said as she shuffled through her bag and walked to the back to clock out.

Arden quickly followed behind her,

“Mia, I think it’s safe to say we’ve both done a lot of growing up since sophomore year. I mean, I heard you’ve got a job lined up after graduation, and I do too. We aren’t kids anymore.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore, Arden. I’m sorry, I just don’t have time to listen to this right now, I have so much to do tonight. So I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” Mia said, grabbing her keys from her bag and walking through the front doors. Arden watched her leave. Rubbing his forehead in frustration, he took his glasses off and slid them in his back pocket slowly.

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When Mia got back to the house later that evening, she set her water bottle abruptly into the sink and her backpack onto the floor of the kitchen. Lorelei was sitting at the counter on the squeaky swivel chair reading a magazine as she took a sip from her warm mug of chamomile tea. She peered up.

“Hey girl, you okay?” Lorelei asked.

Mia glared at Lorelei, “No. Today has been... a day,”

“Oh no. What happened?”

“I just have so many exams and papers to write this week, that it’s all sort of culminating. And on top of that, the stress of the Greek Christmas Battle is getting to me. Arden’s not making it any easier either.”

“Did you see him today?” Lorelei asked, confused.

“Yep. He is the newest barista at The Fiddleleaf, how awesome is that?” Mia asked, sarcastically.

“God help us all.” Lorelei said to Mia, who was picking at the muffin she grabbed from the dish beside the fridge. Lorelei watched Mia as she took a big bite of the muffin and sighed loudly.

“I think we should channel all of this frustration into chapter and focus on how we are going to crush Si Phi. Alright? We are going to kick some Si Phi ass this year,” Lorelei ran into the chapter room to make sure all the girls were in there, “C’mon, Meems.”

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“Alright, ladies! Welcome to tonight’s chapter meeting. Oh wait, I forgot to turn the tree lights on. Make it more festive up in here,” Mia said, flipping the switch and watching the white lights of the 12-foot tree blink on. Oos and ahhs echoed as the girls watched the lights twinkle.

“Okay, so as we all know we have some important information to cover tonight in regards to the Great Greek Christmas Battle of 2018. For all of our freshman and new members, I will explain how the competition works. Basically, every sorority has a rival fraternity, and as everyone knows, ours is Si Phi, our brothers. So, we compete directly with them to raise money for our chapter, which we give to our philanthropy and, of course, win that sought-after trophy. As always, the competition will be split into five separate tasks: first: gingerbread houses,

second: decorating the outside of the Zeta Beta house, third: Christmas cookie decorating, fourth: candy cane relay, and finally the fifth: the Christmas philanthropy concert battle, the most crucial part of the competition. I already have an arrangement laid out, so we don't need to worry about that very much," Mia said confidently.

"Mia, shouldn't we discuss our arrangement and figure that out as a sorority?" Kristin asked.

"I just decided to arrange it because it has to be the best we've ever done. We *have* to beat Si Phi. It's my last year. We lost our streak last year, and now, I'm more invested than ever, not just because it's my last year, but I took the initiative to change our philanthropy project this year to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society," Mia paused for a minute, tears welling in her eyes. Lorelei stood up and hugged Mia.

"What happened," one of the sisters whispered to another in the back of the room.

"Her dad died last year from Leukemia. She was a mess. She didn't even participate in the battle last year. Probably why we lost," Another sister responded.

"Um, sorry. Okay, are there any questions?" Mia wiped her red eyes, smudged a little with mascara.

"Who judges us?" Lilah asked Mia.

"It's on a volunteer basis. I know that Edith and Ron, the old couple that own The Fiddleleaf, always judge. And then, I think Renata Walker, the owner of the floral shop is, as well as Professor Wilkinson, but I'm not sure who else right now," Mia responded.

“Okay, I have a question. So, I know we need to win, obviously, but I just think it should be a team effort, don’t you think?” Kristin asked. A few of the other girls chimed in, agreeing with Kristin.

“Okay, guys, listen up. Mia is trying her best here. She is incredibly passionate about this competition, especially this year. We should try and respect Mia’s decisions, as this charity is close to her heart, after her father passed away last year. And we all know damn well Mia would never let us down. Meems, can you show us the arrangement you were thinking?” Lorelei asked.

“Yeah, and I totally get it, guys. I’m sorry if I am coming off a little bossy. This time of year just gets me super stressed out and I am just determined about this year’s battle, but I can definitely show you guys the arrangement,” Mia pulled out a typed-up sheet with a song list and dance moves to accompany them. She handed one out to each girl.

“Okay, I definitely wanna start with Christina Aguilera’s “This Christmas” because it’s a kick ass song to start with,” Mia continued with the explanation of the dance moves and songs they had to learn by Sunday, the day of the concert battle and judging. Mia led the girls through the dances.

“Okay, we trust you on this, Mia.” Lilah said.

“Yeah, we are definitely gonna kick some Si Phi ass this year. I just wish you would’ve consulted us earlier, ya know?” Kristin said. Mia ended chapter and walked to her room, sighing loudly into her pillow as she flung herself, face first onto her bed.

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The next morning, Mia walked to the Delta Epsilon house where Sierra and Reagan were waiting for her on the steps. Mia did a little skip when she got closer, in excitement.

“Meems, God, what are you so excited about?” Reagan asked.

“So last night at work, Edith was training a new guy for the coffee area and-,” Mia stops as Sierra cuts her off.

“Oh my god, was it Arden?”

“How did you know that’s who I was going to say?” Mia asked.

“I just had a feeling that’s where this was going. Did you talk to him?” Sierra said.

“Yeah a little, but Edith kind of nudged me over to him. She was about to introduce us, but I put an end to that quickly, though I’m pretty certain she knew I hated him. She gave me this look, like she wants us to be together or something. Anyway, Arden and I talked a little, or I guess I should say argued, about the GGCB, and then, he left this little note on my desk,” Mia said, pulling the crinkled gum wrapper from her coat pocket and let Reagan and Sierra read it.

“OH my god, Mia! Why didn’t you tell us this red-hot information last night??” Sierra asked, both her and Reagan frowning.

“Because I had chapter last night and I also didn’t know what to think about it. I needed to sleep on it,” Mia said.

“Well duh. Reagan and I talked about him last night. He seems... different. Like he’s actually matured since sophomore year. I think maybe you’re just being a little nit-picky, and rightfully so. We get it. But at the same time, we’ve all done some growing,” Sierra replied.

“I know, I know. It just has always seemed like he has this douchebag energy, from the sunglasses, the car, the designer things in his life that he seems to be flaunting still. I don’t know,” Mia questioned.

“Maybe it’s a defense mechanism or something, Meems. You can’t always judge people so fast. It seems like he is trying to at least be friends with you, competition or no competition, I think you should be, at least, civil to him, considering you have to work with him every day. Don’t you think?” Sierra asked. Mia began to think about it all and consider being as civil as she could be to him, to test him almost. Could he really be as nice as they think he is? She was going to find out.

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Mia walked with Sierra down to The Fiddleleaf around noon. Arden got out of his car and Mia had to accept the fact that he was effortlessly good looking. He slowly took off his Ray Bans, switched to those round spectacles, and searched the street in front of The Fiddleleaf for Mia. They made eye contact and she looked away quickly. Mia hunched behind Sierra, naturally trying to avoid Arden.

“Mia, what in the world are you doing?” Sierra asked.

“Nothing, shhh.”

“Hey Mia,” Arden said, catching up to the girls. Mia gasped and stood up straight, but before she could say anything Sierra perked up and interjected.

“Well hey Arden, I’m Mia’s best friend Sierra. I don’t think we’ve ever formally met. I’m in Delta Epsilon. My boyfriend, Conner Mooney is actually a junior in Si Phi with you. I’m assuming you know him?” She asked him, pushing Mia to the side and reached her hand out to shake his.

“Howdy, Sierra. Nice to meet you.” He shook her hand. “Yeah, I know Conner! Solid dude, though a little quiet. He doesn’t say much to many of the guys,” Arden shrugged. Mia gave

Sierra a look and nudged her head, signaling for her to leave. Sierra just stood there and Mia made eye contact once again with Arden.

“Arden. Hey. What are you doing here?” Mia asked, brushing a few strands of her straightened brown hair behind her ear and standing awkwardly.

“You know, just going to work. Same thing as you, except I’m not trying to avoid you, knowing that we are about to spend the next five hours at work together. Weird how that works, isn’t it Mia?” Arden replied sarcastically laughing, snapping the gum in his mouth.

“Anyway, I guess I’ll see you inside,” he said as he pulled the garland-trimmed door open and disappeared.

“Smooth, Mia! I thought you were going to try harder than this!” Sierra said, pulling Mia’s arm. “Now get in there and be nice to him. What’s the worst that could happen?” Sierra asked, walking backwards towards campus. Mia stood outside The Fiddleleaf for a few minutes before gaining her composure. As quickly as she gained it, she lost it, getting startled by Frank swinging the door open.

“Mia, what in the hell are you doing standing out in this cold. Get on in here.”

“Sorry Frank, I was just doing some thinking,” Mia said, smiling nervously as she pulled her gloves off and set them in her bag. She did a double take at the counter, seeing another crumpled gum wrapper sitting there. Shifting her head and glaring at Arden, he looked up from the espresso machine smiling slightly. She took a deep breath and opened the gum wrapper to read, “I’m sorry about yesterday. Really. I hope we can try and be friends, despite this competition.” Below the writing, there is a drawing of the two of them competing in the

gingerbread house building part of the competition. Hers had an x through it with the words “Si Phi wins” underneath.

“I hate you,” Mia yelled to him, revealing the slightest smile.

“I know,” Arden replied before getting back to cleaning the espresso machine with a coffee-stained rag thrown over his shoulder. *He is kind of cute... Maybe he has changed.*

**

That evening, Arden gathered all of the Si-Phi’s into the living room to discuss the competition with them and to strategize a way for them to keep the trophy.

“Guys, listen up. We’ve got to come up with a way to keep this trophy for a second year. We actually managed to beat the ZBA’s last year. Who has ideas on how to continue our streak now that we’ve got it?” Arden said, glancing around the room.

“Alright, I have an idea,” Drew stood up and took Arden’s place in front of the fireplace that was just starting to warm the room up. “We need to step it up from last year if we want to win again because the Zeta Beta’s are on to us. They know we are going to try what we did last year, which means we need to come back stronger.”

“Hell yeah we do,” Sam said, shifting to look at Arden. “Does Mia know what we did last year?”

“Yeah... She mentioned it quickly at work. I denied that we cheated, but she knows. We can’t have a repeat of the stunt we pulled last year. As the president, I could have gotten kicked out of Si Phi if the IFC found out,” Arden said, worried.

“The problem is, we wouldn’t have won if it wasn’t for buying votes and using cookies iced by your mom, Arden. We really have to work hard if we want to beat them the right way, this year,” Jack said, getting up to grab a beer from the fridge.

“Alright, y’all. Let’s come up with a plan then. Tomorrow is the first part of the competition, the gingerbread houses. And damn, I *hate* that part. The icing is never sticky enough, but we’re just gonna have to figure it out. I think we should each be assigned a role in the building process and get it done, the best we can. The most important part, out of all the five, is the philanthropy concert, which means we need to lock down songs and stuff by Sunday. Giving us six days. But we can do it. Right?” Arden looked around and lifted his can of beer up.

“Now, our charity, for those who are new. So, listen up pledges,” Arden looks around, making sure everyone is listening. “I’ve been president for two years now, and we still are going strong with St. Jude’s. This charity is incredibly important to me. My little brother has been sick for two and a half years, so the money goes to research for kids who are dealing with similar conditions. That’s why we cheated last year. He is getting increasingly worse, so I felt like we *had* to get that money. No one knows about it because I don’t usually talk about it, but y’all are my brothers. Win together. Lose together. But hopefully it doesn’t come down to that second part.” Arden sat down and chugged his beer, pulling his phone out of his pocket. No new messages. *No updates are good updates.*

**

The following morning, Mia and Arden showed up at the Fiddleleaf promptly, even before Ron and Edith. Mia shut her car door abruptly, looking up quickly, noticing that Arden

was doing the same, shuffling to grab his wallet and slip it into his back pocket. He locked his car and did a little run to catch up to Mia.

“Good morning, Mia.”

“Good morning Arden.”

“Did y’all have a meeting last night for the battle?”

“Yes. It’s stressing me out too much, honestly. I just care so much about it and I just love my sorority, I need to win. Competition just courses through my veins this time of year.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way. Well here’s an idea. Can I take you out for a nice dinner on Friday night?”

“Arden, I don’t know if that’s such a good,” Arden interrupts Mia before she can finish.

“Come on, Mia. It’s just dinner. No competition, no rivalry. Just you, me, two plates of spaghetti at Jameson’s.” Before Mia could answer, Frank and Edith walked up to the front door, Frank fumbling with the keys to find the right one.

“Hey kiddos. How’s it going?” Edith looks endearingly at Mia and then at Arden. Mia looked at Arden and quickly said “fine” before he had time to say anything else.

**

Swiveling nervously back and forth on her chair, Mia bit her finger and peered over at Arden, dealing with several men in suits, patiently waiting for their piping hot cup of Joe before work. Edith came up to the register, snapping Mia out of her daydream.

“Sweetheart. This stack of books isn’t going to sort itself. Please, before 10.”

“Sorry.” Edith looked at Mia for a second, eyebrows furrowed, concerned. Edith’s never had to tell Mia to do something twice.

“Are you alright?”

“Uh-yeah. I’m fine. Uh, it’s just that tomorrow’s the first day of the competition. I’m trying my best to hold it together, but it’s not just this. It’s Arden, the stress of finals, I have one more tonight and another tomorrow morning, the two most difficult to end out my college career, and then of course, I have to win this competition. For my sisters, but mostly for,”

“Your dad. Ward. He was like another son to me. Can’t believe he’s been gone for a year. Come here,” Edith interrupts Mia and hugs her from across the front counter. Mia resting her chin against the soft wool of Edith’s cardigan. She pulls away quickly, wiping the stray tear from rolling down her pale cheek and cleared her throat.

“Alrighty, I’ll get these sorted.”

“I know you can do this, Mia. You are so strong, just like your father. Fight of a million embers. He used to say that all the time,” She took Mia’s face in her palms and kissed her cheek. Mia softly smiled as much as she could, then got back to sorting.

Across the way, Arden had a lull in caffeine-needy zombies and walked over to Mia with his hands in his pockets.

“Can I help you?” Mia looked up at Arden from her text book.

“Yeah, I kinda need an answer to the question I asked earlier...”

“Mmmmm, maybe.”

“Mia, you’re killing me. What do I have to do to get you to go?”

“Well, you could throw the competition.”

“Haha, not likely,” Arden said snarkily, leaning over the counter. Mia leaned backwards.

“Okay, I’ll go. But only for the free spaghetti.”

“Who said it was free?”

“You’re paying. You’re the one who asked me on this date.”

“Oh, so it’s a date?”

“Sounds like one.”

“Well alright then. I will meet you at Jameson’s at 7 on Friday.”

“Okay. But first, I’ll see you tomorrow morning for the gingerbread building competition where we are gonna absolutely obliterate you guys. Our houses will be *supreme*, while yours... will look like Trap houses. At best,” Mia laughed. Arden got really defensive.

“Hey now. We’ve got a couple artists in Si Phi. They’re gonna carry us tomorrow, just you wait.”

“We’ve got some artists among the ZBA’s too. So, I guess we will find out who’s better tomorrow, won’t we?”

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a good ole fashioned competition on our hands. Make the best, ZBA or Si Phi, win,” Arden and Mia shook hands, with a determined, yet subtle smile on each of their faces.

**

Mia flipped the tree lights on and blared remixed Christmas music from the living room speaker.

“Wake up call! It’s 8am ladies. First day of The Great Greek Christmas Battle. Get your booties out of bed and ready! No time to waste. We have to be at Sparks Hall at noon, alright? That’s Sparks Hall at noon,” Mia yelled through a bull horn, walking from room to room.

“MIA. Holy shit, okay,” Kristin yelled. “We got it.”

“Prove it. I want to see y’all hustle it. Finals are just about over, it’s time to put all of our energy into the battle! Believe me, this stresses me out just as much as finals and it’s equally as important.”

“Ughh,” emanated from an indistinctive group of sisters.

**

“It’s go time, boys,” Arden shouted and clapped, as the guys milled around the house with a half hour to get to Sparks Hall, all the way across campus. “Put your freakin’ game faces on, men! I know we don’t necessarily want to build gingerbread houses, but we are doing this for the kids, alright? It’s about those kids.”

Junior Si Phi member Tucker yawned and nodded his head, before changing into some pants and a sweatshirt. “You got it, Arden. We are right there behind you man.”

**

All six pairs of sibling sororities and fraternities lined up along the gymnasium floor in Sparks Hall at their assigned tables, across from their competing team. The gingerbread walls, roofs, doors, and chimneys laid out on plastic tables, atop red paper tablecloths. An assortment of candies and icing glue were handed out by Ms. Walker, the town florist, as the teams waited in anticipation. The Si Phi’s crowded around their table, Arden in the middle shouting directions at the members. He caught eyes with Mia, who had her game face on. Nothing was going to stop her concentration. Not even the date with Arden. *The date with Arden. Crap. She was really going out with the boy who tried to get her to sleep with him sophomore year. That same Arden.*

But he's different now. We've both done a lot of growing up. He's really not the same Arden from sophomore year. That 19-year-old young and naïve kid. Focused on drinking and partying 24/7. That same kid is 23 and graduating with an engineering degree. And I was that 19-year-old girl, too scared to even make eye contact with a boy, let alone talk to one. Now here we are, no longer kids anymore. Both have jobs lined up and I'm too stubborn to realize that he has been nothing but sweet to me this entire time. Huh. Not rivals. Not arch nemeses. Friends. Friends? Wow, that sounds weird.

Mia was so lost in thought she shook her head quickly before realizing she was being bum-rushed by Reagan and Sierra.

“Hey Meems! Good luck today. Crush those stupid boys,” Reagan said, sticking her tongue out at the Si Phi's, some of them doing it back.

“Oh hey.”

“Mia? Were you just thinking about something? Or someone? Holy shit. Were you just thinking about *someone*?” Sierra asked.

“Nope. No one,” Arden softly smirked with a nod to Mia from behind their table and looked down quickly, unable to wipe the smile from his face. Sierra and Reagan looked at each other confused and walked back to their table. With the competition just minutes from starting, Ms. Walker, Edith and Frank, Mr. Wilkinson, and a few other judges sat on their plastic folding chairs and the dean of students announced in the microphone,

“Let's get this 12th annual Great Greek Christmas Battle started! Teams, you may begin!” Each sorority and fraternity grabbed the gingerbread walls and icing pouches and started constructing. Mia yelled out instructions to the other girls on which candies to put where on the

arches of the roof and on the front panel of the house. The girls were frantically gluing the walls together with the not-so-sticky icing. Kristin and Lilah held the walls upright and in place while the icing dried. Across from the girls, the Si Phi boys were struggling with their icing pouches. Drew had icing all over his hands as he attempted to spread it on the edges of the gingerbread walls. Arden yelled at him repeatedly to wipe his hands and to not be wasteful of the icing. They each were only supplied with one 16-ounce package.

**

About 25 minutes had passed and the judges took notes down on little notepads.

“Five minutes, teams!” The dean announced.

“Shit, bro. This is not going well,” Conner said to Arden.

“Calm down, y’all. If we focus, and line the arches with gumdrops, we might have a shot.” Meanwhile, Mia and the girls were almost finished, lining the edges with icing icicles and a snow-covered yard. The front porch was composed of green, red, and blue sixlets. Arden strategically altered colored gum drops along the edges of the roof and green sixlets on every corner of the window on the left side of their house. The door had an M&M doorknob and the roof was slanted, but it didn’t cave in. Yet.

“Pouches down ladies and gentlemen!”

“We’re screwed,” Drew dropped the icing pouch abruptly onto the table.

“Alright, thank you everyone for your wonderful participation in this year’s first portion of the Great Greek Christmas battle. The judges have tallied their scores and are ready to announce each winner.” The girls all held hands and closed their eyes until they got to the ZBA’s and Si Phi’s.

“Please please please,” Mia whispered.

“And for Zeta Beta Alpha versus Si Phi... the ZBA’s have won this round!” Mia screamed and jumped up and down with intense excitement.

“We did it girls! Amazing job.” Arden shook his head and covered his face in defeat, turning his back on the ZBA’s. Mia walked over to the guys.

“Better luck tomorrow, boys.”

“We are going to destroy your house decorating skills, but on our own houses tomorrow. The Si Phi house is going to look tight,” Luke looked at Mia, and Mia looked over to Arden.

“I’d like to see you guys actually put some effort into this competition.”

“Trust me. Our house will be *covered* in lights. We even bought a few yard decorations and inflatables to help us score a few extra points,” Arden said with a smirk.

“Good. You’ll need it,” Mia smirked and shoved Arden’s shoulder lightly before turning away from them. The girls gasp and high fived Mia, walking out of Sparks Hall. Arden grinned, stretching his arms and running his fingers through his unbrushed hair.

“Game on,” he mumbled to himself.

**

Later that afternoon, Mia finished her second to last final and rushed back to the house to make hot chocolate with her sorority sisters. She sat in front of the roaring fireplace with the other 20 girls, attempting to get warm after a frigid walk home from Llorence Hall. Mia reached over to grab the piping hot mug on the coffee table. The sleeve of her flannel pajama set crinkled, bringing the heavy mug to her chapped lips.

“Uh, Mia. Did you see the email that was just sent out?” Kristin asked, looking down puzzled at the bright phone screen.

“No. Is it about the competition?”

“Yeah. Apparently, as a result of last year’s mishap and alleged cheating, the judges have decided to cancel the cookie decorating portion of the competition. That just leaves us with the house decorating, candy cane relay, and the karaoke concert.”

“Woah. Okay. That might be good for us though. They had to cheat at that part because their score was so much lower, which means they bombed the other competitions. Oh, I just got a text from Arden about it too.”

“You have Arden’s number?” Lilah asked.

“Uh, yeah. Just because we work together. For emergencies. You know.” The girls gave her a collective suspicious look.

“*Anyway*, he said ‘Hey Mia. Did you see the email? I’m pretty bummed about them taking that out, but I get it. We will still take the cake with our house, candy cane relay, and of course, the concert. And I’m really looking forward to tomorrow night.’ Shoot.” Mia turned her phone off and threw it beside her.

“WHAT’S TOMORROW NIGHT?” Some of the girls projected in unison.

“Nothingggg. Can we please move on?”

“Are you dating the competition?” Junior member, Ruth asked.

“Mia, I knew it. You do have feelings for him. I told you. I knew you’d give him a second chance,” Lorelei said, teasing her.

“Alright, alright. Yes. Arden is taking me to Jameson’s on Friday night. No, I don’t have feelings for him. We are just going out as friends. Now, can we please go back to talking about our game plan for decorating the house tomorrow?” The girls look at each other giggling. Mia rolled her eyes and continued their discussion.

**

A sleepless night came and went, slow as molasses, and Mia rolled out of bed to make a cup of coffee for the first time in months. Setting the mug under the Keurig, she waited as the steaming hazelnut blend flooded into the “Good morning, darling” mug her mom gave her for her birthday a few months ago. She quickly blew on it and took a gulp, reading frantically through her statistics notes in preparation for her last exam of the semester. And mentally preparing for her date with Arden that night. Throwing on a sweatshirt and a pair of moccasins, she got in her car and drove to Llorence Hall, once again, to take the stats exam. Taking a deep breath, she assured herself she would do fine. She always did. Putting on her confident face, she walked into the classroom with a smile on her face, greeting Professor Greene.

**

After her exam, she walked out feeling good about the work she had completed. All semester. There was one semester left of her entire college career and she felt good about finishing strong. For her dad.

When she got back to her house, the judges’ chairs were lined up along the grass, separating the sorority and fraternity houses right down the middle.

“Lemme grab a shower real quick. I’ll be back down in 20,” Mia assured the girls as she ran past them and up the stairs. The girls lugged boxes of white lights, colored lights, and plastic

candy canes to line their garden with. The Si Phi boys carried strings of colored lights out, along with an inflatable Santa Claus, light up reindeer, and a couple elves with gift boxes in their hands.

“We ready, girls?” Mia took a deep breath and pulled some of the lights from the boxes to check that they still work.

“Yep. We already checked all the bulbs. We’re good to go,” Kristin replied to Mia, then gave a thumbs up to Edith. Mia caught Arden’s eye and he waved to her, doing an eating motion with his hand and a shrug, asking if she’s ready for their date that night. She nodded with an optimistic smile and walked back up the yard to move a box.

“Teams, start in a line on the front lawn. When we say go, you will have one hour to decorate the front of your houses. Alright, you may begin! Happy decorating,” Edith said with a smile from ear to ear. The ZBA’s rushed to grab the three staple guns they were provided and set the ladder up against the house. Two girls stood on either side, stapling the white lights to outline the house, while the other girls were wrapping red lights around the three trees in the yard and yellow lights around the branches. The Si Phi’s hung their colored lights, around their house and Arden plugged in the inflatables, setting the reindeer across the grass on the left side of the yard and the elves on the other.

“Dude, where do you want this elf?” Drew asked Arden.

“On the other side, with the other one, duh.”

**

With ten minutes remaining, Mia stood out by the road to get a full look at what they had done.

“Lorelei, can you move that one strand of lights higher on the tree? And Ruth, can you adjust the candy canes to be more spaced out around the right side of the garden? Let’s hurry up ladies, eight more minutes! It looks great though.” The girls focused and made sure every light was laid perfectly and every bulb was bright. If even one bulb was burnt out, they’d get points taken off.

On the other side, Conner struggled with getting the lights around the tree as a last-minute decision on Arden’s part.

“Five minutes ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Wilkinson yelled through a bull horn.

“Alright men, we are just about done. Come stand out here in the street and look. Notice anything wrong?”

“No, boss.”

“Me either. It looks great. This is shapin’ up to be a pretty even competition.”

The whistle blows, ending the competition.

“Times up! Put your staple guns and lights down. All the houses look great! The judges took notes the duration of this competition and are ready to announce each of the three winning teams. Congratulations to Delta Epsilon... Omega Tau Gamma... and finally... Sigma Phi! Again, great job to everyone.

“What?” Mia asked. “How could this have happened?”

“I mean, did you see their house? The inflatables were pretty spectacular,” Lilah stared admiringly at their house and sighed. Mia frowned. Arden walked over with a frown on his face, mocking Mia.

“Oh, shut up.”

“I didn’t even say anything. Come on, don’t be upset. Dinner on me tonight.”

“Duh. But keep your voice down. You’re the competition. I don’t want the girls to know that I’m going to Jameson’s with you tonight. Even though they for sure suspect something,” Mia whispered.

“Of course they know. Everyone knows everything that happens at this school. Especially with Greek life. Of all people, you should know that. Anyway, I’ll see you tonight, k?”

“Mhm.”

**

Mia spritzed a vanilla perfume cloud and stepped into it. She took the clasp of her birthstone necklace in both hands and hooked it around her neck, pulling her curled hair out from under it. Staring at herself in the mirror, she let out a quick laugh in disbelief. *Am I actually going on a date with Arden Hanes?* Sliding her hands down her red, cotton sweater and pleated, black skirt to smooth out any wrinkles, she nodded her head and took a deep breath, almost in response to her own question. She stepped into a pair of shiny, pointed red flats. Lorelei couldn’t help but watch.

“Girl, you better tell me all about your night when you get back later.”

“Lor, omg. It’s not that big of a deal. I will. Promise. See you later.”

**

Mia walked nervously to Jameson’s, two doors down from The Fiddleleaf. She didn’t know what to expect from that evening. Seeing his face. *Was this actually a date? Like a date*

date? Pulling open the brass handle of the red door open, she scanned the restaurant for Arden. *Maybe he was running late.*

“How many tonight?” The hostess questioned.

“Um, we should have reservations under Arden, I’m guessing?”

“Let’s see,” the hostess searched the list. “For two under Arden Hanes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Follow me this way.” As the hostess was bringing her to her table, there was a single sunflower laying across the table. *How could he possibly know those are my favorite flower? Edith. Of course.* Mia thanked the hostess, removed her brown peacoat and draped it over the side of the booth chair.

She waited for what seemed like an hour. Tapping her fingers on the glossy wooden table, she started to get frustrated. *Why did I decide to trust him? He’s standing me up. This is exactly what I should have expected.* Just when she was about to get up to leave, she felt her cellphone vibrate in her hand. An incoming call from Arden.

“Where are you? You stood me up.”

“I can explain.”

“Save it Arden. I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

“Mia, my brother is in the hospital. He’s been in and out of the hospital for two and a half years and the doctors say he might not make it this year ‘til Christmas.”

“Oh my God. I’m sorry, I didn’t know, I-.”

“I know, how could you have known? I don’t usually open up to people. But we are at Wilmington Health. You don’t have to come up here, but it’d be great if you could.”

“I’m leaving Jameson’s now.” Mia quickly swept her peacoat from the booth and draped it over her shoulders. She rushed to her car and drove to Wilmington Health, about 20 minutes up the road.

**

“Hi, I’m looking for Arden Hanes, uh, the Hanes family? I guess.” Mia stood at the front desk, out of breath.

“Mia, hey! Thank you for coming all the way up here.” Arden emerged from the dark hallway behind the waiting room.

“Arden, oh my god. I am so so sorry,” Mia walked up to Arden and hugged him without hesitation. Arden smiled softly, holding her tight before she let go in realization of what she had just done. He guided her to his brother’s room.

“Hey buddy. This is my friend Mia. Mia, this is my little brother Eli.”

“Hi Eli, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi.”

“And this is my mom.” Arden gestured to his mom, who was sitting beside Eli on the bed.

“Hello dear. It’s nice to finally meet you. Arden has told me a lot about you.”

“Mom,” Arden rolled his eyes and looked at Mia who was laughing.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Hanes.” Mia and Arden made their way to the hospital cafeteria to get hot chocolate and passed the automatic doors to the bench in the front parking lot. Sharing a few awkward passing glances and smiles, Arden began to tell her about Eli. The

constant back and forth for the past two years. The uncertainty regarding his health and well-being for years to come, and the severity of his condition only worsening.

“The doctors are left with no other options. The Leukemia is spreading and we don’t have money for a bone transplant,” Arden looked down at his hands, attempting to hold back tears.

Mia placed her hand over his clasped hands.

“So that’s why you’re so into the competition every year. Your philanthropy is for him, isn’t it?”

Arden nodded.

“My dad always loved the holidays. Picking out the Christmas tree. Decorating the house with lights. Baking cookies. All of it. Last year, *his* Leukemia came back and it got really bad, the doctors couldn’t give him anymore treatment. They tried a bone marrow transplant, but that didn’t work as they had planned, and he passed away last year. Right before Thanksgiving. Our philanthropy is for him. The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. That’s why I’ve been so dedicated this year to win. I can’t bear to see more people suffering from this awful disease, but now that I know you’re fighting for the same thing, I’m so sorry I’ve been so aggressive about it all. I’m just so passionate about this because of my dad.” She sighed and he placed one of his hands on top of hers, lightly stroking his thumb across her knuckles.

“Don’t apologize. You have every right to fight for your dad, as you should. And you didn’t know about Eli.”

“I know. Though, I wish I had. So here’s the thing. The competition. I think that the money, either way, should go to your brother. It’s the right thing to do. And it still helps my dad because it’ll save someone’s life dealing with the same thing. It’s what he would’ve wanted.”

“What if we just continue to make the competition fun, and still compete against each other? No winner, no loser. All in good, Christmas spirit. And we figure out the money at the end.”

“I like that idea. I’ll talk to my sisters about it. I’m sure they will be completely on board.”

“And the guys too. Obviously.” They smiled at each other as snow began to fall lightly to the ground. Standing up, Arden took Mia’s hand in his.

“Thank you for coming here tonight, Mia. It means a lot to me, and I know it means a lot to my mom and Eli.”

“Of course. I’m glad you opened up to me about him,” Mia pulled her coat tighter as the night grew colder. Arden leaned in and kissed her softly. She hesitated at first, then kissed him back.

**

Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit. Arden Hanes kissed me. Arden freaking Hanes. This boy, I swear. Why am I falling for him? He has changed. I guess you just never really know what someone is going through.

Mia walked in from her date and immediately Lorelei charged the back door.

“Mia. So? How’d it go?” Mia couldn’t help but smile. She tried to hold it back, but there was no use.

“He kissed you. I knew it. Knew he would.”

“He did. I need to talk to you girls actually. Can you call an emergency meeting real quick?”

“You got it. LADIES, DOWNSTAIRS FOR A MEETING IN FIVE,” Lorelei yelled upstairs. “I’ll send out a text to the others to come to the house.”

Ten minutes later, the girls huddled in their pajamas in the living room as Mia paced back and forth in front of them.

“Alrighty, hey everyone! So... I uh, heh, don’t know how to say this but...”

“You went on a date with Arden, Mia. It’s no secret. We know you guys have feelings for each other. I mean God, the tension between you two. It’s tangible,” Lilah said.

“Well, I guess that’s out already there, so yeah. Yes. We were going to go on a date tonight, and I initially thought he was standing me up because I was at the restaurant for at least an hour before I got a call from him. He was at Wilmington Health. His brother has Leukemia, just like my dad, but much worse. He needs a bone marrow transplant, which is why Arden is fighting so hard this year. The money went to radiation last year, and this year, it’s incredibly important that... they get the money.

“Are you saying we throw the competition?” Kristin asked.

“No, not throw it. I’m saying, we still compete with the same energy we have put in thus far and then, either way, the money goes to his brother.”

“I think that’s the best idea. And it still benefits what our cause is, but it helps a kiddo we actually know,” Ruth said. The rest of the sorority agreed.

“Cool, I’m glad we are all on the same page about this. So, tomorrow is the candy cane relay. Not much we can really prepare for, just do your best. We can still win that trophy for the Zeta Beta Alpha’s, Chi Omicron chapter!” Mia winked.

**

The next morning, Sierra and Reagan came running over to the Zeta Beta house and knocked on the door. Mia answered.

“Hey, slut!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why did we have to hear through the grapevine that you went out with Arden last night?” Sierra asked, puzzled.

“I’m so sorry, I wanted to tell you guys, but things have been a little hectic lately. We had to figure a few things out with our charity and stuff, talk to Panhel, and get it all straightened out before tomorrow.”

“It’s okay, we’re not actually mad. Just had to get the scoop as soon as we heard. So... what did y’all do?”

“Did he finally get you into his bed? Gimme the details,” Reagan asked, leaning closer to Mia.

“Reagan, shut up. Seriously, no. He kissed me. That’s all.”

“Was it good?” Sierra asked, curiously.

“I mean, yeah. He knows what he’s doing, I’ll give him that. Okay, I need to get ready for the competition today. Good luck! How are you guys doing so far?”

“We fucking suck. Our brothers have taken both of the competitions so far. It’s not fair. But hey, the candy cane relay is today, and lucky for the team, I’m good with my mouth.”

“Jesus Christ, Reagan. Alright, we’ll get out of your hair. Later, Meems,” Sierra yanked Reagan’s arm laughing, back to the Delta Epsilon house.

Two hours later, the sororities and fraternities piled into the welcome center. The automatic doors slid open, revealing a 12 foot tall, flocked Christmas tree in the corner, adorned with red ornaments, snug on each branch by a twine loop. The front desk had dainty, white string lights across the front and a mini replica Christmas tree of the tall one in the corner. Maureen, the welcome center’s finest, sat in her swivel chair, but stood and smiled wide with excitement as the students filed in the lobby. She wore a festive pin over her green, cashmere cardigan and cat eye prescription glasses that slid down her nose every ten seconds.

“Well good mornin’, kiddos. I’m just as excited for this competition as a dead pig in the sunshine. You’ll just follow the arrows on the carpet down to the second room on the right-hand side. I reckon this is ‘bout to be a great time!” Turning the corner, the room opened up to a massive, open space with one large, rectangular table sat at the center. On each side, a pile of candy canes and one plastic, blue bowl with snowflakes around it. Mr. Wilkinson welcomed the sororities and fraternities in.

“Students! Welcome to the candy cane relay. You will need to decide one person to represent your sorority or fraternity in this competition. They will then step forward at either end of the table and compete. The way this works is you will put the end of the candy cane in your mouth, the hook part facing up and you will essentially “bob” for candy canes by hooking the other candy canes onto the one from your mouth and drop it into the bowl. Everyone understand? Alright, pick your player!” Mia looked at all the girls, and they all pointed at her.

“You’ve got this, Mia,” Lorelei said encouragingly. Arden turned to his men and they agreed that he would be the one to represent them.

“First up, we’ve got Zeta Beta Alpha versus Sigma Phi.” Mr. Wilkinson set his clipboard down and picked up his pen. Mia and Arden stood at either side of the table. They smiled at each other for a second before setting each of their candy canes between their lips.

“On your mark... Get set... Go!” Arden and Mia looked like chickens, bobbing their heads to hook the candy canes. This was by far the most difficult of all the competitions. Mia had three candy canes in her bowl at the four minute mark, while Arden had one, with one dangling. He shifted his body slowly to drop it over the bowl. Staying completely focused he flicked his head so the candy cane would fall into the bowl. They were tied with one minute left. Mia struggled to hook it. She clasped her hands behind her back tightly and got almost eye level to the table. Going at the canes sideways, she slid the hook part under the other. It finally hooked on, so she slowly lifted her head, the candy cane dangling, close to slipping off. Finally, she was able to jolt her head and, with just seconds left, the dangling cane flipped around the hook in her mouth and landed in the bowl right as the timer went off.

“MIA, you did it!” The girls surrounded her jumping up and down. Arden hit the table lightly and walked back to the guys, a little bummed as the competitive adrenaline started to lull. Mia watched him walk back. He turned around to look at her and she went over to him.

“I’m sorry, Arden. It’s looking like we are in the lead for the trophy now,” Mia said in a slight sarcastic tone and laughed, placing her hand on his arm. Arden laughed back.

“It all comes down to karaoke tomorrow,” He pulled her closer to him.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it?” She looked up at him and smiled nervously before pulling away.

“I’ll see you at the Fiddleleaf later.”

**

That afternoon, Arden rushed into the Fiddleleaf, passing Edith who was waiting for him.

“You’re late, young man.”

“I am so sorry, Edith. We were rehearsing for the Christmas karaoke competition tomorrow and time escaped me. It won’t happen again. Promise.”

“I believe you, dear. It’s okay, Frank covered the coffee counter. Luckily, it’s been pretty slow.” Edith walked to the back room, humming “Deck the Halls”. The front door chimed as it swung open, hitting the little bell above it. Mia entered and passed the front counter. She took a double take, seeing a folded gum wrapper. She blushed and unwrapped it. It read “Mia, I’m really glad you were able to meet Eli and my mom. Eli really likes you. He told me he thinks you’re pretty. I said eh, she’s alright.” She laughed and ran her thumb across the wrapper to straighten the creases before laying it down beside the computer. Her eyes were teary. She didn’t know how she could be falling for him this quickly, but she was.

**

The following day, the sororities and fraternities held last minute preparations for the final portion of the competition: the Christmas karaoke. The most daunting part of it all was they had to come up with original choreography, which the guys struggled with, but somehow managed to create an arrangement for their allotted two songs. Edith and Frank took the stage

that stood in the greenspace behind the campus center. Strings of lights hung above them, glittering as the sun slowly began to set behind them. An audience of about a hundred gathered from the town, students, and faculty to enjoy and raise money for their causes. Space heaters warmed the people of Hampstead as they walked around, taking in the lights, sipping toasty hot chocolate, all in anticipation for the entertainment they were about to receive.

“Alright, on behalf of the Greek Life organization here at Hampstead State and the wonderful people involved in the Great Greek Christmas Battle this year, Frank and I would like to welcome everyone here tonight! Thank you for coming to the final, highly anticipated portion of the battle: the Christmas karaoke! We will start with Delta Epsilon versus Iota Beta Psi. After they started, Mia stood with the rest of her sorority and waited anxiously for their time to compete. “Marshmallow World” by Darlene Love swirled around in her head. *Step two three four clap up two three four. Wait. Clap or step first? Shoot. Keep it together, Mia.*

“Last, but not least, we have Zeta Beta Alpha versus Sigma Phi. Ladies first.” Edith winked at Mia as she walked past her and off, stage right. The girls got in the formation Mia had taught them and cemented into their brains. All the girls were dressed in green tee shirts, black leggings, green elf shoes, an elf hat, and elf ears to complete the ensemble.

“Five, six, seven, eight,” Mia whispered. “This Christmas” echoed through the speakers as the girls twirled around the stage. With each move, they smiled wide, making sure everyone was watching and getting into it. At the end of the song, they all blew a kiss to Si Phi, looking out to the audience to the left where they were all standing. The second song started playing and the front row of girls synchronously walked to the front of the stage in a line then the back row walked forwards to the front. Arms interlocked, they started a kick line, full on Rockette mode.

The steps were flowing effortlessly and Mia felt at ease. She knew they were going to finish strong, either way, because the money was going to Arden's brother. The stress of everything left her body. She was just happy and hopeful. The final song ended, all the girls bowed and waved to the audience, especially the kids in the front row, who jumped up and down after their performance. Arden clapped and let out a "woo", eyes only on Mia. She high fived him and wished him luck before they took the stage.

"Good luck." With that, the men started with NSYNC's "Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays". They lip synched and made the stage their own, men on both sides, engaging the audience with their encouraging smiles. They winged their performance. Arden knew how much the competition meant to Mia, and though he never wanted to "throw" the competition, he thought that, without a full-blown routine, the ZBA's would be able to win the trophy back for Mia's last competition before she graduated in May. Mia could sense this routine-less performance and she narrowed her eyes, furrowing her brows. Arden shot her a guilty smile and shrug in the middle of their performance. Mia shook her head, but gave him a closed-mouth smile. *This boy.*

After the Si Phi's performance, they waved to the audience and walked off. Edith and Frank walked back up, still finishing tallying the votes for all of the sororities and fraternities.

"Thank you to everyone who has made the 2018 Great Greek Christmas Battle a success this year! We have collectively raised over \$6000, the highest we've ever raised," Edith said over the thunderous clapping that ensued. It began to quiet again as Edith opened up the folded card she had in her hand.

“My husband and I have the incredible honor of announcing this year’s three winners. Frank, can you hand me the envelope with the three winning teams, please?” Frank handed her a green glittered envelope, tied with a candy cane striped ribbon. Edith pulled the ribbon and the bow fell to the floor of the stage. She opened the envelope and set her reading glasses on the tip of her nose.

“Without further adieu, the three winning teams this year are... Delta Epsilon, Lambda Rho, and Zeta Beta Alpha!” Edith shook her fists in the air in celebration. Mia and the girls jumped up and down, screaming. One of the girls in Delta Epsilon and one of the guys in Lambda Rho ran up to the stage. The girl tapped on the microphone.

“Hey! Everybody can you listen up for a second?” the girl asked. The crowd quieted.

“Sorry to interrupt all the excitement, but this will only take a minute. My name is Madison and this is Kyle. We heard about Arden’s brother, Eli, whom is suffering from Leukemia right now.” Arden looked up, confused about how they found out.

“He is in grave need of a bone marrow transplant and we know our charities are important, but nothing compares to community. Family. So we all talked with our sisters and brothers and agreed that *all* the money should go to him.” Arden stood there, tears welling up in his eyes. A smile crept on his face as he mouthed “thank you” and waved up to the stage. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned his head to see Mia, sweetly standing behind him.

“Did you orchestrate this?”

“I did. I’m sorry, I didn’t know if it was okay-,” Before Mia could finish her sentence, Arden grabbed her face and kissed her. They both fell into the kiss as the snow fell around them. They pulled away and Arden giggled and gave her a gum wrapper.

“What’s this?”

“Why don’t you open it and find out?” Mia unfolded the flaps of the silver wrapper and read the words out loud “I love you”.

“Oh, you love me now, do you Hanes?”

“Ehhh, kinda. Maybe.”

“I kinda maybe, you know, too.”

“I *don’t* know. Please elaborate.”

“I love you, Arden Hanes.” This time Mia pulled his arm to wrap around her waist and kissed him.

“Merry Christmas, Mia.”

“Merry Christmas, Arden.”

END