

## Chapter 1

She was two buildings over and five months away from where it happened. It didn't matter. She might as well have been there again, hunched over her English final exam, sobbing for twenty sets of eyes to see.

The fall semester of Adria's junior year would be different, she assured herself over and over again. The students around her in ED 400, Philosophy of Education, were mostly unfamiliar to her. She took a deep, shaky breath, settling her heart rate until her eyes landed on a girl two seats in front of her. Her brain recognized her immediately. A slow, sympathetic smile and the raising of the girl's eyebrows was all it took. Every ounce of reassurance was gone.

Adria wiped the sweat from her hands onto her jeans. The professor, a middle-aged man with a gray buzz cut, and glasses perched on the end of his nose, had been talking for several minutes now.

"Groups of three ideally," he continued, "two if you must. I want each group to email me before the end of the day."

From what she gathered through her panic, she had to join a group and work with them for the entire semester. She felt it wasn't completely out of the question that several people in the room knew about her breakdown. Surely, those who did know would consider her dead weight.

Adria gave herself enough credit to think she was somewhat capable. Before the incident in question, her grades hovered just above a B average. It was her ability to perform under pressure that was the problem.

The whole room was already in motion. She sat on the edge of her seat searching for anyone who was willing to make eye contact.. Everyone was pairing up, forming clusters of three, many of them already leaving the room.

Her hands clambered to shove all of her things in her bag, not bothering to zip it before she approached one group after another, being rejected each time with apologetic looks. Irrational as it was, she felt the entire semester was slipping away, and with it, her dream of being a teacher.

She was left in the room with herself, the professor, and a single male student. The student, a young man speaking in a low voice, was standing next to Professor Merkins by the door of the classroom. Adria approached them, meaning to stand back until they finished their conversation, but the Professor turned and raised his eyebrows to her, waiting for her to speak.

"Hi, sorry. I wasn't able to find a group." She looked between the student and the professor, and got the feeling that neither of them wanted to be listening to her.

The young man standing next to her glanced at her briefly before looking back to Merkins. His deep set eyes and his heavy brow gave his face a stark, rigid look. She tried to focus on Merkins as he spoke instead.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Adria Holzer."

"Ok then," he smiled. "Looks like I've got a partner right here for you, Adria. A group of two will be more work, but it looks like that will have to suffice. You'll be paired with-" he looked at the guy.

“Rowan Briggs.” He stared directly at the professor as he spoke, moving something small and plastic around his hand.

Merkins grabbed the stack of papers off his desk and nodded to both of them. “Make sure you email me by the end of the day.” He tucked the papers underneath his arm and walked out the door.

Adria took her phone from her pocket and looked back to Rowan, who was staring at the door. “Can I get your number?” she asked, her face flushing slightly, “so we can work on the presentation.”

Rowan looked back to her. His complete lack of warmth had Adria overcompensating with an overly-friendly tone.

She took a slow breath, trying to settle her nerves before he began rattling off his phone number and email address. She saw him clench his jaw as she typed the digits into her phone.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll text you so you have my number.”

Rowan put the object from his hand into his ear, a hearing aid, she realized. He frowned slightly and nodded, heading out of the room without saying anything.