

## Prologue: Drew

This is not a break in. I swear!

These kinds of justifications have become so second nature to me by now that I continuously repeat the words in my head, hoping to seem as inconspicuous as possible. But no matter what the situation, it usually doesn't work. Fortunately, at the moment there's no one around who could see me and draw the wrong conclusions as I struggle to fit the key into the old lock on the door to the store and stubbornly ignore the cold air blowing on the back of my neck. I jerk the handle several times, my fingers stiff and clumsy thanks to my threadbare gloves, and leverage my full weight against the door. Finally it clicks – that took long enough – and with one last furtive glance over my shoulder I step inside. The loud door chime sends my heart plummeting into my stomach. Damn, I should have thought about the bell earlier! It doesn't get any more conspicuous than that. At least my steps are muffled by the carpet. While my pulse slowly calms again, I look around the cozy room.

The strings of lights draped along the overflowing shelves are turned off, and the burned down candles on the counter give a melancholy impression. Despite that, I'm overcome with a thoughtful calmness.

One last time, just this one time.

With a wistful smile I run my fingers along one of the shelves bending perilously under the weight of the tomes. I can practically see Lia before my eyes, watch her roam through the bookstore. A flood of memories flows through me. I think back on how transporting that monster of a Christmas tree through the subway nearly drove us crazy. Now the tree stands trimmed and decorated next to the reading nook Justus and I refurbished. I remember how we almost broke our teeth on my failed attempt to bake gingerbread. Then we drew straws to figure out who would run over to the supermarket in the pouring rain and get some edible cookies. I remember our kiss under the mistletoe that I hung over the door to the employee break room for just that reason – even though Lia had protested so adorably. If only it didn't hurt so much just thinking their names. My chest constricts even more tightly than it already was. I doubt I'll ever be able to breathe freely again.

How I wish I could take one of the pens – its clip broken off by Lia out of nervous habit – and leave her an apology on the notepad beside the register. My hands would tremble and not be able to write a single legible word. They tremble now, too.

It's a good thing I came by foot and didn't drive. Tristan would have killed me if I'd borrowed his darling in this kind of weather. Of course, he'd all too gladly wring my neck for other reasons, too. Nonetheless, he is my brother. Just like Nico, whose safety I should be focused on right now – not on the pain of having lost Lia. Those two are the only family I still have left.

As if struck by lightning, I turn away and quickly move to the exit, before the memories of her touch in this place become too vivid again. I can almost hear her laughing at one of my jokes, and the scent of her coconut shampoo hangs in the air. If I can barely stand it, how must Lia be feeling?

The moment I step over the threshold the snowstorm overtakes me. All of London has been firmly in its grip since midday yesterday. I lock up and push the key into the shop through the mail slot. Now there is no going back.

I should not be out here. Alone. On Christmas Eve.

I blink against the snowflakes and hunch my shoulders. Okay, it's not like I didn't deserve this, after what I did to Lia. With my hands balled into fists, I stomp through the snow towards the next confrontation. What awaits me? Somehow it seems to me like another goodbye. That used to be exactly what I wanted, to be anywhere but here.

If I'm lucky, Tristan is preparing a premature end to all of this.

Merry Christmas to me!

## Chapter 1: Lia

Too late.

Within seconds of noticing the girl sitting at the head of the table and listlessly nibbling on marmalade toast, my heart rate soars. It's too late to turn around and pretend I didn't want to go into the tiny kitchen of the shared apartment. Immediately, unease spreads through my body and seems to cut off my breath.

*I can't do this.*

The grocery bags pull me to the floor. I set them on the blue-white tiles next to the trash can and the watering can. I should have gone past the kitchen and inconspicuously checked to see if there was someone in there before I came into the room. Normally the apartment would be empty around now.

If I could go back and choose again, I would go right back to Dad's woven cocoon of stories and dreams, where everything seemed possible and I could amuse myself in the theater of the mind. Imagination on, world off. Unfortunately, it's impossible to shut out the real world. And for me least of all.

I have to put away the groceries, at least the ones that need to go in the refrigerator. Despite the dark-skinned girl in the silver leggings and an over-sized, hooded cat sweatshirt and the sadness she radiates. Tracey is already giving me a weird look. In the past few weeks since my rushed move into the shared apartment I've only rarely encountered my three housemates. And now it's October already. I hadn't figured that everything would still be so unfamiliar, even now.

"Lianne?"

"Lia, please," I correct Tracey automatically, sounding unreasonably out of breath. "Just Lia is fine."

"Sorry," Tracey apologizes halfheartedly and tosses her hair, gathered in a single braid, over her shoulder. "I'll make a note of it."

Somehow it pains me that we still haven't made it past a surface level familiarity. I've seen even less of Ina and Penelope. I imagined life sharing an apartment with roommates differently. Things like cooking together, watching tv series, talking about everything under the sun... Instead, I've perfected the art of

avoiding all encounters, even though I actually would like to make some contacts. It isn't that I disapprove of other people. On the contrary; as soon as I even look at someone, I immediately try to empathize with them and find out what they're feeling at the moment. At some point, though, these intense perceptions take so much energy out of me that I have to pull back and recharge my batteries. It's like a kind of defense mechanism. Unfortunately, not everyone understands that need, which has often gotten me labeled as weird or unusual in the past. It bothers me that the fear of being rejected again still weighs so heavily on me.

“Do you happen to have any aspirin, Lia?”

Immediately I rummage through my purse and pop one out of the foil into Tracey's hand, happy that I can do something for her. Why did she stay here instead of going to her classes? Is she sick? If I had the strength for it, I'd be happy to help her with more than just an aspirin. She really does look exhausted. As soon as Tracy has washed down the pill with a sip of water, she turns back to her cell phone. Only then do I notice that she's Skyping with someone. There must have been a long pause in the conversation before, and suddenly I have an idea what might have caused Tracey's headache.

“So, what's going on?” sounds from the cellphone speaker.

That must be her boyfriend in New York, if I'm not mistaken. I mean, Tracey mentioned that he was studying there. I don't want to keep bothering her, but I had really been looking forward to the vegetable casserole I wanted to make today: broccoli, zucchini, peppers and carrots in a cream sauce, topped with cheese and baked. One of my all-time favorites. Cutting the vegetables always calms me, and while it bakes in the oven is a good time to read a few pages. On the other hand, alarm bells are going off in my head now urging an immediate retreat: *Everything was a bit too much today. You need a break. You are pretty wiped out.* How could I not be? After six hours at the university, six hours of people, six hours of foreign feelings.

The conversation between Tracey and her boyfriend is visibly strained. She has her arms wrapped around her torso and looks pinched, while he takes on an impatient, annoyed tone: “Trace, just say something!”

Finally, I tear myself away from her and focus on unpacking. The sight of the dirty silverware piling up in the sink, the half full cup next to the coffee machine, and the breadcrumbs on the counter make every fiber in me even more tense. I break into a sweat. As if it weren't enough that Tracey's despondence is hanging over the kitchen like an invisible glass dome. My highly attuned senses will not allow me to overlook the clutter.

And now Tracey flares up: “What is it? What am I supposed to say to that, Charlie? I think it's bullshit that we keep talking about the same thing and never find a solution!”

I try not to listen as much as possible. Did I have to walk in right in the middle of a fight? Can't Tracey take this relationship talk to her room? Immediately I scold myself for that unsympathetic thought. Imagining what a relief it would be to come home and not have to deal with another unpleasant situation at every turn almost brings tears to my eyes. But I won't allow myself to be this vulnerable in front of Mom. I could never feel at home with her. I swallow. *Focus on yourself. Tracey's problems have nothing to do with you.*

I move towards the refrigerator covered with postcards and post-it notes, systematically put milk, yogurt, eggs and cheese into my section, and then repeat the process for the non-perishable food. I use the distraction to gain a little distance from Tracey and the negative vibrations, and use a mindfulness approach to give my full attention to the unpacking. Focus on every single movement and carry it out with full awareness, that's the trick. Rice, onions, honey ... my stomach's rumbling has stopped and yielded to light queasiness. Noodles, pesto, soup...

In contrast to Tracey, I failed to plan a fresh new start and put a distance of at least a thousand miles between me and my former life. I didn't even make it out of my hometown for college, only to the other side of the Thames River. You might've thought all the young adult novels I devoured by the dozen when I was younger would've shown me how it was done.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Tracey stand up abruptly. The scraping of chair legs over the tile floor makes me flinch. A jar of olives almost falls on me because I was distracted and hadn't set it far enough back in the cabinet. Reflexively I catch it. Oof! Something embarrassing like that is just what I need.

"Hope you have a good day," Tracey excuses herself without looking up from the display of her smartphone before she leaves the kitchen and heads towards her room. I doubt that she has even a rudimentary idea of how our not even five-minute-long encounter has gotten to me. Mechanically I empty the last cloth bag, lean against the counter, and take a deep breath.

All the way through high school, I was homeschooled and took online classes. Just one day in a full classroom, the noise in the hallways, the other children... It wasn't easy for me to cope with all those impressions and not be overwhelmed. I did try. Again and again. But eventually I had to concede that I truly am one of those highly sensitive people. Going to school had simply overwhelmed me, every time, and left me so drained that my parents finally figured out a different way, in order to spare me the ordeal. Nonetheless, after high school I decided not to isolate myself anymore; I wanted to be in the midst of things. I wanted nothing more than to start a new chapter – or more like a second volume, as one college student among many, including dorm life and student parties and everything else that goes with it. In a light haze of hubris and defiance. I have to admit that now.

Done. I close the cupboard door with a little too much force. That's what I am, completely done. All of a sudden, I can't stand it in here another second. The egg yellow walls seem to be closing in on me and it's getting harder to breathe. I've long since given up on the idea of making the vegetable casserole. It doesn't matter that I just left some of my savings at Tesco, considerably underestimated the cost of a week's groceries, and now won't even be eating what I bought (with the exception of some sweets and snacks). And the longer I stay in the apartment the greater the risk of running into Tracey, Ina, or Penelope again. Ina's nagging and Penelope's hyperactivity would be the crowning touch to the day and rob me of my last bit of strength. When it comes to order and cleanliness in the apartment, Ina always has something to complain about, but without sticking to all our agreements herself. Recently she even started to bicker about what time we do our laundry. Although she hasn't unleashed her frustration on us in person yet, but pours it out in our WhatsApp group, I don't want to take my chances today. Penelope, on the other hand, exudes so much high spirits and excessive energy that I seem even more inadequate in comparison. No, Tracey's bad mood and the stress with her boyfriend were more than enough for me already today.

Honestly, though, I should consider myself lucky to have found a room for the semester on such short notice. Originally, I had planned to continue living with Dad for a while, to get used to the university and then search for something on my own. But then everything unfolded differently. *Oh, Dad.* I close my eyes and bite my lip as the pain threatens to overwhelm me with full force again. How am I supposed to endure this?

The next moment, I grab my purse and throw in a package of cookies. I have to get out of here! And I already know where I'm headed. Even if *he* will never be there again, there's only one place where I can truly calm down. I cross the narrow foyer and leave the building through the back door to take the shortcut through Bethnal Green Garden to the subway station named after it. I'm in such a hurry that I slip several times on the wet autumn leaves. On the muddy path through the park I almost slide right into a man who stops abruptly to pull out a fancy camera for a photo. Obviously a tourist! What on earth is there to photograph here? I apologize anyway and bury myself further into the cozy fleece jacket I scored in a tiny vintage store in Camden. Thankfully it isn't raining right now, and I pause for a moment to take a few calming breaths of fresh air.

*If you want to, then try it, Lia. I'm always here for you. If you need help...* I can almost hear his voice in the rustling of the half-bare branches.

"If only you were still here," I mumble to myself and pick up my pace again. It's pretty hard to run away from yourself.

In the subway, all the emotions of the other passengers roll over me before I have a chance to do some damage control by putting on noise-cancelling headphones. A young woman across from me crumples a tissue in her hands repeatedly. Although she looks reasonably composed, I can feel her tears on her cheeks as if they had rolled down my own face. A lump forms in my throat. Two boys laugh about a video they're playing loud enough for everyone to hear, straining my nerves more. A dog owner berates a businessman with a suitcase to be more careful, as he just missed rolling over his pet. Now my stomach is rebelling, too. The trip to Liverpool Street only takes a few minutes, but I have to make a serious effort to imagine a bubble surrounding me and let all the stimuli bounce off the best I can. Following the masses, I push my way out of the Central Line car and line up on the right side of the escalator, while staring straight at my feet. Because of their size, especially, central stations like this one are more draining than regular subway stations. Soon it will be even worse, as the holiday season is inexorably approaching. Just one more reason I should probably have left London.

In about ten minutes I can breathe easy. That spurs me forward. I wind through the narrow, cobblestone alleyways between Spitalfields and Brick Lane instead of following the main road in the direction of the above ground railway track. I love this neighborhood's alternative scene, with its street art and somewhat raw charm, original stores on every corner, entire factory halls filled with delicious foods and cozy coffee shops.

When I spot the dark green façade with its golden letters and paint peeling in spots, I notice that some of the tension in my shoulders has eased along the familiar route. I'm so glad to finally be here that the stubborn lock doesn't even annoy me. With a chime the glass door swings shut behind me. The air is stale and dusty, but nonetheless, I'm greeted by the unmistakable smell of printed ink on paper that will always remind me of home. The spines of the books – the smooth ones, some still wrapped in plastic, and the ones textured from being handled – beckon me to trail my fingers across them, just like I've been doing since I was young. I never would've thought it would feel so good to come here again.

Surrounded by heart wrenching romance novels and mysteries that make your blood run cold, amongst nonfiction, travel guides and cookbooks.

I cannot think of a more magical place. Here I feel no sadness, no regret, no anger, even though I've carried those feelings around with me day and night, and couldn't concentrate on the moment, much less the future. Yes, it hurts not to see my dad standing behind the shop counter like usual. And knowing that he'll never stand there again, or sort through the new releases or set aside specific books for his regular customers is even worse. It's been two and a half months now that the bookshop has been closed, two and a half months since Dad, just 43 years old and out of nowhere, had a heart attack. Two and a half months that I haven't been here.

*Whatever your father was thinking, leaving you this bookstore ... (quoted from my mother), right at the moment I'm completely grateful to him and doubly happy that he bought the store when he did, against all reason (mom again).*

I pull out the cookies, determined to retreat to the back room of *A New Chapter* and indulge myself in a small, well-deserved wellness break. Animal crackers are one of my most treasured childhood memories and a proven way to calm down. Add a cup of marzipan tea, and I'm back to my usual self again. Of course, I don't intend to open the bookstore, at least not now. Soon, if –

The loud roar of a motorcycle scares me so badly that I drop the package I just opened. As I spin around, I can see the black monster race past the display window only to brake hard a second later, skid onto the sidewalk, and disappear from my view. The sound of the motor falls silent. Before I can shake myself out of my stupor, the driver of the hellish chariot pops into view and makes a beeline for Dad's bookshop, this time on foot.

Hold on. *Closed* – we're closed! Doesn't he see the sign? Through the lowered visor of his helmet, I can't see anything, except for the lined denim jacket that emphasize his wide shoulders, very faded black jeans and heavy biker boots. My heart skips a beat as it dawns on me. Oh god, a burglary. This is going to be a burglary! And the door won't even slow him down. The door I didn't lock behind me. I was so relieved to finally get here that I forgot to lock it. Or did I?

Then the guy takes off his helmet and steps into the bookshop. So I didn't lock the door; so much for that. A chill runs through me. He doesn't look particularly excited by what he sees, and no wonder. There isn't much to take here. He picked the wrong place for a burglary. I may be infatuated with every single book here, but I doubt this guy appreciates the value of my treasures. His sullen gaze stops when he sees me. He can't be much older than me.

"Excuse me? Can I help you with something?" I inquire, still not convinced that he won't order me to empty the cash register. I mean, what kind of a bad-boy performance is this? He isn't wearing a leather jacket, but the motorcycle makes up for that. He must have tattoos. His slightly too long hair hangs almost to his chin, and the color combined with the windswept look reminds me of espresso foam. His presence is definitely too much. The cogs in my head are spinning in high gear, conjuring one scenario after another about how this encounter might play out, until I snap myself out of it. He is a customer who overlooked the closed sign, and he is only here because of my own forgetfulness. Nothing more and nothing less. For a moment, we are both silent.



“I’m just looking around,” the guy fends me off, as if I had stepped too close to him. “Go ahead and round up your zoo animals first.”

Heat rises in my cheeks. My animal crackers are scattered around the tips of my gleaming tennis shoes on the dark red carpet. Suddenly I’m actually glad that the revenue from *A New Chapter* hadn’t been enough to pay for security cameras that could have captured this embarrassing moment.

“They’re not running away anytime soon,” I counter just as snippily as the wannabe gangster and surprise myself for once with this – I find – felicitous parry. His testiness has immediately latched onto me. With long, determined strides my ‘conversation partner’ brushes past me, so that I have to jump back more than step back, and crush two animal crackers in the process. He disappears into the back part of the store, where the second-hand books and a few antiquarian titles are kept. My repartee fizzles out, just as ineffectively as my initial friendliness.

“In case I can help you with anything,” I call almost too tentatively for him to hear, distracted by the masculine note of his scent and trying not to lose my train, “let me know. Although we are actually closed.”

At that he pokes his head out from behind a shelf, and raises his eyebrows – somewhat amused? “You work here?”

No *Oh, sorry, I didn’t know! I’ll hurry up.*

“Why shouldn’t I work here?”

The boy shrugs his shoulders and turns his attention back to the books in front of his nose. He pulls one out and examines it, thumbing through the pages with concentration. He has chosen a collection of poetry with a marine blue cover and a silvery bookmark that I’ve had my eye on for months already. I don’t believe for a second that he’s actually interested in Emily Dickinson. But it gives me a chance to have a closer look at him without him noticing. The high forehead, dark eyelashes, his nicely curved lips opened just a bit to reveal slightly crooked teeth, which make him a tiny bit more likeable.

“The door wasn’t locked, so I thought it was open.”

It takes me a minute to recognize that is supposed to be an explanation. Or an apology? My fingers twitch. The desire just to throw him out becomes overpowering. I’m sure that my discomfort must be obvious, but it doesn’t seem to bother him at all. If I were in his shoes, I’d be incredibly nervous. I’m anxious enough for both of us. What happened to his terrible mood? First he brings it with him, unloads it on me, and now he suddenly seems completely at ease.

“And I thought people who visit bookstores could read. There’s a closed sign on the door.” Immediately I want to slap my forehead, like that WhatsApp emoji. I can’t talk to a customer like that! Not even when my boundaries are overstepped. Which they have been, by the way. Precisely because I generally try to suppress negative emotions into oblivion out of consideration for others. Enough is enough! Why can’t he just beat it? To avoid just standing around and waiting for his reaction, I crouch and gather the crushed cookies. His smug attitude irritates me just as much as the fact that I find him attractive. The next time I look up, the guy is coming towards me. He must have put the poems back on the shelf.

“You’re probably right about that. Don’t you have any audiobooks?”

I rise to my feet, brush off my checkered pants, and throw the crumbs in the trash can behind the counter. I set down the package with the remaining cookies a safe distance from the edge.

“No, I’m sorry.” My overstimulated self has finally taken over the reigns and makes sure that I don’t try to continue trying to behave like everybody’s darling. In moments like these I usually come across as stiff and standoffish, almost insensitive, even though the exact opposite is true. But raising another wall and making myself unapproachable is the only way I can protect myself.

His gaze burns into mine. I fold my hands on the counter and withstand his silent challenge. The counter between us lends me new courage and a feeling of superiority. I suspect he just wants to toy with me a little. The boy throws a quick glance over his shoulder into the street. Ha, with that I would’ve won the staring contest! As he turns back to me, it is as if he’s a different person. He’s even smiling, sadly without showing his teeth. Of course, he’s not only good-looking, but also well aware of it. His eyes shimmer in the same espresso-foam shade as his hair. “I’m afraid we got off to a bad start. I’m Drew!”

“Lia,” I reply, not half as enthusiastic as this guy, who leans over towards me conspiratorially. Rather than convincing me, this display of charm makes me want to roll my eyes. As if I would swoon every time he looks in my direction, like a naïve little girl. He shouldn’t let himself be fooled by my double-bun hairdo and the animal crackers.

“Okay, down to business. I need a last-minute birthday present for my little brother. He’s turning ten. What do you have in comics?”

Drew hadn’t appeared to be in the mood for joking when he arrived here. His face has more color than it did, but something was weighing on him until just now. And yes, he played it off with his attitude and hid his true feelings behind a mask of coolness and indifference. I use the opportunity to put an end to this farce. I don’t have the energy for something like this. I haphazardly search out a lesser known *Spider Man* comic that I read years ago and a ten-year-old might enjoy.

Drew presses a ten-pound note into my hand and takes his leave with a hand raised in a wave. I wait until I hear the roar of the motorcycle’s engine. Only then do I lock the door behind him. Finally! Got rid of him.