

## LOST LIVES excerpt

Emily tried to shut out the crowds as she and Jerome crossed the street towards The Holmeswood. *They were all laughing at her. Laughing and pointing.*

The angry note she had seen posted on the lift was gone. An old man dressed in dark overalls rubbed polish into the doors.

“Is it working again?” Jerome’s voice echoed through the foyer.

The old man waved a hand.

They took the stairs in silence, with Jerome stealing worried looks as they climbed. His apartment was identical in design to Emily’s. It was strange, as if someone had replaced her living room furniture with a small tatty sofa, a cheap table and chairs, and a bookshelf half-filled with play scripts and film subscription magazines.

“Here, sit down.” Jerome guided Emily to the sofa, then disappeared into the kitchen. He returned with two glasses and a full bottle of malt whiskey. “Drink this. It’ll help to calm the nerves.”

He handed Emily a glass and she stared at the amber liquid. Before she could change her mind, she swallowed it down. Her insides ignited as the burn of alcohol turned her veins into trails of blazing gunpowder.

“One more. Doctor’s orders.”

After draining the glass for a second time, Emily felt the panic beginning to recede. Minutes later, the iron grip on her chest relaxed. She drew in a deep, steady breath.

Jerome fetched his laptop from the bedroom. After searching online for the relevant phone numbers, Emily spent the next twenty minutes cancelling her cards. Then, she made an awkward call to Paulina Blanchard, who agreed to stop by in an hour with a spare set of keys. When she was done, she handed Jerome his mobile phone, thanked him, and paced over to the window. A sad spray of drizzle clung to the glass. Daylight was coming to an end.

“You sure there’s no one else you want to call?” Jerome asked, watching her at the window.

Emily was quiet for a long time. She shook her head.

“How could someone have taken my bag without me seeing? It was right there, right next to me.”

“You’d be amazed how easily it’s done. A crowded room. People milling up and down. You’ve got small-time thieves working in rings all over the city and the police can’t seem to do anything about it because they’re too busy dealing with all the serious crimes. Rape, murder, gang warfare ... I guess if you’re going to squeeze all these people into one place you’re going to have your fair share of problems—most of them being the human kind. Theft like that isn’t worth reporting, unless you have insurance.”

Emily watched the tops of umbrellas moving back and forth.

“Like I said, London’s not easy,” Jerome continued. “But you’ll get used to it after a while. All the noise goes away. You learn to push and shove. And you can choose to be as invisible as you want.”

“Did you grow up here?”

Jerome shook his head. “Who does?”

Turning her back on the street, Emily thought about the contents of her bag. She didn’t care about any of it except for the photograph of her mother. It was the only one she’d kept, and she had been saving it; sealing it in an envelope, waiting until she could bear to look at it again. Now, it was gone. The only images she had of her mother remained in her mind, and they were not how she wanted to remember her.

Jerome was talking, oblivious that she had slipped away. She didn’t want to think about her mother. She didn’t want to think about what had happened in the café. Her thoughts turned to Alina Engel.

“Did you know the people who used to live in my apartment?” she asked, returning to the sofa.

The question caught Jerome off guard. “You mean the married couple? A little, I suppose. Although I probably heard them more than I actually saw them.”

“Harriet said they fought a lot.”

“That’s an understatement! Although fights are usually two-sided. This was more of an ‘I’ll shout, you’ll shut up and listen’ sort of situation. That asshole certainly liked the sound of his own voice.”

“What did he shout about?”

“Hard to say. The ceilings aren’t thin enough to make out actual words. He was always pissed off about something though. And poor Alina. She’d never cry in front of him. She’d wait until he’d stormed off somewhere. I would hear her in the bathroom, her sobs coming down the pipes. And then one day, it all went quiet. According to Harriet she left him, went back to Germany. Good for her.”

Emily leaned forward. “Are you sure that she left him?”

“What do you mean?”

She told him about the missing persons notice in the supermarket, about the painting of Alina she’d found in her apartment.

Jerome poured out another couple of whiskeys.

“The police came around not long after things went quiet. Knocking door to door, asking if anyone had seen Alina. I told them about the fighting, but that was before we heard she’d left him. Perhaps Karl did report her missing, but that doesn’t mean she actually was missing. Maybe she thought, ‘Screw you, asshole! I’m out of this chicken shit hell hole!’ It would be a nice way to get back at him—to disappear in the middle of the night and make him sweat for a while. Then a few weeks later, the police track her down at her family home back in Germany, and it’s divorce courts, alimony, case closed.”

Emily sipped her whiskey. The alcohol mingled with the fluoxetine in her bloodstream, leaving her lightheaded and disconnected.

“It’s plausible,” she said. “But who told Harriet that Alina had gone back to Germany?”

“Karl Henry.”

“Exactly. The word of a wife beater. The word of the man she supposedly ran away from.”

“But why would he lie?”

“If your wife went missing, why would you move out of your home? What if she came back? How would she find you? Wouldn't moving out be the last thing you'd do?”

“Unless,” Jerome said, “she'd turned up alive and well in Germany.”

Emily scowled. “Her clothes were still in my apartment, all bagged up. If she was planning on leaving wouldn't she have taken them with her?”

They were both quiet, the silence an awkward reminder that they were not yet friends.

“Tell me about being a teacher,” Jerome said.

Emily's shoulders stiffened. She drained her glass. “What do you want to know?”

“What did you teach?”

Another long silence. Emily crossed her arms. She began to scratch the back of her hand. Jerome stared at the thin scars scored into her flesh there.

“I taught English,” Emily said, quickly pulling her sleeves over her hands. The conversation had just stepped onto an old rope bridge that clung to the sides of a black, bottomless chasm. She got up again, pacing back to the window.

“So you appreciate the arts? What were the kids like? I bet there were some real pains in the ass.”

The ropes creaked. The knots unravelled with each step forward.

“My parents used to despair,” Jerome said, when Emily didn't answer. “Every day there'd be a call from the principal. *Jerome stole from the petty cash. Jerome wrote obscenities on the whiteboard.* And then along came Miss Davey, the drama teacher. Suddenly, I had an outlet. She showed me how to channel all those feelings. To make characters out of them. I wonder which of your kids will look back one day and say, she was the one. She got me.”

Emily stood, frozen in front of the window, knowing that if she turned around now she would not see Jerome—she would see *him*, cutting at the tethers of the rope bridge, watching as each one snapped until the bridge fell and they both tumbled into the darkness together.

Phillip. His name was everywhere; weeping in the raindrops that fell on the window panes, howling in the wind that whistled past the corners of The Holmeswood. In the street below, it screamed from the mouths of passers-by.

“Are you all right?”

Dizzy, Emily shook her head.

Jerome leapt off the sofa and hurried into the kitchen. He returned with a glass of water.

“Drink this. Maybe the whiskey wasn't such a good idea after all.”

Emily took the glass and heard ice cubes clink together, singing the boy's name. *Phil-lip.* She and Jerome were both silent, watching the rain slide down the window. The intercom buzzer announced Paulina Blanchard's arrival.

Emily turned away and picked up her coat.

“Thank you,” she said. “For everything.”

“Will you be all right?”

Without turning around, Emily nodded then walked unsteadily out of the room.