

BONUS CHAPTER

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Once again, Lydia's face seems to flicker. Her lips part, her eyes go unfocused. My heart climbs up into my throat, but even before the question can fully form in my head—*is this another seizure?*—it's over. Lydia carries on with straightening the straps of her bathing costume.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I can't resist asking.

Lydia's huff of a laugh sounds miffed. She tucks her neatly folded school uniform into her metal locker. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

I think over my response as I adjust the ill-fitting Presley's School for Girls bathing costume. "You just don't seem like yourself today."

"It's the same thing I told you earlier—I'm tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

Maybe a week ago, I would have accepted that. Would have told myself—yet again—that I was just imagining the changes in Lydia's behavior. Like how sometimes she seemed to be absent for a second or two. Or how there were days when her moods swung wildly. Or how she fell asleep in class several times a week.

But I can no longer pretend.

Last week while over at Lydia's house for a bit of fun, I turned my attention to her younger sister for hardly a moment. When I looked back to Lydia, I found her still sitting in her chair, but transformed. Her head was angled back, and her hands pulled up to her collar bone, the wrists bent in.

I screamed and dropped my glass of iced tea, neither of which caused any change in Lydia's demeanor—she was clearly elsewhere. But it brought Lydia's stern mother rushing in. She sent me out of the room, and ordered their housekeeper to call for Lydia's father, Dr. LeVine.

He arrived what felt like an eternity later. He marched through the entryway, calling for Mrs. LeVine, and seeming oblivious to my trembling figure curled up on their couch. Dr. and Mrs. LeVine had a serious, whispered conversation, and then Lydia's mother came to talk to me.

I had expected an explanation of some sort, or for her to weep with fear, which is what I felt like doing. Instead she said a solemn, "You must not tell anyone what you've seen. Not even Lydia. I cannot impress upon you strongly enough how important it is that this remain a private matter."

The idea of keeping any kind of secret from Lydia was preposterous, but to keep *this*?

In my silence, Mrs. LeVine carried on. "Lydia believes these are fainting spells, and that's sufficient for now. Once Dr. LeVine has determined the right kind of medication, the right dose...then we'll tell her. We just can't..." Mrs. LeVine seemed to reconsider. "If people were to know..." Again, she restarted. "There's just no benefit to this being common knowledge. This is family business, and it's to remain family business. Is that clear, Piper?"

I had given my word, which Mrs. LeVine seemed reluctant to accept, but what choice did she have? I couldn't unsee what I saw. Much as I might wish I could.

And now, as I watch Lydia tuck her hair up in her swimming cap, there's a weight that settles on me. I'm the only one who knows she could change at any moment. That she could become the Other Lydia.

“Oh, Piper. Did you forget your swimming costume again?” Mae Husboldt wears a Kelly green Jantzen suit with a towel slung over her shoulder. “I think I would rather fake sick than put on one of those awful Presley’s suits. They’re so old-fashioned.”

Normally I might rise to the occasion to snip at her, but my brain is getting plenty of exercise trying to work out the puzzle that is Lydia LeVine. “Who here should I care about impressing?”

But Mae is no longer paying attention to me. “Lydia, are you okay?”

I whirl, but Lydia is merely pressing a fingertip to the bridge of her nose and smiling wanly. “I’m fine, thank you. Just a bit of a headache.”

Mae leans against the closest locker. “You must have already had biology, then. My head has been killing me since second period.” She takes in our expressions. “Have you not?”

“We have it next,” I say.

“You haven’t seriously forgotten what’s happening in there today, have you?”

Now I remember—the frogs. The frogs that Mr. Hammond collected as froglets that we’ve studied these last few weeks. Today is the final test, and it’s worth a third of our grade.

“I completely forgot.” Lydia’s blue eyes are round as she looks at me. “I’m going to do awful.”

“No, you aren’t,” I say. “You’ll be fine.”

Lydia seems not to hear me. She keeps pushing on her cuticle.

“The test is awful. And the frogs stink. And—” Mae drops her voice low. “This isn’t even the worst of it. Tomorrow is part two of the test. You know what we have to do? *Dissect* them.”

Lydia gasps.

“What?” I choke on a laugh. “That’s not true.”

Mae’s jaw clenches. “Yes, it is. Mr. Hammond said that’s why he got two frogs. One for each of the senior biology classes.”

Lydia’s face is ashen. “That’s ... that’s barbaric.”

“Try not to worry about it, Lydia,” I say. “We don’t know that it’s true.”

Mae’s eyes narrow. “You think I would make this up? That I find dissecting frogs to be funny?”

“Piper didn’t mean to offend.” This response of Lydia’s is like a reflex, she uses it so often.

“Well, however Piper meant it, she could be kinder.”

“*Piper* is standing right here.” And I’m *not* apologizing for questioning Mae on this. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, Mae, but I haven’t heard anything about dissecting the frogs. Nor does that sound like Mr. Hammond.”

Mae’s eyebrows rise. “Doesn’t it? He’s so peculiar.”

I frown. “He’s idiosyncratic. That’s different.”

Mae double blinks. “Whatever. Remember when he caught that bat and made us study it?” She shivers. “He would definitely think frog dissection was the berries.”

With that Mae strides off toward the exit.

“She’s a piece of work,” I mutter to Lydia.

“Her mother is hard on her.”

So Lydia. Always looking for the best in someone. Always explaining away a flaw or foible. I suppose it’s how she’s withstood being my best friend all these years.

Lydia is still distant, but not like she's on the brink of another episode. Rather like she's fretting. She continues to push back the cuticle of her thumb, over and over.

I'm about to ask what's troubling her when she comes right out and speaks it. "I'm failing biology already." Her voice is quiet, despite how the locker room has emptied around us. "Remember when Mr. Hammond held me after on Monday?"

"You said it was to talk about a special project."

Lydia's eyes pool. "I lied to you. I mean, it *is* for a special project, but it's because I'm failing. I won't be able to graduate if I can't bring my grade up. And I promised Mr. Hammond I would study for the life cycle test, and I really meant to, but last night I just couldn't keep my eyes open..."

Which could either be from the toll the seizures take on Lydia's body or all the different medications Dr. LeVine is trying.

"Your parents could talk to Mr. Hammond. They could explain that..." How should I finish this?

"Explain that what?"

"That you haven't been healthy this spring."

"I'm a terrible biology student even when I am healthy." Lydia's jaw takes on a determined set. "No, I brought this on myself. I'll endure the consequence."

Joan of Arc has nothing on my pious friend.

I'm about to make a snide, unhelpful remark when it happens again—Lydia's mouth slips open and her eyes go vacant. The towel she's holding slips from her grasp, but she's present again even before it hits the ground.

"Whoops." She laughs airily, and the sound has me clenching my fists.

It's not funny! I want to yell, as if any of this is her fault. *This isn't normal!*

Lydia drapes her towel over her crooked arm, like the attendants do at the country club.

“Ready?”

“I . . . need to use the restroom.” I need to get my emotions under control before I break down in tears in front of Lydia. “I’ll be right in.”

I watch her walk toward the staircase that leads to the pool in the basement. I stand there and let thoughts swirl about my head. Tears build behind my closed eyelids, but none escape. What does all her strange behavior mean? The seizure I witnessed last week. These moments where she seems to disappear for seconds at a time. Her constant fatigue. Is this really something that a little time and the right combination of medication could fix?

Despite my having been eighteen for months now, I feel as though once again I’m thirteen. I’m thirteen and standing by Mother’s bed, watching her grow weaker and weaker.

“She’s getting worse,” I told Father.

“I know it seems that way,” he said. “But she’s going to turn a corner any day now. Just you wait and see.”

That had been all I could do—wait. Wait and listen to everyone tell me that she would get better, even when I knew in my heart she was *not* getting better. She was slipping away, and I could do nothing to save her.

And maybe that’s not what’s happening with Lydia now, but the emotion of it is so eerily similar that I find I can’t take in a full breath. I sink to the floor and focus on sucking air into my lungs and pushing air out.

Lydia isn’t like my mother, who was laid up in bed, covered in blankets despite the heaviness of the August heat. Lydia is still coming to school, still doing homework, still blushing

every time her chauffeur talks to her. This health situation is just a temporary setback that she needs help getting through.

Mr. Hammond likes me—maybe I could talk to him about Lydia. Only how would I convince him to give her a few more days to study if I can't tell him what's wrong? If only there was some reason that we didn't have the test next period. Like the room caught on fire or the frogs escaped...

The idea blooms in my mind.

No frogs would mean no test, right? The frogs are in the biology room, in the glass box by the window. This is sixth period, which is Mr. Hammond's free period. He almost always takes his papers down to the teacher's lounge to grade them so he can be with Miss Martin, the English teacher he carries a torch for.

I could sneak into his room and make it look like the lid was left off. Then I could free the frogs outside, all before the period is over.

First, I'll need to be excused from Physical Education.

Mr. Drees stands at the edge of the pool, a whistle hanging around his neck and a clipboard in hand. "I wondered if you were going to join us, Miss Sail."

"Sorry to be tardy, sir." I press a hand to my abdomen. "My stomach is awfully tight. Maybe I ate too fast at lunch? I don't know, but it feels dreadful."

His eyes narrow. A certain brand of girls regularly fake cramps to get out of participating in Physical Education, but Mr. Drees has had me in class for four years now, and I've never been one who enjoyed the sidelines. In the fall, I accidentally gave Mae a bloody nose during our unit on pickle ball. (Which I felt bad about, but really, she shouldn't have been standing so close behind me when I was getting ready to serve.)

“I think I should go to the nurse’s office,” I say. “Or maybe swimming will loosen it up?”

“Go to the nurse’s office, Miss Sail. When you feel better, you can come back.”

I give a blustery sigh. “Okay.” I maintain my measured pace until I get to the locker room.

I could swing by the nurse’s office first—solidify my alibi—but it’s on the opposite side of the building from Mr. Hammond’s class. I’ll just have to do the best I can with what I have.

I take a route that leads me past the teacher’s lounge. There I linger a moment, which is a risk, but it would give me a lot of peace of mind if I could verify that Mr. Hammond is following his usual pattern. I hear Miss Martin’s tinkling laugh and then ... yes, that’s Mr. Hammond’s baritone.

I should have an empty classroom waiting for me.

My bare feet slap against the cold tile of the halls, and I rush at the quickest pace I dare. I start up the first staircase. If I’m caught heading *upstairs* while in my bathing costume that’s a bit trickier to explain than if I’m caught heading *down*. Maybe I’m running an errand for Mr. Drees? Maybe I say nothing? Just charge ahead like I’m on a mission and can’t be bothered to take the time and explain.

The only girls I pass on the first staircase are freshmen, who give me and my bathing costume funny looks but don’t question me.

On the second staircase, however, my stomach pitches when I find not only a photographer setting up for some kind of portrait, but also several Presley’s girls. One girl holds a tennis racket, another holds a mixing bowl and spatula, and the third a small stack of textbooks. They look like an advertisement for a well-rounded education at Presley’s School for Girls, which I’m guessing is the point.

When the girl holding the textbooks curls a smile at me, I realize with a jolt it's Emma Crane. Of *all* people. But Emma is a sweet, quiet sort of girl. She wouldn't bother to tell her very cute older brother that she saw me running around school in bare feet and a horrid Presley's bathing costume, right?

I'm just going to say hello and go on my way. I can't worry about what Jeremiah may or may not hear because of this. "Hello," I say with a flash of a smile.

Emma's smile seems shy. "I should have guessed they would ask you to be in the ad."

The photographer—a tall man in a flat cap—turns to me with a gaze so critical, I want to shrink into the black and white linoleum floor.

"Lose the swim cap," is his verdict.

Okay, then. Apparently I'm not just liberating a few frogs in order to help my best friend graduate, I'm also posing for some photographs.

I pull off the cap. "Sorry to be late."

The photographer's gaze sharpens on my hair. "Is there a place nearby where you can fix that?"

"I believe there's a restroom upstairs." Next door to the biology classroom, as luck would have it. "I'll be right back."

"Hurry up," he calls after me. "I have a schedule to keep."

The biology room is empty as anticipated and holds the familiar smell of creek water and textbook. In the corner of the room, the frogs laze about in their glass container. Beside their habitat is the jar Mr. Hammond uses when he takes one out to put on our desks ... but where on my person would I hide that?

I hadn't yet considered how I would smuggle the frogs out of the school, and now I have a picture to pose for as well.

My swim cap remains in my hand—it'll have to do.

I open the top of the case and hesitate a moment. My chest is tight in the way that it gets when I've done something I shouldn't have. But I'm protecting Lydia. And, if what Mae said is true, I'm saving the frogs from being killed and sliced open in front of a class of grossed out girls. Talk about an undignified way to go.

"Time to go back home, boys." I reach in and retrieve them. "Sorry for the close quarters. This won't take long."

I hope, anyway.

In the bathroom, I do what I can in thirty seconds to re-pin my faux bob. Then—after a moment's consideration—I secure the end of the swim cap with a hair pin and leave it on the other side of the wastebasket.

A photograph can't take *too* long, can it?

But fifteen minutes later, I'm still being arranged and rearranged. The photographer keeps voicing his distaste of working with even numbers instead of odd.

"I don't have to be in the photograph," I finally say in a cheery voice. "Do you want me to go?"

"No, no, we'll just make do. Swim girl, let's put you on this side, and tennis girl, you go on the other. Books and cooking, I want you in the middle."

My cheeks hurt from smiling, and I can feel myself growing sweatier with each passing minute. How much longer will this take? When does Mr. Hammond come back to the classroom?

The photographer looks at his wristwatch and sighs gustily. “Only a few minutes left until my next group arrives. I suppose we better call that enough.”

I try to let a beat or two of silence fall before I blurt, “I think I left my swim cap in the bathroom upstairs. Bye!” and take off.

I’m terrified that I’ll find the frogs dead inside my swim cap, but when I start to undo the hairpin, they hop about with gusto. What a relief.

I rush out of the bathroom to the stairwell, and find it packed with sophomore girls who have apparently had their brains scrambled. They seem to be just loitering on the steps, beating their gums with one another.

“Excuse me,” I say, trying to squeeze around on the side.

But there’s nowhere to go because the stairs are full of non-budging sophomores.

“Girls!” I hear the photographer hollering from down below. “Everyone look down here, please! I need to check our arrangement!”

No wonder I can’t get through. They’re posing for a picture.

I don’t have time for this. I hook my leg over the staircase rail, make sure the frogs are secure, and I push off down the bannister.

“Oh, my!” several girls gasp in a rather satisfying way.

Their faces blur around me as I focus on keeping my swim cap secure. The material of the bathing costume sends me down in fabulous speed, like that time I rode the tilt-a-whirl at the fair.

My attempts to slow myself cause a burning sensation on the underside of my wrists, and a yelp hops out of me as my rear hits the curve of the banister. The left side of my body bends

one way and the right side tries to keep going straight. I tumble off the end and crash into someone.

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry. I—” I swallow when I catch sight of my home economics teacher, Ms. Underhill, sitting on the floor, having been plowed over by me.

If there is a worse teacher to run into right now, I can’t think of who it’d be. Even Mr. Hammond would be preferable to this.

Ms. Underhill blinks at me as if she can’t quite comprehend what she’s just seen.

“I’m so sorry,” I hear myself gushing. I reach to help her up before I can think better of it. “That was awfully foolish of me. I was trying to rush back to swimming and the stairs were full—”

“Why *aren’t* you at the pool, Miss Sail?” Having recovered a bit from the shock, she now glares at me.

“Sorry!” I call over my shoulder as I hurry away around the corner and clatter down the last—vacant, thankfully—staircase.

One of the back doors to the school has been propped open, allowing the mild afternoon breeze to blow in the scent of cut grass. As the days grow warmer and sunnier, my tolerance for being trapped in a classroom wanes.

I lean out the door, lower my swim cap into the closest flowerbed, and open up the top. The frogs tumble out and hop away to happiness. Or at least to *not* getting killed and dismembered under the banner of education.

I’ve done a good thing.

So why won’t the tightness in my chest dissipate?

“I’m glad your stomach stopped bothering you,” Lydia says as we leave the Physical Education locker room. “Had it been troubling you since lunch?”

“Around then, yes.” My stomach actually does feel terrible as I anticipate what awaits us in the biology room.

“At least we only have one more class.” Lydia fusses with the damp edges of her hair. “It’s impossible to make your hair look nice after it’s been crammed into one of those swim caps.”

“I want to bob mine so badly,” I say. “I think Father may be close to caving.”

“With Miss Miller’s hair bobbed, how can your father insist on you keeping yours long without insulting her?”

The mention of my father’s girlfriend causes a disgusted noise to rumble in my throat. “I would keep my hair long for the rest of my life if he would break up with her. I’d powder it, even.”

Lydia gives me an amused glance. “Piper, you and your theatrics.”

At moments like this, everything feels so normal. It seems impossible that the Other Lydia even exists.

“I hope we’re not late,” Lydia says as we start up the first staircase.

“He knows we’re coming from P.E. It’ll be fine.” My voice is surprisingly light and unaffected considering how nervous I feel. Will he accuse one of us of taking the frogs? Will he be able to piece together that it was me?

“Are you okay?”

I startle at Lydia’s question. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” The corners of Lydia’s mouth are dipped into a compassionate frown. Lydia’s instinct is to sympathize, even before she knows what’s going on. “I asked you a question and you seemed to not even hear me.”

“I was just thinking, that’s all. What did you ask?”

“I asked about Walter. Have you heard from him recently?”

“Yes.” I pause to think through my words before I say them. “He’s lonely, but I think he’s doing well with his team.”

Asking about Walter is a goodwill gesture on Lydia’s part. She disapproves of my friendship with the son of our live-in housekeeper. He’s like a third older brother to me, but Lydia seems convinced that if I’m not careful I’ll fall completely in love with him.

Though if she were to disapprove of that, it would be a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black considering her hopeless crush on her family’s chauffeur.

“Walter will actually be here in a few weeks,” I add. “Some sort of break.”

“That’ll be nice for you,” Lydia says, her good breeding shining through. “How long will he stay?”

“Just a week.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll like having him home.”

As we near the top of the second staircase, the cacophony of the classroom grows louder—desks and chairs scraping along the linoleum, feet shuffling, and girlish chatter.

Lydia’s pace increases. “I wonder what’s going on.”

“I’ve no idea.” Hopefully she’ll think my breathlessness is just a result of mounting all the stairs.

In the doorway of the classroom, we find girls stacking their chairs atop their desks or crawling about on their hands and knees. In the corner of the room, the one where the empty frogs' tank sits, Mr. Hammond has pulled out the bookcase and peers behind it.

"What's going on?" Lydia asks a nearby girl.

"The frogs are missing," she says with an amused smirk. "Mr. Hammond left the lid off after the last hour and they escaped."

"Careful stepping, girls!" Mr. Hammond calls. His hair is even more askew than normal. "Does anyone want to volunteer to search the hallways?"

Several girls raise their hands, including Lydia—who I swear raises her hand before a teacher can even fully get out the word "volunteer"—but Mr. Hammond isn't paying attention. He's muttering to himself as he carefully shifts books and boxes.

That guilty twinge I felt when I released the frogs is far more than a twinge now. I go through the motions of looking for the frogs, but it's hard to keep my eyes off Mr. Hammond. He's a nice teacher. Demanding, yes, but only because he's so passionate about science.

Whenever I've driven Ms. Underhill into a panic with my actions, I've never felt badly. With Mr. Hammond, however, it's a different story. I console myself with the thought that the frogs are living in the wild and are in absolutely no danger of dissection. That has to be a good deed, right?

The LeVine family chauffeur drives me all the way home before I decide that I can't live like this. I tell our housekeeper that I forgot something at school, and I'm using the family Ford.

When I pull into the vacant circle drive of Presley's, I spot Mr. Hammond's lanky figure out back by the creek. He has a net in one hand and the glass jar in the other.

Class had ended with Mr. Hammond postponing our test till tomorrow. This was the exact result I had wanted, and as Lydia chattered about her plans to spend the evening studying, declaring this turn of events to be a gift from heaven, I had told myself that I didn't need to feel guilty.

If only my heart could have listened, I wouldn't be here right now.

"Hi, Mr. Hammond."

He startles and turns to me. "Miss Sail, what are you doing at school still?"

As I look at him, his face changes from one of surprise to one of suspicion. My guilt must be smeared all over my face.

"I'm very sorry, sir." The words come out quiet, and I force them louder. "I'm the one who took the frogs."

He looks at me. Then down at the mud on his nice shoes. Then back to me. "Why would you do that?"

I can hear Mrs. LeVine's warning in my ears—*you must not tell anyone what you've seen.*

"Miss Sail." The cold manner in which Mr. Hammond says my name is a warning in itself. "I advise you to give me an honest answer."

"Lydia wasn't ready for the test," I say. "I didn't want her to fail."

"Did she also—"

"No. She doesn't even know I did anything. She would be furious."

Mr. Hammond holds my gaze for a moment. He takes a deep breath. "Your friend Miss LeVine..." He seems to reconsider a moment, and then pushes on. "She isn't herself these days.

During the first semester, she struggled, but was attentive in class. I could see how hard she was trying. But recently she's been different."

I don't want to betray the trust Mrs. LeVine was forced to put in me, don't want to disappoint her any more than I naturally do with my existence. But I also want Lydia to pass her biology class. To graduate in a few weeks.

"You're right," I say. "She isn't herself these days."

"Unless she turns things around, I'll have to do some very creative math to give her a passing grade." He speaks with slow, calculated words. "Am I right to believe that Miss LeVine is doing the best she can, but is limited by circumstances?"

"I believe that's a fair assessment, sir."

He considers this. "If you wanted to help me find another frog, Miss Sail, and put the classroom back together, I believe we could call this water under the bridge. How does that sound?"

"More than fair, sir. I'm very sorry for the trouble I caused."

"It's a relief to know I'm not the forgetful scientist that I thought I might be. I would hate to think of myself as stereotypical."

"No, the lid was very secure."

"What a comfort," Mr. Hammond says drily.

After twenty minutes of hunting, we locate a frog and secure him to his fate. "Sorry, buddy." I screw on the lid of the jar. "You drew the short straw."

"Don't fret too much, Miss Sail. This time tomorrow he'll be back with his frog friends," Mr. Hammond says as we start back to the door. "Would have been today, had it not been for your bold act of friendship."

My confusion must be written clearly on my face, because he continues. “Both the senior classes would have been done with their tests. So I would have been out here releasing frogs instead of capturing them.”

“Oh. But I thought... I mean, I had heard we would be dissecting them.”

Mr. Hammond’s laugh is a sharp snort. “Oh, my. I should have known some of the girls wouldn’t realize I was joking. If you take a biology class at a university then you might, but it’s senseless to do it at your age.” He honks another laugh.

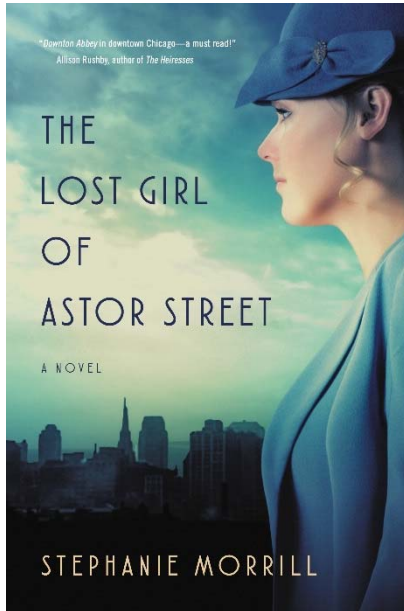
“Well, I’m very relieved to hear that.”

Mr. Hammond holds open the door for me. “You have just a few weeks left at this place, Miss Sail. Do you think you’re ready?”

I think of Ms. Underhill and the way she glared at me when I bowled her over on the stairs. She’ll probably find some excuse for smacking my hand with a ruler tomorrow during class. Which will be a painful diversion from the tedium of schoolwork and lectures.

“Absolutely.”

“Somehow, I expected that answer,” Mr. Hammond says with a smile. “Brace yourself, world. You’re about to meet Piper Sail.”



THE LOST GIRL OF ASTOR STREET

By Stephanie Morrill

On sale February 7, 2017

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When her best friend vanishes without so much as a good-bye, eighteen-year-old Piper Sail takes on the role of amateur sleuth in an attempt to solve the mystery of Lydia's disappearance. Given that Piper's tendency has always been to butt heads with high-society's expectations of her, it's no surprise that she doesn't give a second thought to searching for answers to Lydia's abduction from their privileged neighborhood.

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