

Blown Up

L Lydia Barnes screamed, and the lights flickered back on.
“What happened?” someone yelled.

Lydia had no idea. She’d heard a deafening bang and lunged forward, sure she was about to be blown up. She had bumped into something but didn’t know what.

Lydia looked at her hands. Brown ooze dripped from her fingers.

She looked at the floor and saw a broken lamp and a fallen body.

She looked up at the small crowd of people in the lobby of the Christian Hope Guesthouse in Jerusalem, where she and her dad had been mingling with the other guests—and all eyes were on her. “I . . . I . . .” she mumbled, “I think it was me. I think it’s my fault.”



“It’s my fault” were words fourteen-year-old Lydia Barnes generally tried to avoid. The gutsy American teenager didn’t like being in the hot seat, and she usually did everything she could to avoid getting there.

But this was different. Something terrible had happened.

“Marcus,” she said, bending down over her friend, not sure what to do with her sticky hands.

Marcus was one of the teens traveling with a group called Youth Around the World. They had arrived at the guesthouse just

a few hours before Lydia on a tour of the Holy Land. Marcus was nearly six feet tall, almost as tall as Lydia's dad, and had the broad shoulders of a defensive lineman on a football team. With his mass of black curly hair and his perfectly black eyes, Marcus could appear a bit wild at times. But his sweet smile and smooth, milk chocolate skin made him look positively innocent. And he had been making Lydia laugh all evening.

Until now.

"Marcus," she said again.

He groaned, rolled over, and looked at her gooey hands hovering inches above his face. "You didn't squash the last brownie, did you?" he asked.

Lydia stared at him for a moment, then looked at her hands. With everyone watching, she placed one finger in her mouth and tasted the chocolate goo. "That," she said firmly, "was the best brownie I've ever had!"

Marcus sat up, grinning. "Remind me never to pop a balloon near you again."



No one could blame Lydia for freaking out. She and her dad had made it through the madness of security screening at the Tel Aviv airport where people seemed to think that every piece of gum and bottle of water held a secret bomb, so what did they expect? She'd heard a bang and naturally assumed it was a bomb.

Mrs. Oliver, the guesthouse host, shooed them all away with a severe stare and then cleaned up the broken glass. Lydia's dad, Frank Barnes, went right back to talking with two British archaeologists who were taking a break from their work in the Negev for a little holiday in Jerusalem—it was just one more week until Christmas. Lydia glanced over at her dad while stopping another

blow from Marcus's pillow. She was glad to see her dad was wearing the black, zippered hoody with wild white designs all over the front. She had bought that for him as an early Christmas present while they were in Amsterdam a few days earlier, and he'd picked out some faded, loose jeans. What a difference from the plaid button-down shirts and khaki pants most of the other dads were wearing. One dad from Australia was even wearing ugly green cords!

"So which one is yours?" Lydia asked Marcus, yanking the pillow out of his hand so he'd quit hitting her.

The people in Marcus's group were from all over the United States—fifteen teenagers and four adults.

"Are you kidding?" Marcus said. "He's not here. Maybe if he was cool like your dad, I would've let him come." And he hit her with another pillow.

Lydia giggled and hit him back.

"Ahem."

Lydia looked up to see Katherine Oliver staring down at her. Maybe if a twelve-legged, slimy alien from some bizarre intergalactic planet had come to earth to study humans, it could look as disgusted as Mrs. Oliver did at this moment. But she wasn't an alien. She was a middle-aged Christian woman with too much makeup and lots of gaudy jewelry.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Lydia said, but she didn't really know what she was supposed to be apologizing for. Was it for the lamp? Or the noise? Or for simply existing?

"Show a little more discretion, if you please," the woman said. Whatever that meant.

Lydia might have felt miserable if she weren't so happy. Marcus hit her with a pillow again, and she saw Martin Oliver give her a wink. Clearly, Mrs. Oliver was the only grump in the room. Mr. Oliver was a tall and frail man with the thinnest, palest

lips Lydia had ever seen. He hadn't spoken once since Lydia met him, but he smiled a lot.

"Yoo-hoo!" Mrs. Oliver now called to another teenager at the other end of the room, her voice carrying above all the others. "Don't touch that vase, please." Then off she went to place a pillow firmly between two other teenagers who were talking on the couch. "No need to sit so close together," she said. "And button up that shirt, missy."

"She's got *serious* problems," the girl said a bit too loudly as soon as Mrs. Oliver swooped away.

Mr. Oliver winked again.



"Hey, everyone!" said a slim woman of about Lydia's dad's age. She was the guide of Marcus's tour group, and she wore black cotton pants with leather in the front, a soft black shirt, a black leather vest, and high-heeled boots. Her classy glasses were hand decorated with gold and silver squiggles, and her shoulder-length hair was layered and spiky. She might have been a fashion designer in Amsterdam, but she was actually a historian and Bible teacher from Monterey, California. "Good news!" she said.

"Of great joy?" asked Lydia's dad, and Lydia thought of the famous Bible passage about the angels announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.

"Why, thank you, Frank," Dr. Erwin said slyly. "Do I look like an angel to you?"

So this was the famous Dr. Erwin. Lydia's dad had mentioned her a few times, always with a bit of a grin. Her full name was Skyblue Dawn Erwin, but Frank had told Lydia never to call her that. "Stick with 'Dr. Erwin,'" he'd advised.

“With all that leather,” Frank said now, grinning, “more like a biker.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” said Dr. Erwin without cracking a smile, “though I trust you to be informed about anything that is noisy and grimy.” Then she winked at Lydia.

Great. Someone with the same sense of humor as her dad. Now he’d never quit. Still, Lydia smiled.

“As I was saying,” Dr. Erwin said, glaring at Frank with just the faintest of smiles. Frank pretended to zip his lips. “You’ll never guess what Brenda found today.”

Everyone turned to look at the Canadian college girl, who happened to be right beside Lydia. Brenda was fun and independent and afraid of nothing. She was volunteering at the guesthouse for a few months to earn her room and board, and Lydia adored her sense of adventure. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” Brenda said. “Let me tell them!”

“Of course,” Dr. Erwin said, bowing slightly.

“A historic Holy Land token!” Brenda whispered loudly into the now-quiet room. “You know, the mysterious Palestinian coin of 1927!”

“This coin is probably one of the most interesting topics debated among coin collectors,” Dr. Erwin said. “It is sometimes referred to as the ‘Souvenir Mil.’ No one really knows why this particular item was made or whether it is a coin or some sort of token.”

“Do you want to see it?” Brenda asked her audience.

“Of course we do!” Dr. Erwin said. “We won’t believe you have it otherwise.”

Brenda laughed. “It’s out in my car,” she said. “Come on, Lydia. I want some company.”

Brenda pushed open the heavy wooden door, and the two girls stepped out into the darkness. A package wrapped in brown paper lay at the doorstep, and Lydia bent and picked it up without thinking.

“Hold up!” It was Lydia’s dad. He was following them out the door and handing Lydia the white fuzzy coat he had bought her in Amsterdam. “I’m not letting you out alone this time of night. I’m coming with.”

“Dad!” Lydia groaned, embarrassed. It wasn’t even ten o’clock yet. She was glad for the coat, though; it couldn’t have been more than forty-five degrees out there. She moved down the concrete steps out of the way of the others who were coming out the door, set the package on the bottom step, and pulled the jacket on.

A bright lamp shone above them, and the street that had been so busy earlier in the day was nearly empty. Only a few cars were parked along the road, including a white Ford Focus at the end of the block. Iron gates covered the doors to the many neighboring shops that were packed tightly together—tall stone buildings that looked ancient and forbidding. Hardly any other people were out walking.

“I may as well come too,” Dr. Erwin said, moving in step beside Frank. “I want to hear about your scuba diving experience. Did you say you went diving in South America?”

“South *Africa*,” Frank replied, his breath turning white as he spoke. “I dove deep into the home of the most savage beasts of the sea . . .” he said, holding up his hands in a dramatic pose, “solo!”

Lydia groaned at her dad’s lame humor, but Dr. Erwin grinned and urged him on. “And did you meet up with any of these savage beasts?”

The door of the guesthouse was still open, and some others from the group filed out, obviously interested in Frank’s story. Marcus ran out in his T-shirt, followed by the same girl who had made fun of Mrs. Oliver, along with the boy she had been whispering with on the couch. A few of the other Americans and both the Australian kids followed close behind.

Frank waited until everyone was crowded around. “I’ve been scuba diving for years,” he continued, then gestured for Brenda to lead on. The small gang walked down the sidewalk, slipping and sliding on the thin layer of frost, toward the Focus. “But I had never encountered any big creatures until this dive.”

Lydia had heard at least three million times how Frank had been swimming next to a pack of blacktip sharks and lived to tell about it, so she pulled her iPod from her pocket and stuck in her ear buds. She clicked on her favorite Hawk Nelson song and cranked up the volume. Lydia fell nearly to the back of the crowd, trailed only by a couple of American guys, who were barely shuffling forward at all.

After a moment, Frank, who had been walking backward to face his small audience, took on a look of perfect terror, and Lydia understood why everyone loved his storytelling so much. She belted out a laugh that must have been heard by those same sharks at the bottom of the sea.

Suddenly everyone whipped around, each of their faces holding as much terror as Frank’s. Lydia pulled the buds from her ears. Something was wrong.



The first thing Lydia saw was that the American teenagers behind her had fallen down. When she looked past them, she noticed that the front door of the guesthouse—the door to the guesthouse they’d just walked out of—was blown away. The people inside were staring back at them through the open space. The steps they had just walked down were now a pile of rubble.

Suddenly everyone was moving at once. Mrs. Oliver ran out of the house and Frank ran toward it. Lydia began running and

was the first to reach the fallen boys. She tore off her jacket and placed it under his head and shoulders, fuzzy side up, and then carefully wrapped her sweatshirt around his bleeding arm, which was bent in an awkward direction. She didn't even feel the chilly air on her arms as she rubbed the sweat from the boy's forehead with her sleeve. *Andrew*, she thought his name was.

When she finally looked up again, her father was a few feet away leaning over another teenage boy, and Mrs. Oliver was walking around squeezing her hands together. All the others were either huddled down the street by Brenda's car or were still inside the guesthouse, cowering on far side of the front room. Mr. Oliver was nowhere to be seen.

If only the ambulances would arrive.



Mrs. Oliver brought water to the boy Lydia was caring for, but did not look at Lydia. *I'm sorry*, Lydia wanted to say. This time she knew what she was apologizing for. *I'm sorry I laughed*. She hadn't known the boom she'd dimly heard over the music blaring in her ears was a bomb. She hadn't known her dad's shocked expression was not part of the crazy story he was telling.

"Is Mr. Oliver okay?" Lydia asked Mrs. Oliver meekly.

"Yes, he is in the house," the woman replied before walking toward the guesthouse.

Suddenly Lydia started to tremble. Someone had bombed the building they'd just been in! If they hadn't gone outside to see the coin . . . She wanted to call out to her dad but knew he had more important things to do. She looked down at the boy she'd been tending. Blood from his arm was soaking through the sweatshirt, and now his eyes were fluttering shut. Crying wouldn't help, but Lydia couldn't stop the tears. "Hold on," Lydia whispered to

him. “The ambulance will be here in a minute. Just keep your eyes open!”

A blanket fell over Lydia’s shoulders, and a paramedic gently moved her aside. When had an ambulance arrived? “I’ve got him,” he said in accented English. “Get yourself in the house where it’s warm.”

Lydia nodded, weeping uncontrollably now, and walked toward the side door to the guesthouse, where others were filing in and out. She found an unoccupied corner of the kitchen and curled up, trying to think of nothing.



When you try to think of nothing, of course, thoughts flood through your brain faster than whitewater down the Colorado River. Lydia recalled the last thirty-six hours of her life that had brought her from the wet heat of Africa to the dry chill of the Middle East.

One moment she had been in the Liberian airport hugging Ben—the missionary kid who had become her best friend in a matter of weeks. Together they’d undertaken a sometimes perilous, sometimes heartbreaking, ultimately victorious treasure hunt. In the next moment she had been hugging her dad in a Dutch hotel lobby, thanking him for giving her the best present she could ever imagine—the heart-shaped diamond necklace she now wore around her neck—and then exploring the canal-lined streets of that historic city. Now she was hugging her own knees in the rubble of a Christian guesthouse somewhere in the middle of a war zone during the holiday season that was supposed to bring peace on earth.

When Lydia’s dad had first presented the idea of traveling the world together so he could serve as Director of Critical Issues for

Global Relief and Outreach—usually just called GRO—Lydia hadn't considered long. Hmm . . . study half a day with a tutor while exploring foreign countries—or sit through boring middle school classes all day long in Indiana? Easy choice. So before she could even finish that trimester, she, her dad, and the newly hired tutor had swooped off to Africa for trip number one.

But right about now Indiana sounded like paradise.