

X Marks the Spot

She never expected the breath of a lion to be sweet. Correction. She never expected the breath of *lions* to be sweet . . . or so close. Lydia Barnes backed away from the two giant cats staring at her, keeping her eyes glued to their twitching tails. She didn't dare to scream. She didn't dare to turn her head to search for an escape route. Step by step she inched back—and her terror was like a giant wave about to crash over her. Lydia couldn't help imagining those monstrous teeth sinking into the flesh of her throat.

The golden fur of the female rippled in the sunlight as she leapt, and the boom of the male's voice vibrated like a mighty motor. Lydia scrambled out of the path of deadly claws just in time. She ran. No more baby steps. She hiked up her skirt—why in the world was she wearing a skirt?—and nearly flew to the Land Rover she could see in the distance, where her mom was waiting.

She was too slow. The lions pounced in front of her, blocking her path. When Lydia whirled around, she saw a dozen more slinking out of the tall grass toward her.

“Mom!” Lydia screamed. “Mom!”

But when she turned around once again, the green Land Rover was gone. She could see only the dust rising in a cloud along the road.

“Nooo!”

The lions rushed toward her. . . .

Lydia opened her eyes. She was staring into the face of her dad. He looked worried.

“Did you have a nightmare, Peachoo?” he asked. He always called her that. Who knew why?

Lydia shrugged, still a bit confused.

“You were making more of a racket than Mrs. Hinkle,” he said.

Lydia craned her neck to peek between the seats to catch a glimpse of the woman her dad had hired to be her tutor. Mrs. Hinkle—a skinny old lady who wore her hair up in a tight bun—was wearing a long, royal purple skirt and a lime-green blouse with ruffled sleeves that made her arms look like white sticks. She was snoring loudly, and her orange cat-eye glasses bounced up and down on her nose.

The first time Lydia met Mrs. Hinkle, the woman looked Lydia up and down, literally walking around her, making little grunting noises. “So this is she, eh?” Mrs. Hinkle said to Frank, using proper grammar, of course. “I can see I’m going to have to keep a close eye on this one.” Then she pulled out a CD labeled “School Rocks!” in purple handwriting and gave it to Lydia. It turned out to be an awesome collection of classic and contemporary rock songs, Christian and mainstream, that all had something to do with learning.

Lydia wasn’t sure what she thought of Mrs. Hinkle yet, but being tutored had to be better than going to regular school.

Now that she and her dad would be jetting around the world rather than living in the suburbs of Indianapolis, Lydia would never have to go to school again. Her father had accepted a job as senior consultant—whatever that meant—for Global Relief and Outreach (GRO), and he would be going from country to country to check on the work of missionaries and to offer support.

This was trip number one—Lydia’s first airplane ride since the trip to Africa when she was six. She didn’t think she was nervous,

but then she hadn't had a nightmare in ages. *I'm just surprised I wasn't dreaming about diamonds*, she thought. Ben, the missionary kid who lived in Liberia with his parents, had e-mailed her about some treasure hunt he wanted them to do together when she got there. He had found some old map and was convinced the hidden treasure had to be diamonds.

Lydia had teased Ben at the time but was secretly glad for a reason to hang out with him. He sounded cool. And good looking. And if he turned out to be right about the diamonds, that would be all the better. *I could use a little bling-bling*, she thought.

"Are there diamonds in Liberia, Dad?" Lydia asked as she rested her head on his shoulder. She stared at the video screen on the seatback in front of her. The screen rotated through several channels that gave information about the flight in different languages. It told how high they were, how cold it was outside, when they left, and when they were expected to arrive—plus it showed a digital map marking their exact location. Somehow the information was comforting to Lydia. Even more comforting was the illustrated instructions she found in a pocket on the seatback in front of her that explained what to do in case of a crash. She felt completely prepared for anything.

"Yes, there are diamonds in Liberia," her dad said. "Unfortunately."

"Why is that bad?"

"Well, Liberia produces almost no diamonds, but billions of dollars worth of diamonds pass through it."

"Why is that bad?" Lydia asked again. Her dad knew everything. When she was little, he had traveled from country to country providing accounting and consulting services to Christian ministries—and still told wild stories about those days. Someone else's dad would have gotten on the airplane, taken a taxi to the hotel, stared at paperwork for a few days, and then come home.

Her dad would end up getting lost on a dirt bike in the African bush or wrestling a crocodile in South America to save some little kid.

“Mining can be done only by people who have a mining license,” he said. “That reminds me, when your mom and I took you to Guinea all those years ago, Mom spotted a beautiful heart-shaped diamond in the marketplace, and she batted her eyelashes until I agreed to buy it. She wanted to make a necklace out of it for you, my sweet, as an heirloom.”

“She did?” Tears suddenly shot into Lydia’s eyes, but she quickly pulled her emotions back in check.

“Yes,” her dad said, “but before I pulled out my wallet to buy it, I asked to see the mining license—which the guy didn’t have.”

“Huh?”

“He didn’t have a license to sell diamonds. He was probably trying to sell me blood diamonds.”

“Blood diamonds?”

The plane bumped a little, but her dad kept talking. He didn’t seem to notice the turbulence. “Some African countries, like Sierra Leone, harvest diamonds like you harvest mulberries from the back yard,” he replied, “—which is bad because of environmental issues, but even worse because of how it supports the rebels who have killed so many innocent people.”

“Rebels?” Lydia asked, glad that the bumping seemed to be over for now.

“Rebels are soldiers who fight against the government.”

“So you didn’t buy it?” she asked.

“Buy what?”

Lydia couldn’t believe he forgot what they had been talking about. “The diamond Mom wanted to get me!” she said.

“As much as I wanted to please my girls, I had a responsibility first to God. I just couldn’t be part of the rebel cause, even in an indirect way,” her dad said.

Whatever.

“So if I find diamonds in Liberia, I can’t do anything with them?” Lydia asked.

“Diamonds are not exactly lying about, so I don’t think this will be an issue for you.”

“It might be.” Lydia leaned closer to him. “Don’t tell anyone, but Ben VanderHook found a map to a real diamond mine. He told me!”

“Well,” her dad said, “it’s true that Liberia is a prime location for such a hidden treasure.”

Lydia smiled. The best thing about her dad, Frank Barnes—besides being so adventurous—was that he took kids seriously. Maybe because he was such a kid himself. Take yesterday for example: Lydia had introduced him to YouTube, and he had stayed up until two in the morning watching silly video clips like NumaNuma and *Star Wars* spoofs.

“Amazing stuff!” he’d said the next morning as he hurriedly packed, making them almost miss their plane. “I mean, there’s real talent out there. You don’t need to be Britney Spears to get attention anymore. Anyone with a webcam and a little flair can be famous. Amazing.”

She knew he would take this treasure hunt seriously, too. “But why would someone make some weird map to it?”

“Good question,” her dad said. “Why wouldn’t they just harvest the treasure themselves?”

“Maybe they thought the mine would cave in, and they didn’t want to risk it themselves.”

“Or maybe they didn’t have a miner’s license,” her dad said.

“Anyway,” Lydia said, “we’re going to try to hunt it down.”

Lydia had an adventurous side, too. She thought of herself as a female clone of Frank Barnes, and she couldn’t wait for escapades of her own. If only she could get her dad to realize that she had grown up so he wouldn’t be so protective of her all the time.

“Where did Ben get the map?” her dad asked.

“He found it hidden under the floorboards in his room,” Lydia said. “He noticed PRVB24 on the top right-hand corner in very small letters. He decided to look up Proverbs 2:4, and it turned out to be that passage that says something about seeking a hidden treasure.”

“Yes, ‘search for wisdom as for hidden treasure,’” Frank murmured.

That was the major difference between Lydia and her dad. He was the most passionate Christian she’d ever known. He had the whole Bible memorized, it seemed, and he was always talking about his faith with others. It got embarrassing at times. It wasn’t that Lydia didn’t have faith. She believed in God and all that. It was just that she didn’t want to talk about Him all the time.

Besides, if she were perfectly honest, Lydia wasn’t entirely sure God would always be there for her when she needed Him. He hadn’t been there for her mom.

“Right,” Lydia said. “Well, he figured it must be a treasure map, so he looked at every speck of the map until he found an X.”

“He really found one?”

“Yep,” Lydia said. “It was tiny and black, so he hardly noticed. But he finally found the X right in the middle of the map over a post office.”

Her dad leaned toward her, obviously interested. “And then what?”

The flight attendant walked by pushing a cart and glanced at Lydia. “Oh, you’re awake!” she said, smiling broadly. “I saved you a snack.” The woman pulled a small box out of the cart and handed it to Lydia. “The cookies might even be warm still.”

Lydia dove right into it. “Mmmm!” she said. “This is sooo good! Thank you!”

“Lydia!” her dad said as soon as the woman walked on. “What did Ben do?”

“Oh!” Lydia said with her mouth full. “He went to that post office and looked all over the grounds for some clue. But it was impossible. The building was basically gone—only the cement blocks were left. I guess during the war the bad guys shot everything, even lampposts—”

“Wait,” her dad said. “How do you know all this? You haven’t even met Ben yet.”

“You’re the one who gave me his e-mail address, remember? And after that we started IMing.”

“What’s that?” Frank asked.

“Dad! Instant messaging! Everyone does it.”

“Oh. Okay. Go on.”

“Anyway,” Lydia paused dramatically, “Ben finally realized the post office wouldn’t lead him to the next clue, so he went to a newly opened post office a few miles away to see if he could find any clues there.”

“He’s tenacious, isn’t he?” her dad said.

“Whatever that means,” Lydia said—and then quickly continued before her dad could start reciting the dictionary definition and Latin root of the word. “Anyway, he asked them what happened to the mail that had been in the destroyed post office.”

“What did they say?”

“They said most of it had been lost, but they were sorting through what had been recovered.”

“Recovered?” her dad asked.

“They basically took the mail strewn all over the floor of the old building and tried to read the labels. The bad guys—”

“The rebels,” her dad corrected.

“The rebels weren’t interested in letters,” Lydia said. “They were looking for packages that had items of value.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a voice over the loudspeaker, “this is your pilot speaking. We expect a bit of turbulence in a few moments. The seatbelt sign has been turned on. We ask that you all return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts.”

Lydia quickly buckled up and stared at her dad.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he said. “It happens all the time. What did Ben do next?”

Lydia looked out the window and watched the airplane lights flashing in the dark sky. “He didn’t even know what he was looking for, so he offered to help them sort. They were surprised, but they let him.”

“Did he find anything?”

Lydia turned back to her dad. “Mostly junk that wasn’t even readable, but he did find some mail that had existing addresses. He was so excited about that.” Lydia smiled, remembering the IM where Ben had gushed: “im so happy i cud kiss u . . . wat a rush to give sum1 news about sum1 they lost for so long!”

“I mean about the treasure hunt,” her dad urged.

“Oh. Yes. He found a bunch of mail addressed to Wisdom, PO Box 24. The ladies there loved him by then, so they let him take it all.”

“What kind of mail?”

“Some old catalogs with church pews and stuff like that, some requests to donate money to different Christian ministries, a postcard, some church newsletters.”

“And that’s all?”

Lydia sighed. “Be patient,” she said. “One envelope in the pile caught his eye.”

“Why? What was so special about it?”

“It was just a normal envelope, but it was from the Proverbs 24 Group.”

“Ooh!” Frank said. “Proverbs 2:4—just like what he found on the map!”

“That’s right,” Lydia said, glad that he was listening. “Ben opened up the envelope right away, of course.”

Her dad was all but in her seat. “What was it?”

At that moment two things happened. First, Lydia turned quickly to see Mrs. Hinkle move back in her chair and pretend to be asleep. Second, the plane dropped suddenly and everyone screamed.