



Strangers

ON A

PLANE

JOHN TOWNSEND

“ The text read:

Can U help me? In trouble. Need U 2 do something 4 me when we land. Don't turn round or look at me. Will explain later. Delete this. Todd.

”

Strangers on a Plane
by John Townsend

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BREAKOUTS

**STRANGERS
ON A
PLANE**

John Townsend



ONE

Cameras recorded every move. They panned across the airport concourse and zoomed in on passengers' faces – scanning for tell-tale signs. Lenses fixed on eyes and digitally analysed them. Any known terrorist would be matched against biometric data and instantly recognised.

Body-scanners, X-ray machines and internal bag searches examined below the surface. Hidden CCTV devices closely watched everyone in the departure lounge. Airport security software scrutinised body language and alerted guards to anyone acting suspiciously. All staff

had been notified of the latest level of threat. Their computer screens flashed with the code: **S**. **S** for **SEVERE**.

A dangerous passenger was expected anytime soon.
RED ALERT.

Officers in the security suite stared at banks of screens. They watched the boy in a denim jacket with rucksack as he strode across the departure lounge. He held a can of drink in one hand and a phone in the other. His image changed colour in response to the latest data. Level of threat = **LOW**. Safe.

A small window appeared on security screens:

Toby MacCulloch	
Unaccompanied minor	
Frequent air traveller	
Age: 13	Destination: Paris
Mother in Cardiff	Father in Glasgow
Threat = ZERO	

The ring-pull snapped with a hiss and the can fizzed. A spurt of cola sprayed over Toby's jacket and he swore, as an officer read his lips on the screen and smiled. Checking his watch, Toby decided there was still enough time to sponge his stain-soaked sleeve, so he grabbed his rucksack and headed to the door marked *Gents' Washroom*. At a sink, he wetted a paper towel and rubbed his arm before holding it under the hand-dryer. He was glad to have the washroom to himself. All cubicles were empty, so he didn't have to worry about puzzled stares from strangers or where to put his rucksack. Even so, he slid it safely out of the way in a small space between the end cubicle and the wall. He didn't want his gift for Jodie (carefully bubble-wrapped inside) to get kicked and broken. When at last his sleeve was stain-free and dry, he went to get his rucksack, squeezing down the narrow space into the corner. As he stooped to grab it, he heard the door swing open behind him and a loud whisper at the sinks filled the washroom; urgent, foreign and assertive. 'It is OK – no one in here. Empty. We can talk. I talk – you listen.'

Knowing he couldn't be seen where he was, Toby

remained very still. It was best not to startle whoever was there, even though he felt awkward; hiding and crouched beside a toilet cubicle. He froze when the voice suddenly hissed aggressively. ‘You got this far, so good. But I watch to make sure you don’t mess up. If you do, I will strike. I will be following all the time. Three things you must know. One: don’t let that bag out of your sight. Two: don’t tip it on its side – it’s safe as long as you don’t break the tough lining. Three: don’t forget the code and time is *two thirty* in French at Montblanc. Now go, quick. Remember cameras are everywhere. I’ll give you half a minute before I follow you out. Make sure you don’t look at me or show you know me. Get it wrong and you know what I will do. Go.’

Toby daren’t move. If he gave himself away now, the man might turn even nastier. At the same time, he wanted to see what the speaker looked like and who he’d been talking to. After all, the conversation sounded a bit scary and suspicious. Should he report it? Yet as he began to think about it, Toby didn’t really know how he could explain what he’d just witnessed. What exactly

was there to tell anyone? Sounding nasty and making some sort of threat wasn't exactly a crime, was it? And it wasn't a proper conversation because the other person had said nothing. Toby had no idea how to describe either of them. The one who spoke sounded a bit French, but Toby still didn't have a clue what he looked like – so it was worth taking a quick peep. Or better still, if he could slowly stretch out his arm and take a photo on his phone, he could stay hidden. It was worth the risk. Holding his breath, Toby slowly raised his phone and pointed it towards the row of sinks. His finger touched the button and he paused, wondering what he might discover in the next few seconds.



Nothing. Toby stared at the image on his phone. All he could see was a fuzzy shadow in front of the door. When he enlarged it, the shape looked like the back of someone's head. He'd caught the man's silhouette as he was heading out through the door – a dark shape with broad shoulders and just a glint of an ear cuff at the top of his left ear.

Toby was in two minds what to do. Should he tell someone he was hiding in the toilets and happened to overhear a strange man sounding menacing? That just seemed too weird. Although there was nothing really criminal in what the man had said, Toby couldn't help feeling there was something worrying or dangerous about him. Something sinister. But who would listen to the bizarre hunch of a 13 year-old who lurked in public toilets? Maybe it would be best if he forgot the whole thing.

By the time Toby emerged from his hiding place, a cleaner in orange overalls was mopping the floor. He wore earphones and was whistling loudly, totally oblivious to Toby creeping out past him and returning hurriedly to the busy departure lounge ... and then on to Paris.



John Townsend was born in Chelmsford, Essex, and discovered his enchantment with books at an early age. As a child, he wrote mini-dramas, silly poems and stories to tell the cat. Whether or not the cat wanted to hear them is another matter!

His love of hiking and the outdoors led him to become a geography teacher in Gloucestershire, writing pantomimes and plays for the annual drama productions. His first publication was inspired by his rusty old Morris Minor and, 200 books later, he is now a full-time writer.