

**TWILIGHT AT  
NOON**

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*'Twilight at noon' is a phrase coined by*  
*[J. Crutzen Paul](#) & [W. Birks John](#) in a paper titled*  
***The Atmosphere after a Nuclear War: Twilight at Noon***  
*referring to the atmosphere that is created when a*  
*nuclear bomb explodes and debris and soot etc. obscures*  
*sunlight, creating a nuclear winter.*

## CHAPTER 1

### *White Light*

The mournful caterwauling of the warning sirens struck a chill through Duggan's heart. Everybody knew the sirens were there – they weren't particularly well hidden – but they'd been part of the cityscape for so long that they were generally thought of as nothing more than street furniture, no more alarming nor threatening than the streetlamps and litter bins. Sure, they were tested at frequent intervals but those drills were always announced in the media beforehand and, although the sound of the alarms was decidedly unpleasant, the tranquillity of the city was only interrupted for a couple of minutes from start to finish.

This time, however, was different. There had been no broadcast messages to prepare the population for this latest aural assault.

The yowling intensified – or did it just seem that way? Duggan wasn't sure. He just knew that the sound was unsettling. He instinctively glanced down at his wristwatch to check the time but the timepiece's battery had died the previous day and he hadn't had a chance to buy a new one. The watch misinformed him that it was 13:37, whereas he knew that it was still before 09:00.

*It's a false alarm. It has to be. The lack of any advance warning was surely just an oversight.*

Susan swept into the kitchen, her twelve-year-old daughter Kate trotting in her wake and ten-year-old Rory dragging his heels behind her. The boy had wanted to stay in his room and watch whatever was happening through his bedroom window. He'd defiantly resisted his mother's calls to follow her downstairs and, eventually, she'd had no choice but to threaten him with physical violence if he didn't do as he was told although both she and Rory knew that that would never happen – neither parent ever laid a hand on their kids in anger. Susan hated that she'd needed to resort to such low depths but now wasn't the time to get into a verbal confrontation with a disobedient child. Unlike her husband's, Susan's wristwatch was working perfectly and, by the fourth minute of continued howling, she was convinced that this was more than just a drill. This was the day that she and Duggan had silently dreaded. She looked into her husband's eyes, mirroring the terror that she saw within.

No words were spoken. None were needed. Each of them instinctively knew what the other was thinking. This was Doomsday.

They could have stayed there, staring at each other for the rest of their lives which, if they had done so, would have been very short indeed, but the tugging of a small hand on his mother's blouse

jarred them out of the stupor into which they were in danger of falling and spurred the parents into action.

Duggan rushed over to the kitchen cabinets, swung open the doors, and clawed at the tinned food that tumbled out, scooping them into a weathered backpack. He turned to his son.

“Rory. You see those plastic bottles next to the recycling bin?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Start filling them with water. All five, please.”

“Why?”

Duggan glanced at his wife before returning his attention to Rory.

“Because we’re going on a road trip.”

Susan handed Rory his school bag.

“When the bottles are full, put them in there.”

Rory frowned.

“If I do that, my bag’s going to be really heavy. That’s ten litres of water.”

There was no way that Duggan could expect his son to carry all that weight.

“Do you think you can manage four litres?”

Rory nodded.

“Yes. And some other lighter stuff too, if you like.”

Duggan fist-bumped the boy.

“Deal.”

The siren continued its depressing song.

Kate leaned against the kitchen table and watched as her mother ran over to another cupboard and grabbed an unopened eight-pack of four-ply toilet roll. Rory's eyes widened.

"What's that for?"

His mother rolled her eyes at him.

"Use your imagination, Rory."

He thought for a second before the reason dawned on him.

"Oh. Okay. How long will we be away for?"

Neither parent wanted to tell the truth, although both knew what that truth was. Duggan shrugged.

"We don't know, but it's better to be safe than sorry, eh?"

Rory's lip curled as he considered his father's response.

"I s'pose so."

The provisions they'd gathered would no way be enough for the adventure they were about to embark on, but they didn't have space in the car for everything but the kitchen sink. What they had would have to do – until they could replace what they used, anyway.

Time seemed to fluctuate between cantering like a thoroughbred racehorse and dragging itself along like a child on its way to a dentist's

appointment. Of course, there were still sixty seconds to one minute and sixty minutes to one hour but each member of the family experienced the passage of time at a seemingly different rate. Kate was at *that* age, the beginning of finding out who she was as a person, and was far more interested in the latest Instagram posts than proactively helping her parents get things ready but Rory, now that he'd surrendered to the fact that his immediate future lay in the kitchen, and not his bedroom, was being uncharacteristically helpful.

Duggan and Susan, on the other hand, were highly conscious of the pressure that they were under, in the race to get the family to safety. Seconds and minutes seemed to be crushing against the walls of the house, threatening to burst through at any moment and devour the entire family.

Rory shuffled his feet.

"Dad. I need the loo."

Duggan wasn't surprised. His son had drunk two glasses of yoghurt at breakfast instead of his normal one. Rory's ten-year-old bladder could only handle the extra liquid for so long.

Susan called over to her daughter, who was still engrossed in catching up with her social media accounts.

"You'd better go too. We don't know when the next toilet break will be."



Son and daughter went off in the direction of the stairs. Susan shook her head.

“Kate, you go upstairs and Rory can go downstairs. It’ll save time.”

The children shrugged and did as they were told. Duggan picked up Rory’s school bag and the backpack he’d been filling with non-perishable foodstuffs.

“I’ll go put these in the car. Can you think of anything else we might need?”

Susan thought for a moment.

“You’ve packed lots of tins. Did you pack a can-opener?”

Duggan grimaced.

“Good call. I mean my pen-knife has a thingy for that but it’ll be much easier with a real one.”

Susan rummaged in a kitchen drawer and pulled out a can-opener. She checked that it was operational and tossed it into her travel bag.

“I’ll put some cutlery in too.”

She omitted to say out loud that the cutlery included a very sharp carving knife – she didn’t want to scare the children. They could be back from the bathrooms at any moment. The carving knife was for protection and she prayed to God they wouldn’t have to use it.

She called upstairs to Kate.

“Bring some books with you. Real books, not

ebooks. Real books don't need batteries or charging. And some for your brother too."

Kate's voice tumbled down the stairs.

"But can't I bring my Kindle too? I've got tons of books on there and it won't take up much space."

Susan capitulated.

"Bring both. And your brother's too."

She heard the tailgate of the car slam shut and Duggan jogged back into the kitchen. He started to make his way upstairs. Susan looked up at him.

"Where are you going, Dug?"

"To get some clothes. I reckon we'll need at least one change of clothes each. And shoes or boots."

Kate appeared at the top of the stairs and waited for her father to reach the landing.

Duggan went into his and Susan's bedroom first. He looked around the room. They'd only just got the room looking exactly how they wanted. The bedspread combined with the colour of the walls perfectly. The bedside lamps had been chosen specifically to match the bedroom furniture. The curtains adorning the window were the perfect hue to contrast with the walls yet subtle enough to not overpower the shade of the bedspread.

*I wonder when – if – I'll see you again.*

He grabbed clothes and footwear that he and Susan had bought a few months earlier, in

anticipation of a hiking holiday that they had planned to take later in the year. The kids would stay at their grandparents' house. It wouldn't have killed them to stay with their Nana and Grandie for a couple of weeks while their parents spent some quality time together. The children didn't see enough of their grandparents anyway.

The second honeymoon would have to go on the back burner for now – maybe forever.

Duggan wondered if the sirens had gone off in Devon. He hoped not. Both sets of grandparents lived over two hundred miles away in a much more rural area than he and Susan lived. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to drop a bomb on Devon - not unless they wanted to wipe out herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. He often wished that he and his family lived in a less urbanised area but the southeast was where most of the jobs in his line of work were.

Stuffing the hiking clothes into the couple's other travel bag, he ran into the children's bedrooms to get more outdoorsy clothes for them too. He knew that Kate, especially, wouldn't approve of what he chose but there wasn't enough time for his daughter to *um* and *er* about what to wear.

At last, the family was ready to leave. Duggan ushered the children into the car and pulled the

front door of the house closed as Susan settled herself in the front passenger seat. He double-locked the door — perhaps the siren was a false alarm and they'd be back home by the evening. Better not to take any chances.

*The siren.*

He hadn't noticed the siren had stopped wailing.

*Does this mean we can go back inside?*

He looked up and down the road.

His neighbours were all leaving their homes too, so evacuating was the consensus. He silently congratulated himself on having filled the fuel tank the previous night. He'd always wondered why, on TV and in movies, when people were escaping from somewhere in a car, they very rarely ran out of fuel. If he hadn't paid a visit to the petrol station the previous night, they'd be driving on fumes after half an hour or so. As it was, they could probably drive three hundred miles or so without having to stop for anything but calls of nature.

Duggan got into the driver's seat and strapped himself in, before turning the ignition key and coaxing the car engine into life. He half-turned to confirm that the children had their seatbelts on. Susan patted his thigh.

"I've already checked, hun."

Rory wriggled in his seat until he felt more

comfortable.

“Where’re we going, Dad?”

That was a good question. Duggan and Susan had been so concerned about packing stuff and getting themselves and the kids away from the house, they hadn’t discussed where they would go.

“We’re going to stay with your grandparents for a while.”

Kate piped up.

“Cool. Which ones?”

Another thing that they hadn’t considered. It didn’t matter which – there was no friction between anyone in the family – and both sets of grandparents lived within a few miles of each other. Duggan made an executive decision.

“Nana and Grandie King. Your mum’s mum and dad.”

An Audi slowed down to let them join the flow of traffic and Duggan dipped his head in appreciation, accompanied by a half-wave.

Rory had a quizzical look on his face.

“Why d’you wave at that man, Dad? D’you know him?”

Duggan laughed.

“No, I have no idea who he is. I was just thanking him for letting us in. It’s polite to wave *thank you*.”

Traffic was understandably very heavy and it

took them a good fifteen minutes to reach the motorway, a journey that, under normal circumstances, took only five minutes. Rory then asked the question that Duggan and Susan had been hoping to avoid.

“Mum, what was that sound?”

“What sound, love?”

“That woo-woo-woo sound. It sounded like a police car or ambulance or something but was different. It was much slower.”

Susan looked at her husband for help. Should they tell the children the truth or maybe it would be better if they were creative with the facts? She was grateful when Duggan took responsibility. He glanced at his son in the rear-view mirror as he answered Rory’s question.

“It was an alarm. Telling us that there was some bad weather coming and that we should go somewhere safe until it’s all over.”

There was no need to panic Rory and Kate by telling them that the noise signalled an imminent nuclear attack. Weather, they could probably deal with. A missile attack, definitely not.

Rory liked the sound of a storm.

“Is it a hurricane or a tornado or something? Like they have in America?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Cool. I hope it’s a tornado. They’re dope.”

Traffic conditions on the motorway weren't much better. Traffic was moving but not very quickly. The 70mph speed limit signs were redundant; nobody was going to get up to anything like that speed.

Kate was oblivious to the traffic and her family's lack of progress. Her mind was buried in a book. Her brother had dozed off.

Susan squeezed Duggan's leg, the most risqué gesture she could afford with the children in the car.

"It looks like the world and its dog have the same idea as us, babe."

Duggan nodded, keeping his eyes on the road just in case the car in front decided to stop unexpectedly.

"Yep. And, unfortunately, they're all going in the same direction as us. Do all grandparents live in Devon?"

Susan chuckled.

"Of course not. But it is a nice quiet area to live in. I'd like to retire there someday."

Duggan was brought back to Earth with a bump.

*If we survive long enough to retire.*

For a moment, he was worried that he'd said that last sentence out loud but, fortunately, nobody else had heard his inner thoughts.

Suddenly, the car started vibrating and pulling

to the left.

*Shit! That's all we need.*

Duggan guided the car to the hard shoulder and stopped the vehicle. He eased himself out of the car, and walked around to the nearside, fearing the worst. He opened the front passenger door and leaned in to speak to his wife.

“We’ve got a puncture. I can change the wheel but I need you all to get out of the car and sit up there on the grass embankment, away from the traffic.”

Rory went to open the right-hand rear passenger door but Susan stopped him in his tracks.

“Get out on Kate’s side, Rory. I know the traffic isn’t moving very fast, but cars can still hit you. It’s safer on Kate’s side.”

Rory reluctantly slid across the seat and, once Kate was out of the car, exited the vehicle and scurried up the bank. He nudged Kate.

“How quick do you think Dad can change the wheel? Formula One pit crews can do four wheels in 1.82 seconds.”

Kate scowled at her brother.

“They have special equipment. Dad’s just got a jack and a wrench, dork.”

“Have a guess, though.”

Kate had seen her father change a wheel before.

“Okay. First, he has to loosen the wheel nuts



and then jack up the car. That might take 30 seconds.”

“Why does he have to loosen the wheel nuts before jacking up the car? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Because he needs the weight of the car to provide resistance. If he tries to loosen them with the wheel off the ground, the wheel will just spin.”

Rory was impressed with his sister’s knowledge but would never admit it in a million years.

“I knew that. I was just testing you.”

Kate continued to explain the wheel-changing process while Duggan set about loosening the final wheel nut. The air turned blue momentarily as the fourth wheel nut and its stub came off the wheel together.

Rory turned to his sister, mouth wide open.

“Did Dad just say the F-word?”

Rory had never heard his father swear before. Well, he *had* but not when Duggan knew that his children were within earshot.

Susan, sitting on the bank alongside her kids had heard Duggan’s F-bomb too.

“What’s wrong, Duggan?”

Duggan stood up from his crouching position and wiped his hands on a rag that he’d taken out of the boot of the car when he’d fetched the spare tyre.

“The last hub bolt sheared off. We can still drive on three, but it means that we won’t be able to go

very fast.”

Susan looked at the traffic feeding its way past their stricken car.

“The traffic’s not fast anyway. Maybe it won’t make that much difference.”

Duggan crouched on his haunches again and continued to wind the jack until the wheel was a couple of inches off the ground. He called up to his wife without looking at her.

“It may be okay for the moment, but once the traffic flow picks up, we’ll have to stay at maybe 20 mph and watch everyone else fly past us. If we try going any faster, it’ll put too much pressure on the other hub bolts and they might break too.”

“Well, do what you can, Dug. That’s all you can do.”

It wasn’t so much the stub shearing off that worried him, but the circumstances that the family had found itself in when it happened. Duggan knew that they had to get as far away from home as quickly as possible. They lived in an urban area with a military base only a few miles away – a prime target – so the more distance they could put between them and home, the better.

Nobody knew exactly where the missiles would land – certainly not the civilian population. Duggan was sure that the powers-that-be knew almost to the square inch where the bombs would fall – they

had sophisticated computer systems that had probably executed simulations as soon as the launch was detected – but the rest of the country was kept out of the loop. He imagined the idea was to avoid panic but that goal went out of the window as soon as the first siren sounded and didn't shut off after two minutes like it normally did.

Outwardly, his neighbours had appeared reasonably calm, just as he had, but he knew that inside they were surely mirroring his internal reaction – hearts pounding, a myriad of emotions flooding their minds, adrenaline pulsing through their veins, and – above all – fears for their families' safety.

A car pulled up behind them and a man with a receding hairline compensated for by an impressive red beard and moustache got out of the vehicle.

“Problems, Duggan?”

Neil lived six doors down from Duggan's family, and his arrival couldn't have been better timed.

“Hi, Neil. Yeah. One of the wheel stubs has sheared off.”

Neil crouched down to survey the damage, and then stood up again, shaking his head.

“I'd say you're well and truly screwed, my friend. It's not as if the RAC or AA will come out today.”

Duggan agreed.

“I’m going to put the new wheel on with just the three hub bolts and take it slow. That’s all I can do.”

Neil walked a couple of feet away from the car and waited for Duggan to join him. He spoke in a quiet voice.

“I assume the kids don’t know?”

“No. We told them the siren was a storm warning. No point in scaring them more than necessary.”

“For the best. Where are you heading to?”

“Paignton, Torbay.”

“I’m going to Brixham. I have to go past Paignton to get there.’

He nodded towards his SUV.

“Carol and the kids are already in Devon, so I’ve got plenty of room. You’re welcome to come with me if you like. To be honest, I could use the company.”

Duggan’s spirits rose.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t.”

“But the car?”

“Duggan, we don’t know when – or even if – we’ll ever be able to come home again. The car’s the least of your worries at the moment.”

Duggan called up to the trio sitting at the top of the bank.

“Neil’s very kindly offered to give us a lift. He’s

going past Paignton on the way to Brixham to join Carol and the girls.”

Susan guided Kate and Rory safely down the slope and they joined the two men. She smiled at Neil.

“That’s very kind of you, Neil. Thank you so much.”

Neil blushed a little.

“If you can’t help out a neighbour at a time like this, then what’s the point of it all, eh?”

Duggan opened the tailgate of the family hatchback and removed the bags, hoisting the heaviest onto his shoulder and handing the rest to Susan and the kids. He closed the tailgate with his free hand. He smiled at his family.

“Okay, guys. Let’s get back on the road.”

It took just a millionth of a second for the material inside the bomb to heat up to 10,000 times hotter than the surface of the sun, and ignite the fusion reaction. An intense fireball formed immediately and expanded as it cooled, dragging x-rays, light, and heat in its wake, enveloping and vaporising everything within a three quarter square mile radius.

Duggan, Susan, Kate, Rory, and Neil were within that radius.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Burn*

It's difficult to tell who enjoyed their morning walks more — David, a self-employed computer consultant or Trojan, his German Shepherd dog. Trojan was the more emotionally open of the two, showing his joy by leaping into piles of leaves that the park-keepers had gathered up and burying his nose deep into the heaps, taking in the various smells that wafted out from the disturbed foliage but, that day, David also had a permanent smile on his face as he followed his dog around the country park. He enjoyed seeing his friend so excited.

Suddenly, Trojan started barking and ran as fast as his legs could carry him into a nearby copse. That wasn't normal behaviour for the dog. He'd normally run a few yards in front of David but always kept an eye on his master to make sure he was following. And he'd never completely disappeared from view before.

Without warning, the sky turned bright white. David immediately and instinctively turned his eyes away from the piercing magnesium white sheet that covered the sky. A fraction of a second later he was knocked off his feet and slammed into the trunk of a large oak tree. He struggled to remain conscious for a few seconds until his brain claimed victory and eased him back into the land of the living.

He called out for Trojan but to no avail. The dog had disappeared. Hauling himself up to his feet, he saw a couple approaching him from the opposite direction. He was just about to ask them if they'd seen Trojan when the words got trapped inside his mouth.

They weren't walking but stumbling and were obviously in great distress. The skin was peeling off their bodies and faces and all that remained of their hair was a few clumps that doggedly refused to abandon their station. The clothes that they wore had been seared off and consisted of a few scraps of material that had welded itself to their skin. They hardly resembled humans at all.

It was only then that David became aware of the heat. Such intense heat, as if someone were pointing a hairdryer at him but had cranked up the temperature of the airstream to tenfold the highest setting.

He saw somebody else shouting at him. A mouth that moved but spawned no words. He cupped his left hand to his ear and felt a molten gooey substance where his ear should have been. He wanted to scream but his throat was too dry to allow anything more than an empty croak.

Walking was difficult but he retraced his tracks to the car park where his Range Rover was parked. The good weather always brought out lots of

walkers and hikers to take advantage of the unpolluted woodland environment. Now the car park was littered with their half burnt bodies, many of them alongside what was left of their pets. David's thoughts returned to Trojan who, until five minutes earlier, had been frolicking in the fallen leaves. He shut his eyes in an attempt to prevent the tears from falling but they still managed to force their way between his closed eyelids.

He made his way over to his car, oblivious to the damage done to all the other cars in the car park. He felt an inexplicable urge to be close to something familiar, needing to be with something he knew. But the burnt-out shell of what used to be his symbol of motoring freedom wasn't enough.

Where's Trojan? We should go home now.

He looked up the pathway to the woods, half expecting to see his friend bounding towards him but knowing that he would probably never see Trojan again. He scanned the hell that surrounded him. All these dogs hadn't survived the bomb, why should he think Trojan would have done?

Suddenly David's mouth was forced open by bile and vomit desperate to escape from his stomach. A steady stream of viscous liquid gushed from his mouth for a few seconds until he was left with slimy mucous slowly dripping from his mouth and nose, accompanied by an empty retching gut.



His body went into spasm as if he was about to throw up again but his stomach had nothing more to offer.

David looked down at his body – the first time he had dared to since the bomb went off. His clothes were hanging off him, mirroring his skin which, in places, looked like strips of cooked bacon. Miraculously, one of his car's wing mirrors was still intact. It took all his remaining strength but he dragged himself into a position where he could see the reflection of his face. He looked like a zombie extra from *The Walking Dead* but this was no special effects makeup. The intense heat had clawed at his face and now all he saw was a mass of peeling skin and burns.

*Why doesn't it hurt? Surely, I should be in agony. But I just feel numb.*

He knew he was going to die. Nobody could take the thermal beating that he had and survive. It was just a case of when he and life would part ways.

He hobbled over to the gift shop and cafeteria. Jagged shards of glass were all that remained of the windows which had been blown out by the blast. He tugged on one of the slivers until it broke loose, ignoring the tearing of flesh from his palms, and slumped down. He rested his back against the cafeteria wall.

*I can't go on like this.*

He drew the sharp edge horizontally and purposefully across his throat from left to right. It didn't take long for him to bleed out.

A battle-scarred dog trotted up to his corpse and nuzzled into him, trying to poke him into life. Unable to rouse him, the German Shepherd sat down alongside him, waiting patiently for his master to wake up.

## CHAPTER 3

### *A Stranger in a Strange Land*

A young man, perhaps twenty-nine or thirty years old stands in the middle of a shopping plaza, empty except for the occasional pigeon pecking at the discarded remains of last night's kebabs. In the distance, a mushroom cloud continues to form.

The man looks calm as if he's been expecting this moment all his life. He should be panicking – only one thing could create such a cloud in such a short space of time – but he appears to be trying to remember something. He knows his life depends upon him remembering. He takes his smartphone out of his jeans pocket and opens a YouTube video that he downloaded ages ago, just in case he should ever need it.

He needs it now.

He diverts his eyes from the screen for a moment as a new truth dawns on him.

*My parents and my sister are dead. There's no way they can have survived the explosion – the mushroom cloud is more or less directly above their house or, rather, where their house used to be. Please let their deaths have been instantaneous, swift and painless.*

He watches the video for a few more seconds, reminding himself of survival instructions. The recording tells him he has to get to safety, to get

inside a building, preferably a well-constructed concrete building. To stay outside will invite a slow and painful death. Gamma rays and neutrons emitted shortly after the nuclear explosion will damage the body of anyone who stays outside at a cellular level and cause acute radiation poisoning.

His hours spent watching YouTube videos on his smartphone, feeding his paranoia about an impending nuclear conflict, have not been wasted. His mother often chastised him for what she called an unhealthy obsession but he's finally been proved right. The death and devastation the bomb brings with it is a testament to that fact.

His mother often chastised him...

*My parents and sister are dead.*

*I'll never laugh and joke with my father again over a beer at their local pub. My mother will never again prepare my favourite meal for his birthday. And my sister, Naomi. We fought like the proverbial cat and dog when we were young but, beneath the sibling rivalry, was a brotherly and sisterly bond of love that can never be broken.*

*Until now.*

He shakes himself back to reality. He can't dwell on the loss of his family. His job now is to stay alive and his life depends upon what he does in the next fifteen minutes.

YouTube taught him that he has a fifteen-

minute window before radioactive particles begin to fall from the sky and blanket anything that's outside. His first priority? Find shelter.

Directly in front of him is an ugly carbuncle of a building, a soulless concrete monster that had been the vanguard of a planning department's brainfart, ripping the character out of what had once been a very pleasant and attractive English town.

Entertainment complexes are supposed to be welcoming places, seducing people into enjoying a night out at the cinema or theatre but, back in the 1960s, many architects had been beguiled by the modernist architecture movement and the result had been a proliferation of tasteless glass, steel, and reinforced concrete buildings in communities that didn't deserve to be punished in such a way. The young man has always hated that building and felt like cheering when he heard it was due for demolition but, now, at this moment, he loves every square inch of the abandoned hulk.

He sprints towards it.

He spots something out of the corner of his eye that stops him in his tracks.

A young woman is walking around in a circle, muttering to herself, her face devoid of expression.

For a split second, he feels an urge to ignore her and get himself to safety but he isn't the type of guy to leave a fellow human in danger – especially if he

can do something about it. He knows he won't be able to live with himself if he leaves her outside to die.

He races towards her, calling out as he runs.

"Hey. Are you alright? We need to get undercover."

The woman doesn't see him, although her eyes look straight at him.

*Maybe she's deaf. Perhaps the explosion's damaged her hearing.*

He points to the building. He accentuates the movement of his lips, in case she can lip-read.

"We have to go in there. To be safe."

The girl's empty eyes blink.

*"Pelo amor de Deus. O que é isso? Me salva Senhor."*

At least now he knows she isn't dumb and hopefully not deaf. He doesn't recognise the language but maybe she knows a few words of English. Many foreigners do.

The young woman stops asking God to save her and looks at him. He smiles, hoping that she might feel more at ease.

"Do you speak English?"

She shakes her head.

*"Não. Nada. Brasileira. Falo português."*

"Brazil? Portuguese?"

He only knows four words of Portuguese. That's

all he'd needed when he spent a week in The Algarve. *Por favor, cerveja, obrigado, and banheiro.* Those four words – *please, beer, thank you, and bathroom* encapsulate his entire Portuguese repertoire. They were the only words he'd needed at the time. He'd muddled through all other situations with a few gestures and Google Translate on his phone.

He goes to take her hand. She snatches hers away. He points at the drab building before them.

“Come with me.”

The young woman shakes her head.

“*Tenho que voltar pra h tel.*”

A word Glenn recognises. *Hotel.*

He points at the complex again.

“No. Not hotel. We have to go there.”

“*Minha amiga. T  me esperando.*”

“Look. I'm sorry. I don't understand a word you're saying. But we don't have time to mess around. We need to get inside that building.”

He's desperate to make her understand.

“Now! Please! Otherwise, we'll both die.”

The girl looks at the building, and then at Glenn. She can see that he seems genuinely worried for her.

“Okay.”

She grabs the young man's hand and the couple rush to the entrance of their haven.

Lady Luck is looking down on them favourably – the door's unlocked. The man pushes the door open and ducks inside, pulling his new friend behind him.

The darkness inside the building is a complete contrast to the brilliance of the light outside. The young man turns on the torch app on his phone casting a shadowy light over what had once been the foyer of a multiplex cinema. He gestures towards a wide central staircase.

"We need to go downstairs. There used to be a nightclub downstairs. We'll be safer down there."

The young woman looks at the staircase.

"Descer?"

"Yes. Desser. Go downstairs."

As they make their way downstairs, the man stops suddenly and points to a sign above a blue double door. *The Armitage Theatre*. He pulls open the doors.

"In here."