

INTERNATIONAL AIRSPACE. MAY 5.

At 30,000 feet, American Airlines Flight #147 from Paris to Boston flew according to routine. Airline food wasn't what it used to be, but in first class at least, the drinks were good. The crew had just finished a meal specially prepared by a Parisian eatery catering to airline personnel. Captain Jack Kelly switched autopilot on, and leaned back. "Did you see that new girl?" he asked his co-pilot, "the one with tits out to here?" He gestured with his hands toward the instrument panel.

At that moment, he felt a shock in the belly of his Boeing 767. He hurriedly scanned the instrument gauges, but before he had a chance to understand the readings, another explosion severed the cockpit from the cabin and Jack Kelly was hurtling through space, memories of the pretty girl lost to black sky and the flames of exploding fuselage.

Michelle Polito stood in the mid-cabin bathroom of British Airways' smart new Boeing 777. She hung over the sink, knees as weak as a baby's. Mother of God, she hated flying! The turbulence alone was enough to kill her, that awful sensation of the ground falling out from under her. But what was she going to do, tell thirty kids in her Queens Spanish class that they couldn't go on a once-in-a-lifetime exchange program to Madrid because their teacher was afraid to fly? She checked her ashen face in the mirror and noticed the turbulence had stopped. She waited another few seconds to make sure the calm was holding before she turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on her face.

She dried her hands, gave her cheeks a few pinches to bring some color back, and stepped out of the bathroom.

Seeing the kids jumping and playing made her smile. She felt that everything was going to be fine when she heard a bang and then a dreadful thumping as a seam opened up in the cabin floor before her. The scream roared out of her as she watched Maryann Angelides and her American Girl doll get sucked through the hole. Right behind her went Ishmael Cordoba, seat and all, who was playing cards with his best friend Anthony Apt.

Chang Lee, a flight attendant on Cathay Pacific's medium hop from Hong Kong to Singapore, had just begun his beverage service when a businessman in row three asked for a Fresca. Finding none on his cart, Lee headed to the galley. He noticed a wisp of smoke curling from one of the forward overhead compartments. As Lee reached up to unclip the latch, a tremendous blast flung him backward and then he was floating, slipping, as if down a water slide. Cold and wet and dark. He thought of the Fresca, then drifted away, his arms and legs buffeted by the wind. His face was burning hot but he was cold as ice, and before he could think about what had happened, he could no longer take a breath.

TURQUOISE COAST, TURKEY. MAY 5.

Julian Granot cut a U-turn with his jet ski, churning the water into a tall fan of spray, then accelerated back toward his sons. The boys' parallel wakes converged toward

the horizon, and the sun sparkled off the waters of the Mediterranean Sea at the Granot family's Turquoise Coast vacation spot. Lore held that the ancient peoples of this land had fashioned the word turquoise to describe the ravishing shade of the water, eventually deciding the country itself could be no better named: Turkuaz.

While Julian and his boys turned their games into sea-land strategy drills, his wife Gabi painted watercolors at water's edge. Her large kilim bag muffled the ring of her cell phone, as if trying to bar the outside world. She answered it. General David Ben-Ami grunted hello. He was head of Shabaq, Israel's internal security service, the Israelis' equivalent of the FBI, and Gabi knew the voice well. She and Ben-Ami had grown up together, and Julian had worked with Ben-Ami in the service for the last quarter century. She recognized the clipped syllables in his speech as a sign of controlled anger.

Somewhere, someone had died, or was about to.

Gabi told him Julian was on the water, far from shore. He asked how long it would take to get her husband's attention and wave him in. Maybe five minutes, she said. Ben-Ami added ten minutes: Julian would continue skiing after he saw his wife gesticulating with a telephone in her hand. A call at the beach invariably meant he'd be kissing his vacation paradise good-bye. Ben-Ami knew Julian well, had commanded him and run missions with him. The man was a fine and loyal soldier, but also a stubborn son of a bitch. He needed latitude.

After attracting Julian's eye, Gabi returned to her work. The faded pastel hues she was trying to coax from the paint were slipping away from her into the bright sky, the shimmering silver of the mountains and coves. She blotted and dabbed while trying to block out the telephone call and what it meant. After a few more brush strokes, she saw

Julian pull up to shore. He was red-haired and strong, a fit 49 year-old with thick legs and a muscular chest. As he dragged the jet-ski onto the sand, Gabi told him that Ben-Ami had called and would ring back. It wasn't thirty seconds before the telephone sounded again. The still-soaked Julian held the device away from his head. When Ben-Ami complained he couldn't hear him, Julian joked there might be something more affecting in the phone than a good friend's voice. A few years back the two of them had caused a rather unhappy morning for a terrorist leader by planting a miniature bomb in his telephone earpiece.

Ben-Ami let out a short laugh. It was no time for jokes, he said, and explained: three commercial jets down within the last hour. Julian flushed deeply as he listened. He took these crashes personally and though he was no longer directly responsible for the safety of airline passengers, he felt the familiar stomach-clenching reaction. His mind raced as if he were still on the job. Had he overlooked something, failed to make a crucial connection in the never-ending loop of intelligence clues? Habits of mind, forged through training, hard work or even a long marriage, were hard to break. They never disappeared completely.

"I'll have a plane pick you up in ninety minutes," Ben-Ami was saying. "You'll be met at the airport in Tel Aviv and driven here." A fleet of private planes was available to the State of Israel on request, and the government had emergency landing rights for those planes at most of the world's major airports. Julian had negotiated many of those rights himself. He checked his watch. Ben-Ami hadn't asked whether he could make it. And Julian hadn't answered.

His sons splashed and shouted in the waves. They were getting big now, and muscular. The oldest one was almost a man. When Julian turned to his wife, he saw a shadow cross her face. Their life together had been full of interruptions and surprises. There were ten years in an active unit that was routinely mobilized at any time of night or day, and ten more years of foreign postings. But who ever got used to the silence, the waiting for loved ones to come home. Who could?

“Three commercial jets have disappeared and are believed to have crashed.” Julian spoke to Gabi in the combination of Hebrew and English that had developed into a family patois after years of living in the States. “David wants me to head a Ministry task force to investigate.”

Gabi winced, saddened at the thought of the planes and the deaths, the families left to their shock and pain, at night and alone with nothing for comfort but the official papers in their hands. She thought especially of the new orphans. Like most Israelis, Gabi was all too familiar with the nearness of death.

The worst of it, which came much later, was that the survivors would *never* find any sense in the deaths. Understanding brought no relief. There was nothing to understand. The terrorists didn't know their victims, didn't care about their particularities. To their killers, the dead weren't people, only statistics, body counts. Those who loved them didn't matter at all. The survivors were then left with an unbearable choice: to live choked with rage and hatred, or fight their way back to life through some form of forgiveness, bitter as it might be.

“When will it end?” she muttered, standing and pulling on her sweater. She wore a blue bandeau around her shapely hips and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a sage green

ribbon. Her light-colored hair hung straight to her shoulders. She was two years younger than her husband and her face was still youthful and vibrant, not yet marked by the anxiety that prematurely aged the faces of many of her countrywomen. She looked out at the boys, playing so happily, and felt in her chest a familiar flutter. Soon these beautiful children would be in the Army themselves. So would all their friends, girls and boys alike.

“What should we do?” she asked Julian, stepping toward him and placing her hand gently on his forearm.

“All airplanes have been grounded,” he said, “so you can’t leave.” He grinned at her. “You’re stuck here in this enchanted place with your two favorite boys!”

She stuck out her lower lip in a girlish way she usually didn’t allow herself. She’d run missions for Mossad for fifteen years before leaving to teach college and she’d earned her comrades’ respect several times over. But these last few weeks of Julian’s retirement had softened her, allowed her to imagine that life might return to normality, whatever that was. And she wanted him to be here. Julian put his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. “I’ll let you know in a couple days how you can return. Everything will be OK,” he said. “Kiss the boys for me, will you?” he asked, stepping back.

She nodded and he embraced her again, smelling the vanilla scent of her skin. “Be good,” he said, his deep voice dropping off. Fatigue. Or was it sadness, she wondered, as he disappeared across the beach, his feet digging petal shapes in the fine white sand.