

THE LONG SHOT

The tyres of the Boeing 737 bit into the runway, squealing like dying pigs and sending spurts of dust into the air. The plane taxied towards the terminal building which shimmered in the midday heat. In the First Class cabin the passengers began to unbuckle their seat belts before the plane had come to a halt. A dark-haired stewardess left her seat and went over to the occupant of seat 3B. She bent down and gave him her professional smile. "Mr Ahmed?" she said. The man continued reading as if he hadn't heard. "Mr Ahmed?" she repeated. He looked up and nodded. He was a typical First Class passenger: middle-aged, overweight and seemingly bored with the whole business of flying. He'd scarcely touched the inflight food and rejected the complimentary headset with an impatient wave of his hand. He'd spent most of the three-hour flight with his nose buried in the *Wall Street Journal*. "Mr Ahmed, the pilot has requested that you remain behind while the rest of the passengers deplane," she said.

The passenger didn't seem the least bit surprised by the request. "What about the people I'm travelling with?" he asked. The woman next to him was down on the manifest as his wife and, like the man, was travelling on a Yemeni diplomatic passport. A grey-haired older woman, apparently his mother, was sitting behind him, and on the other side of the cabin were his two young children. All had Yemeni diplomatic passports.

"I'm sorry, sir, they're also to stay behind."

The passenger nodded. "I understand," he said quietly. "Will you tell my children while I explain to my mother?"

The stewardess went over to explain to the youngsters while Ahmed turned around and spoke to the old woman. Elba Maria Sanchez had grown accustomed to waiting in airliners while immigration officials took advice on whether or not her son should be admitted into their country. The family had been turned away from most of the countries in the Middle East, and previous safe havens including East Germany and Hungary had turned their backs on their old cohorts in their rush to embrace capitalism. Even the Sudanese had betrayed them.

The passengers shuffled off the plane. The stewardess asked Ahmed if he wanted a drink while he waited but he declined. He picked up a copy of *Newsweek* and idly flicked through it. "It's always the same," said his wife bitterly. "They should be ashamed of themselves, these people, they have no loyalty. After all we've done for them."

"Be patient, Magdalena," said the man, his eyes on the magazine.

"Patient! Ha! I was patient in Tripoli, I was patient in Damascus, I've been patient in virtually every airport in the Middle East. Face it, Ilich, no-one wants us any more. We're an embarrassment."

"Hush," he said quietly. "You'll upset the children."

She looked like she was about to argue but before she could speak a small, unimposing man in a dark suit appeared at the doorway. He carried a shiny black briefcase and he nervously rubbed his moustache as he approached Ahmed. He introduced himself as Khatami, just the one name, and he didn't tell the passenger who he represented. There was no need. He suggested that they go back into the Business Class cabin where they could have some privacy and Ahmed followed him along the aisle. Ahmed's children looked anxiously up at him and he winked at them reassuringly. Khatami stood to the side to allow Ahmed past and then he whisked the blue curtain closed. Ahmed sat down in an aisle seat and Khatami took the seat opposite him, balancing the briefcase on his knees. Khatami seemed uneasy and beads of perspiration dripped down either side of his beakish nose. "Your passport, please," he said, holding out his hand.

Ahmed took his passport from the inside pocket of his Armani jacket and handed it over. Khatami flicked through the pages of the passport which contained a plethora of visas and immigration stamps. He read the name at the front of the passport: Nagi Abubaker Ahmed. The photograph matched the man sitting in front of him: a receding hairline, a thick moustache over fleshy lips, and jowls around the chin that suggested the man had lived a

soft life with too much time spent in expensive restaurants. “You are Ilich Ramirez Sanchez?”

The passenger nodded.

“The woman travelling with you is Magdalena Kopp?”

Another curt nod.

“Mr Sanchez, I’ve been asked to put a number of questions to you before our Government decides whether or not it can accommodate your request for asylum.”

Sanchez said nothing. Khatami could see his own reflection in the darkened lenses of Sanchez’s spectacles. It gave him an uneasy feeling and he took a large white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. “You have been living in Damascus for some time, is that correct?”

“Yes,” said Sanchez.

“From there you went where?”

“To Libya.”

“The Libyans would not allow you to stay in their country?”

“You are well informed,” said Sanchez.

“And from Libya you went back to Damascus?”

“That was the first plane out of the country, yes.”

Khatami nodded, wiped his forehead again and shoved the handkerchief back into his top pocket. “Your assets are where?”

“Assets? I don’t understand.”

“You have money?”

Sanchez smiled. “Yes, I have money. I was well paid for my work.”

“The money is where?”

“Switzerland, mainly. I also have one million dollars in my diplomatic baggage. I can assure you I will not be a burden.”

Khatami smiled nervously. “Good, good. That’s good.”

He looked down at his briefcase and noticed that he was gripping it so tightly that his nails were biting into the leather. He took his hands away and Sanchez saw two wet palm prints where they had been. “My Government is particularly concerned about your past, Mr Sanchez. Your, how shall I call them? . . . exploits . . . have been well documented, and have attracted a great deal of publicity. They want to know whether or not you have rescinded your terrorist past.”

Sanchez sighed. “I am looking only for a place where my family and I can live in safety. My past is my past.”

Khatami nodded, keeping his eyes down so that he wouldn’t have to look at his own reflection. “Then you no longer consider yourself a terrorist?”

“That is correct,” said Sanchez.

“Ah,” said Khatami. “That is a great pity. A great pity.” He lifted his head and there was a look of hawkish intensity in his eyes. “It could well be in the future that we would have need of someone with your talents.”

“I see,” said Sanchez. He took off his spectacles, revealing brown eyes that were surprisingly soft and amused. “I would not have a problem with that. I think that whoever offers me sanctuary would have the right to expect me to perform a service for them.”

Khatami grinned and nodded. He had expected the discussion with Ilich Ramirez Sanchez to be much more stressful. The man the world new as Carlos the Jackal was proving surprisingly easy to deal with.

Jim Mitchell scanned the clear blue skies through the cockpit of his Cessna 172. It was a glorious day for flying. There were a few wisps of feathery clouds but they were way up high, much higher than the single-engine Cessna could ever hope to fly. To the north-west, about eight miles away, he saw the runway, almost perpendicular to the nose of the Cessna. The plane was perfectly trimmed and there was next to no turbulence so he needed only the

barest pressure on the wheel to maintain his course. He turned his head to the right and caught his wife's eye. She smiled and winked at him and he grinned back. "Sandra, do you want to call them?"

"Sure," she said. She tuned the radio to the control tower. Mitchell watched her as she contacted the air-traffic controller, reported their position and told him that they were inbound for landing. She asked for a runway advisory and, through his headset, Mitchell heard the controller tell her that the wind was blowing right down the runway at about six knots. Perfect. At forty-five years old, Jim Mitchell was a decade and a half older than his wife and he never tired of looking at her. She smiled as she spoke into the microphone and she waved for him to keep his eyes on the outside of the plane. He glanced down at the sectional chart clipped to his leg. Their approach was taking them through a Military Operations Area, marked on the chart with a magenta border. Flying was permitted in the MOA, but it still made him slightly nervous. He peered through the windshield, scanning the sky in segments, looking for military traffic.

He felt a small hand on his shoulder. "Dad, Dad, turn around."

Mitchell twisted around to see his son Jamie holding their camcorder. The red light was on showing that Jamie was filming. Mitchell grinned and gave his son a thumbs-up. "Jim Mitchell, the fearless pilot," he laughed and Jamie giggled. The boy panned to the right. "Mon," he said, and Sandra looked over her shoulder.

"Don't use all the tape," she chided. "Save it till we get closer to Vegas."

"Oh Mom, don't say stuff like that, it gets recorded," Jamie moaned. He switched the camcorder off. "Now I'll have to rewind it." He sighed in the way that only a child can sigh and pouted. "I bet Scorsese never had this trouble," he said.

Sandra leaned back and ruffled his hair. He jerked away, refusing to be mollified. At eight years old he was getting to the 'I don't want to be touched' stage, Sandra realised with a twinge of regret.

"I see the wind-sock," said Sandra, and Mitchell squinted, looking for the orange sock which would give him an accurate indication of the ground-level wind direction. He couldn't see it. His wife's eyesight was much better than Mitchell's, who was no longer allowed to fly without his correcting lenses. Another sign of old age creeping up on him, he thought ruefully. Mitchell reduced power and took the Cessna down to one thousand feet above the ground and joined the traffic pattern at the single runway. They were the only plane in the area and they were soon on the ground, taxiing up to a refuelling station.

Jamie filmed the plane being refuelled and then wandered off to get a canned drink from a vending machine. Mitchell put his hands on his hips and surveyed the sky overhead.

Jamie returned with his Coke. He took the camcorder out of the Cessna. "Okay, I want a shot of the two of you together at the front of the plane," said the boy, and he showed his parents where he wanted them to stand.

"Our son, the movie director," said Mitchell.

"It'll be a great loss to the real estate industry that he doesn't follow in his father's footsteps," said Sandra, smiling to show that she was joking. Real estate had given them an enviable lifestyle, even if Mitchell had to admit that it wasn't the most exciting of careers and that people tended to avoid him at parties. She stood close to him and he slipped his arm around her waist. Mitchell held his head high to conceal his growing bald spot and double chin from the camcorder, and sucked in his stomach.

Jamie panned across from the fuel pumps until his parents were in the centre of the viewfinder. They waved and grinned. He switched the camcorder off and climbed into the back seat of the Cessna while his father walked around the plane and checked the fuel tanks. Sandra told her son to put on a pullover. The weather in Phoenix had been unseasonably warm but the forecast had been for cold winds to the north.

Mitchell soon had the small plane up in the air. He headed west, his VOR tuned to the Needles beacon in Havasu Lake National Wildlife Refuge from where he planned to fly up to Vegas. There was little in the way of landmarks to navigate by once he'd flown over Highway 93, so he had to rely on his VOR. He would have preferred to fly at a slightly higher altitude, but Jamie kept insisting that they fly low so that he could look at the

scenery, even if it was just sand, rocks and the many-armed cacti which stood like guardsmen on parade.

“Hey, Dad, what’s that down there?” Jamie pointed down to the left.

Mitchell turned to look where his son was pointing but couldn’t see anything. “What is it, Jamie?” he asked.

“There’s someone down there. Cars in the desert, and some other stuff. Can we look?”

Mitchell squinted behind his sunglasses. The darkened lenses were prescription but lately he was finding they weren’t as good at correcting his long-distance vision as they used to be. He checked his fuel gauges and saw that he had plenty to spare. With the VOR equipment there was no chance of getting lost, and it was supposed to be a vacation. “I guess so, son,” he said, and put the Cessna into a slow, turning descent.

“Is this a good idea?” Sandra asked through his headset.

“We’ve plenty of time,” said Mitchell. “And we’re on a VFR flight plan, we can play around if we want.”

“There!” Jamie shouted. “I think they’re making a movie.” He switched his camcorder on and began filming out of the side window.

“What is it?” asked Sandra. She was sitting on the right-hand side of the plane and her husband was blocking her view.

“I can’t see,” said Mitchell, putting the Cessna into a steep turn so that the ground whirled underneath him. The altimeter span as he took the plane down to two thousand feet.

“There are two towers down there, the sort they put cameras on,” said Jamie excitedly. “I can’t see what they’re doing, though. I bet they’re making a movie. This is cool. I wonder who the director is?”

Mitchell peered out of the cockpit. Far below he could see a wood and metal structure, about fifty feet high. It looked like scaffolding, and he could make out a figure on top of it. Chains or ropes tethered the structure to the ground. About half a mile away were a group of men standing on the ground in a line. Mitchell frowned. The figures were standing too still, and there was something awkward about the way they held their arms. They weren’t cacti, but they weren’t human, either. He levelled the plane off and pointed out the figures to his wife.

“They look like robots,” she said.

“Or dummies, he agreed.”

“There are real people over there, see?” She pointed to another group of figures standing several hundred feet away.

“I see them,” said Mitchell.

“Let’s go down lower, Dad,” said Jamie, still filming. “It might be someone famous.”

“That might not be a good idea, Jamie,” said his mother, twisting around in her seat. “They might not want a plane buzzing overhead.”

“Just one pass, Mom,” implored Jamie. “Please.”

“Jim, what do you think?” she asked her husband.

“One quick look wouldn’t hurt,” said Mitchell. “I must admit I’m a bit curious myself. They’re miles from anywhere.”

“Looks like I’m outvoted then,” said Sandra.

Mitchell circled slowly as he lost height and levelled off at five hundred feet above the ground, several miles away from the two towers. Jamie trained the camcorder on the desert below. They flew around an isolated butte which rose majestically from the ground as if it had been pushed up from below. Jamie took the viewfinder away from his face and peered at the rocky outcrop. “There’s someone on top of the hill,” he said. He put the camcorder back to his eye and zoomed in on the butte. “He’s lying down . . . I think he’s got a gun, Dad.”

“Are you sure?”

The Cessna had flown by the hill and Jamie couldn’t see the man any more. “I don’t know, I think so.”

“There wouldn’t be hunters out here, surely,” said Sandra, the concern obvious in her voice.

“Nothing to shoot at except lizards,” said Mitchell.

“Okay, Jamie, keep your eyes open, we’re only going to do this once. Shout if you see Steven Spielberg, okay?” He cut back on the power and slowed the Cessna’s airspeed until they were at eighty knots. Jamie panned across the activity below, zooming in on the three people on the ground and then tracking across to the two towers. Sandra shaded her eyes with her hands and peered down.

“Jamie, can you see what the men are doing on the towers?” she said. “They’re not cameras they’re holding, are they?”

Jamie concentrated his camcorder on the tower closest to the small plane. It was about half a mile away and seemed to be made of metal scaffolding and planks. “No, Mom,” he said, “they’re guns.”

“Guns?”

“Yeah, like the guy had back on the hill.”

Sandra turned to her husband. “Jim, I don’t like this, let’s go.”

“You think maybe we should report it?” Mitchell asked.

“I don’t know, I just think we should go. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Okay, honey, no problem.” Mitchell pushed the throttle full in and pulled back on the control wheel and aimed the small plane up into the blue sky. He looked at his VOR and saw that he was to the left of his original course so he banked the Cessna to the right as he climbed. The desert scrub seemed to slide below him.

Sandra settled back in her seat, glad to be away from the men with the guns. She closed her eyes and rubbed them with the back of her hands. She heard the crack of splintering glass and she jumped as something wet splattered across her cheek. Her stomach lurched as the nose of the Cessna dipped down and when she looked across at her husband she saw that he’d slumped back in his seat, his head resting against the side window. Her first thought was that he’d had a heart attack or a stroke but then she saw that there was blood on his face and she screamed. His blood was all over her and there were bits of pink tissue and fragments of bone that looked like white wood shavings. She screamed and tugged on his shoulder, hoping that by shaking him she’d wake him up. His head lolled forward and she saw the top of his skull had been blown away. His feet were drumming against the floor but she could see from the size of the wound that he was already dead, the kicking was just a nervous reaction. Something dripped down her face and she looked up to see thick globules of blood trickling down from the roof of the plane. She opened her mouth to scream again and blood ran between her lips, making her gag. Behind her, Jamie was screaming for his father.

Sandra wiped her hands across her face and felt the blood smear over her skin. Through the cockpit she saw nothing but the desert and she realised with a jolt that the plane was still diving. She reached for the control wheel and pulled back on it, feeling her stomach churn as the plane’s nose came up. She was gasping for breath and her arms were trembling. She looked towards the attitude indicator but her husband’s body obscured it, then suddenly his whole body swung away from the instruments as if he’d only been dozing, but she realised it was the deceleration forcing him back. The shaking in her hands intensified and she forced herself to keep her eyes on the instruments and not on her dead husband. The plane levelled off and she decided to accelerate away from the gunmen below rather than wasting time trying to climb. There was a loud crack from somewhere behind her and then another and she yelled at Jamie to lie down across the rear seats. The rudder pedals abruptly lost their resistance as if the cables had been cut and the Cessna began to slide to the right, with the wind. More bullets thudded into the rear of the plane and she felt the control wheel kick in her hands. “Oh God, the fuel,” she said, remembering the fuel tanks in the wings above her head. She began twisting the control wheel from side to side, jerking the plane around in the air. Mitchell’s body swayed grotesquely, held in place by the seat belt. His blood was dripping everywhere, though thankfully his feet had stopped drumming on the pedals.

Jamie had followed her instructions and was lying across the back seats, sobbing into his hands.

“It’s okay, honey, it’s going to be okay,” Sandra said, though there was no conviction in her trembling voice. Her mind was racing and she couldn’t remember what the emergency procedures were. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to picture the emergency transponder code. Seven Seven Zero Zero. She took her left hand off the control wheel and fumbled with the dials on the transponder, turning them to the four figures which would set alarms ringing at all radar facilities within the range. The wheel jerked in her hand and pulled forward as the plane began to dive again. The engine started to splutter and the whole plane bucked and reared like a runaway stallion. Her hands shook as she keyed in the emergency frequency on the radio: 121.50 MHz. The control wheel began to shudder, making her shoulders vibrate.

“Mom, what’s happening?” screamed her son.

“It’s okay, honey. Stay where you are.” The engine was coughing and the propeller blades became visible as a grey disc as they slowed. Black smoke was pouring from the left side of the engine cowling. According to the altimeter they were a little over a thousand feet above the ground and the vertical speed indicator showed they were dropping at five hundred feet a minute. She clicked on the radio microphone. “Mayday, mayday,” she said. “This is Five Nine Four, position unknown, crash landing.” She couldn’t remember what other information she was supposed to give in a distress call.

The headset crackled but there was no reply. The altimeter was spinning and they were probably too low for anyone to pick up their signal. “Mayday, mayday,” she repeated, she took her thumb off the microphone switch and concentrated on the emergency procedures. She pulled back hard on the control wheel to try to keep the nose up but it suddenly went slack and she knew she’d lost control of the elevators. The dive steepened and the airspeed indicator went above the red line. The plane was diving at its maximum speed but there was surprisingly little sense of movement. Sandra Mitchell became quite detached about her own imminent death. She kept pulling back on the control wheel, knowing that it was quite useless but wanting to do something. She took deep breaths. “It’s all right, honey,” she called to her son. “It’s all right.”

The ground seemed to get no closer until the last hundred feet and then it suddenly rushed up to meet her.