

## THE SOLITARY MAN

THE PRISONER LAY IN the damp grass and watched the building. It was in complete darkness. To his left was a line of small planes, standing like soldiers on parade, their noses pointing towards the distant runway. Two of the planes were four-seater Cessnas and he memorised their numbers. A police car sped down the road that ran parallel to the airfield, its siren on and lights flashing. The prisoner flattened himself into the grass, spread-eagled like a skydiver. He closed his eyes and breathed in the fragrance of the wet grass. Dew had coated his beard and he wiped his face with his sleeve. The siren sounded closer and closer and then began to recede. The prisoner lifted his head. It wouldn't be long before they searched the airfield.

He got to his feet and ran towards the single-storey building. There was a main entrance and fire exit, and a window that overlooked the parked planes. Two locks secured the main door: a Yale and a deadbolt. The Yale he could pick but he'd need a drill for the deadbolt. He scuttled around the side of the building and checked the emergency exit. There was no lock to pick, but the wooden door didn't look too strong. A couple of hard kicks would probably do it. The moon emerged from behind a cloud, making the thick yellow stripes that ran down both sides of his blue denim uniform glow.

A truck rattled down the road. The prisoner took a step back from the door, then waited until the truck was close to the entrance to the airfield. When the truck's engine noise was at its loudest, he kicked the door hard, putting all his weight behind the blow. The wood splintered, and it gave way on the second kick. He pushed the door open and ducked inside. The keys were in a cabinet mounted on the far wall of the office.

He dashed over to the planes. The fuel tanks of the first Cessna he tried were almost empty. He said a silent prayer and went over to the second four-seater, a blue and white Cessna 172. He fumbled for the keys, then unlocked the door on the pilot's side and switched on the electronics. Both tanks were half-full. The prisoner smiled to himself. More than enough to get him well away from the island. He untied the chains that kept the plane tethered to the metal rings embedded in the concrete parking area.

In the distance a dog barked. The prisoner stopped dead and listened intently. There was another bark, closer to the airfield. A big dog, a German Shepherd maybe, the sort of dog that the police would use. He walked quickly to the front of the plane and climbed into the pilot's seat. He let his hands play over the control wheel for a few seconds. There was so much to remember. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Carburettor heat in, throttle in a quarter of an inch, just enough to get the engine turning over. He turned the key. The engine burst into life. He pushed the throttle further in and the engine roared.

The noise was deafening. He hadn't realised how loud it would be. It was the first time the prisoner had ever been in a small plane. He shook his head. He was wasting time, and the dogs were getting closer. He put his feet on the rudder pedals and released the handbrake. The plane lurched forward.

He wrenched the control wheel to the right but the plane kept going straight ahead. Only then did he remember what Ronnie had told him: on the ground, you steered with your feet. The control wheel was only effective in the air. The prisoner took a hand off the wheel and wiped his forehead. He had to stay calm; he had to remember everything that Ronnie had taught him.

He pushed his right foot forward and immediately the plane veered to the right. He overcompensated and tried to use the control wheel to get the plane back on course. "Rudder," he muttered to himself.

He jiggled the pedals and manoeuvred the plane to the end of the runway. The windsock down the runway was blowing towards him, so he'd be flying straight into the wind. He pushed the top of both pedals forward to operate the brakes, and held the plane steady. The gyroscopic compass was about twenty degrees adrift, according to the magnetic compass, so he reset it. A heading of 340 Ronnie had said. North-north-west. He pushed in the throttle as far as it would go and let his feet slide off the pedals. The plane rolled forward, accelerating

quickly. He used the pedals to keep the nose heading down the middle of the runway, resisting the urge to turn the control wheel.

His eyes flicked from the windscreen to the airspeed indicator. Thirty, thirty-five, forty. The runway slid by, faster and faster until it was a grey blur. He waited until the airspeed hit sixty-five and then pulled back on the control wheel. The plane leaped into the air. His stomach lurched and he eased back on the wheel, levelling the plane off. A gust of wind made the plane veer to the left and he pulled back on the wheel again and started to climb.

Below, houses and gardens flashed by, then a road. He began to laugh. He was doing it. He was actually doing it. He was flying.

He looked at the altimeter. Five hundred feet and climbing. Wisps of cloud hit the windscreen and then were gone. Ahead of him were grey clouds, but he could see large areas of clear sky between them.

The control wheel kicked in his hands as he hit an air pocket and he gripped it tightly. He scanned the instruments. Everything seemed to be okay. He looked down at his feet and realised he'd left the fuel selector switch in the 'off' position. He reached down and turned it to 'both', freeing up the fuel in both tanks. That had been a stupid mistake. Running out of fuel wouldn't have been smart.

He took the plane up to a thousand feet and levelled it off, pulling back on the throttle as Ronnie had told him. He looked out of the window to his right. There was a beach below, and then he was flying over the Solent, towards the town of Lymington. The muscles in his neck were locked tight with the tension and he rolled his neck. Taking off was the easy part, Ronnie had warned. Getting the plane back on the ground would be a lot harder.

He flew through a patch of cloud and for a moment he began to panic as everything went white, then just as quickly he was back in clear sky. Ahead of him were more clouds. They were grey and forbidding, and the prisoner was suddenly scared. He pushed the control wheel forward and took the plane down a few hundred feet but all he could see ahead of him were the slate-grey clouds. Far off to his right was a flash of lightning. The clouds seem to rush towards him and he turned the control wheel to the left, figuring he'd try to fly around the storm, but he was too late.

Before he could react, he was inside the storm, the plane buffeted by the turbulent air. He could see nothing but impenetrable cloud. It was totally white, as if he were surrounded by a thick, cloying mist. There was no way of telling whether his wings were level or not, no sense of which was up and which was down.

The engine began to roar and he pulled back on the throttle. It didn't make any difference. He scanned the instrument panel and saw that his airspeed was rising rapidly. He was diving. Diving towards the sea. He yanked the control wheel back and his stomach went into freefall. His compass was whirling around but nothing he did stopped the spin.

He began to panic. He'd been crazy even to think that he could fly. Crazy. The engine was screaming now, screaming like a tortured animal, and the plane was shaking and juddering like a car being driven over rough ground.

He yelled as the plane dropped out of the clouds and he saw that he was only fifty feet above the waves. His left wing had dipped so far down that he was almost inverted. He wrenched the control wheel to the right and kicked his right rudder pedal, his cries merging with the roar of the engine.

WRECKAGE FROM THE SMALL plane was found floating in the Solent two days later. After a week police divers discovered the bulk of the plane scattered over the sea bed. There was blood on the windshield where the prisoner's head had slammed into the Plexiglas. Of the body there was no sign, but one of the doors had sprung open on impact and the tides in the area were strong, and the Hampshire police knew that it wasn't true that the sea always gave up its dead. The file on prisoner E563228 was closed and his belongings sent to his ex-wife, who was listed on his files as his next of kin.

THE FARMER KNELT DOWN, took a handful of reddish soil, and held it up to his lips. He sniffed, inhaling its fragrance like a wine connoisseur sampling the bouquet of an expensive claret. He took a mouthful and chewed slowly, then he nodded, satisfied. He had worked the land for more than three decades, and could taste the quality of the soil, could tell from its sweetness whether it was rich enough in alkaline limestone to produce a good crop of opium poppies.

It was important to choose the right land to grow the poppies, because if the crop was bad, the farmer would be blamed, and with blame came punishment. So the farmer chewed carefully, mixing the soil with his saliva and allowing it to roll around his mouth. It was good. It was very good. He nodded.

“Yes?” said the man on the white horse.

“Yes,” said the farmer. He stood up and surveyed the hillside. “This will be a good place.”

The man on the horse wore a shirt of green and brown camouflage material, with matching pants. Black boots that stopped just below his knees were thrust deep into the stirrups and he had a riding crop tucked under his left arm. The horse stood up straight, its ears pricked as it too looked at the hillside. They were more than three thousand feet above sea level, in a mountain hollow which would protect the crop against high winds, but high enough that the plants would be nurtured by the night fogs. The ground sloped away gently, providing good drainage, but not so steeply as to make planting and harvesting difficult.

“How long will it take to clear the land?” asked the man on the horse. He watched the farmer through impenetrable sunglasses.

The farmer ran a hand through his hair. If he over-estimated, Zhou Yuanyi would think he was being slothful. If he under-estimated, he might not be able to finish the work in time. He thought it would take eight days, if all the men and women in the village helped. “Nine days to cut,” he said.

Zhou Yuanyi nodded. “I think eight,” he said.

The farmer shrugged. “Maybe eight,” he agreed.

“Start tomorrow.”

The trees and bushes would have to be slashed down with machetes. It would be hard work, back breaking, and they’d have to toil from first light until dark, but the farmer knew he would be well rewarded. Zhou Yuanyi was a hard taskmaster, brutal at times, but he paid well for the opium the farmer grew. He paid well, and he offered protection: protection from the Burmese troops who wanted to smash the poppy-growers of the region.

Once the area had been cleared, the cut vegetation would be left to dry on the ground for four weeks, then it would be burned, the ashes providing essential calcium, potassium and phosphate, a natural fertiliser. The land would be ruined, of course, good for only three years, maybe four, but by then the farmer would have cleared new fields and be ready to move on.

“How many rais?” asked Zhou Yuanyi. A rai was just over a third of an acre.

“Twenty. Maybe twenty-one.”

Zhou Yuanyi sniffed. He cleared his throat and spat at the ground. “Not enough,” he said. “Find me another field as well. Soon.”

THE IRISHMAN SHADED HIS eyes with the flat of his hand and peered down the crowded street. Both sides were lined with stalls selling dried fish, counterfeit cassette tapes and cheap clothes. The smell of spices, fried food and sewage was overpowering. “Bloody hell, Park, how much further?” he asked.

His Thai companion flashed a broad smile. “There,” he nodded. “The big building.”

The Irishman squinted at a four-story concrete block with iron bars over its windows. There were several signs affixed to the side of the building, all of them in Thai, but he recognised a red and white Coca-Cola symbol and a sign advertising Kodak film.

He shuddered. He didn't like being among crowds, and the street was packed with sweating bodies: old women huddled over trays of cigarettes; men sleeping on sunloungers while their wives stood guard over their stalls; bare-chested and shoeless children running between the shoppers, giggling and pointing at the sweating foreigner. A three-wheeled tuk-tuk sped down the narrow street, narrowly missing a teenage boy, its two-stroke engine belching out black fumes.

"Come on," said Park. "We said three o'clock."

The Irishman looked at his watch. "Shit, if we're late we're late," he said. "This is Thailand, right? No one's ever on time here." Rivulets of sweat trickled down his back and his shirt was practically glued to his skin. According to Park, it would get even hotter in the weeks to come, but by then the Irishman would be back in Dublin, drinking Guinness and chatting up the local talent. The Thai girls were pretty enough with their soft brown skin and glossy black hair, but the Irishman preferred blue-eyed blondes.

Park walked down the street with an easy, relaxed stride, covering the maximum amount of distance with the minimum of effort. He scratched his right cheek as he walked. The skin there was rough and ridged with scar tissue. Park had told the Irishman that he used to be a kickboxer, but this wasn't the sort of scarring that a man would get from fighting with fists or feet. The Irishman hurried after Park, sweat pouring down his face.

They were followed by two Thai men, friends of Park with virtually unpronounceable names who'd met them at Chiang Mai airport. They smiled a lot but the Irishman didn't trust them. But then he didn't trust anybody in Thailand, not since he'd given money to a beggar with no arms as he'd left his hotel in Bangkok. The beggar had been sitting cross-legged at the bottom of a footbridge over one of the city's perpetually congested roads. He had been in his early twenties, dirty and dishevelled and holding a polystyrene cup in his teeth, the empty sleeves of his T-shirt dangling at his sides. The Irishman had dropped two ten-baht coins into the cup and Park had roared with laughter. It was only then that the Irishman had noticed the bulges and realised that the beggar had his arms folded behind his back. He had reached towards the cup to take back his money, but Park had restrained him, laughing and explaining that the beggar was simply like everyone else in the city, trying to make a living. Since then, he had taken nothing at face value.

He stepped aside to allow three saffron-robed monks to walk by. The monk bringing up the rear was a young boy who smiled up at the Irishman. It was a guileless smile and the boy's eyes were bright and friendly. The Irishman grinned back. It seemed as though everyone he met in Thailand smiled, no matter what their circumstances.

Park took them around the side of the building to a loading ramp. The four men walked up the ramp to a steel shutter which Park banged on with the flat of his hand, three short raps followed by two more in quick succession. A door set into the shutter opened a couple of inches and someone inside muttered a few words in Thai. Park replied and the door opened wide. He motioned for the Irishman to go in first.

It was dark inside and the Irishman blinked as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. The warehouse was hot and airless. The area around the door was bare except for a small steel table and two wooden stools, but the rest of the building was packed with wooden crates and cardboard boxes which reached almost to the ceiling. A line of bare lightbulbs provided the only illumination in the warehouse, but there were so many crates and boxes that much of the interior was in shadow, adding to the Irishman's feeling of claustrophobia. He wiped his damp forehead with his sleeve.

Park smiled sympathetically. "We check, then we go," he said.

The Irishman nodded. "Let's get on with it, then."

The man who'd opened the door was short and squat with a tattoo of a tiger on his left forearm and a handgun stuck into the belt of his pants. He had a frog-like face with bulging eyes, and around his neck was a thick gold chain from which dangled a small circular piece of jade. He grinned at Park and nodded towards the far end of the warehouse. Three more

Thais in T-shirts and jeans with guns in their belts materialised from the shadows. The Irishman looked at Park, and the Thai gave him a reassuring smile. Together they walked down an aisle between the towering boxes, following the man with the tiger tattoo. They turned to the left down another aisle where a large space had been cleared. A cardboard box had been opened and half a dozen Panasonic video recorders taken out. The man with the tattoo spoke to Park in rapid Thai.

“He wants you to choose one,” Park explained.

The Irishman shrugged carelessly. “You choose,” he said.

Park squatted down and tapped one of the machines with his finger. The man with the tiger tattoo picked up a screwdriver and quickly removed a panel from the bottom of the video recorder. He pulled out three polythene-covered packages containing white powder and handed one to the Irishman.

The Irishman walked over to a stack of boxes. He indicated the cardboard box at the bottom of the stack. “That one,” he said.

The man with the tiger tattoo began to talk quickly but Park silenced him with a wave of his hand. Park said something in Thai but the man continued to protest. “He says it’s too much work,” Park translated. “He says they’re all the same.”

The Irishman’s eyes hardened. “Tell him I want to see one from that box.”

Park turned to the man with the tattoo and spoke to him again. There was something pleading about Park’s voice, as if he didn’t want to cause offence. Eventually the man with the tattoo shrugged and smiled at the Irishman. He waved his two colleagues over and they helped him take down the upper boxes until they had uncovered the one on the bottom. They dragged it into the centre of the space. The man with the tattoo handed a crowbar to the Irishman and pointed at the box.

“He wants you to—”

“I know what he wants,” said the Irishman, weighing the crowbar in his hand. The metal was warm and his palms were damp with sweat. He stared at the man with the tattoo as if daring him to argue, but the Thai just smiled good-naturedly as if his earlier protests had never occurred. The Irishman inserted the end of the crowbar into the top of the box and pushed down. There was a crashing sound from the far end of the warehouse followed by shouts. He looked across at Park.

The man with the tiger tattoo pulled his gun from his belt and ran towards the entrance to the warehouse. His two companions followed. Park yelled at his own two men to go with them.

“What’s happening?” shouted the Irishman.

“Maybe nothing,” said Park.

“Maybe nothing, my arse,” the Irishman shouted. “This is a fucking set-up.” He jumped as a gun went off, the sound deafening in the confines of the building. There were more shots, louder than the first. The Irishman glared at Park. “Maybe nothing?” he yelled.

Park looked left and right, then grabbed the Irishman by the arm. “This way,” he said, pulling him down the aisle. They ran between the stacks of boxes.

“Is it the cops?” asked the Irishman, gasping for breath.

“Maybe,” said Park. “I don’t know.”

A bullet thwacked into a cardboard box above the Irishman’s head and he ducked down. “The cops wouldn’t just shoot, would they?” he asked.

“This is Thailand,” said Park. “The police can do anything they want.” He kicked an emergency door and it crashed open. Sunlight streamed in, so bright that the Irishman flinched. Park seized him by the belt of his jeans and pulled him across the threshold, then stopped dead.

It took the Irishman a second or two to realise that the once noisy street was now totally silent. He blinked and shielded his eyes from the blinding sun. The stall-owners had gone, and so had the crowds. Khaki Land-rovers had been arranged haphazardly around the building and red and white barriers had been erected across the alley. Behind the vehicles and the barriers crouched men with rifles, in dark brown uniforms and sunglasses. The Irishman whirled around but immediately knew that there was no escape. They were

surrounded. Three rugged Thais with assault rifles stood at the emergency exit, their fingers on the triggers of their weapons.

A megaphone-amplified Thai voice echoed off the walls of the alley.

“Drop the crowbar,” said Park calmly. “Drop the crowbar and put your hands above your head. Very slowly.”

The Irishman did as he was told.