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The Unknown Soldier

Written by Gerald Seymour

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THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Gerald Seymour



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Prologue

'I had a life. It was not the best, not the worst, but it was a life. It was hard, a struggle, but I did not complain because it was the life that God had given me. I had happiness.'

The voice dripped. Sometimes it faded away, was lost under the noise of the combi-van's engine, sometimes it was little more than a whisper.

'I was blessed. My wife was Muna. Our son was three years old, our daughter was close to one year. They were fine children. The girl had good eyes that were the colour of the early-morning skies in summer, and she would have been beautiful. We lived in the village with my wife's parents, and four houses away were my parents. Her father had fields for goats and my father had an orchard for apples and peaches. Her father said, after our marriage, that he no longer wanted to drive the taxi, and he gave it to me. It was generous of him to give me the taxi and I thought that one day I would have enough money to buy a second vehicle and employ a driver. It was what I hoped. A man with two taxis is a man of substance.'

Caleb thought the driver talked to stay awake. The others slept. The combi-van stank from the engine's fumes, and from the oil that they used to clean the weapons. None of them had washed for more than a week. Caleb could not sleep because he was squashed tight against the driver and each time the driver twisted the wheel or reached down for the gear-stick, an elbow nudged into his ribcage and jolted him. Three of his friends had crammed into the rear seats with their rifles, the rocket-propelled grenade-launcher and the rucksack with the missiles; three more were immediately behind him, cradling the rusted old .5 calibre machine-gun taken eleven years earlier from a Russian paratroop platoon. His own body separated the Chechen from the driver, to whom only Caleb listened.

'We did not think the war would come to us. We thought the war was for the cities – for Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad. Once there had been a camp for the foreigners near to the village, but it had not been used for two years, and we did not think we would be a target. Why should we be? It was an early morning like any other. I had prayed in the dawn at the mosque and the *imam* had spoken to us and then I had gone to bring wood for my father and for my wife's father, and I had drawn water from the well and had washed the taxi windows and its body, and I had measured the oil, and then I had told my wife when I would be home in the evening. We were worried for our son because he coughed, but I had said to my wife that I would try in the town, in the day, to get medicine. That day my father was going to select a goat for slaughter because we were close to my wife's birthday, and my wife's father was going to cut back

dead wood from the trees in the orchards. It was like any other day and the war was far away. I said goodbye to my wife and I held my son while he coughed up onto my shoulder and I kissed my girl. God forgive me, but I spoke sharply to my wife because my son's phlegm stained my shirt and that would not be good when I went into the town to hope for passengers in my taxi. I left them. I drove past the mosque and past my father's fields where his goats were, and past my wife's father's orchards, and as I went down the hill, very slowly because the road is not tarmacadam but crushed stone, I saw the trails of the aeroplanes in the skies.'

To the Chechen, who had a patch of leather fastened with elastic over his right eye and whose left hand was replaced with a chrome-coated metal claw, Caleb was Abu Khaleb. He and the other men had fought in the north and on the plain south of Kabul and then north of Kandahar, had fought and fled when disaster was about to overwhelm them, then fought again and fled again. For a week they had not rested, had barely eaten. For each of them, pressed into the combi-van – the taxi – it was hard to accept defeat. They were now on a flat plain, featureless, without trees or hills, without cover, and their destination was the mountains where, if those were their orders, they would finally stand and fight from caves, ravines and high ground . . . if they reached the mountains.

'I was driving down the hill from the village, very carefully so that the holes would not damage underneath the vehicle, and the trails from three aeroplanes were coming towards me. They were very high and I could not see the planes themselves, only the trails they left behind. In our village we knew little about the

war. Everything we knew came from the *imam*, who had a radio set and who listened to the broadcasts of the leadership from Kabul, but we were far from Kabul. I remember I was angry with the dust that came up from the road because I had just washed the windows. I had no interest in the aeroplanes. It was a good morning and the sun shone . . . I thought I was blessed by God and I was thinking of the feast for my wife's birthday. I regretted that I had spoken sharply to her about my shirt.'

His head rocked, his chin drooped. Even if Caleb could have slept he would not have done. The elbow butted into his ribcage. But the taxi-driver, who used only the sidelights of the combi-van, had swerved twice onto the rough gravel beside the tarmacadam and each time Caleb had snatched the wheel, heaved it over and prevented them spewing off the road. In the Toyota pickup, with the .5 calibre machine-gun mounted over the cab, they had been at the back end of a five-vehicle convoy fleeing for the mountains. It would have been chance, luck, that the first four pick-ups had twisted and negotiated a way through an old roadblock of concrete-filled oil drums and had missed the coil of loose barbed wire. Their pickup had caught it. They had driven on, hearing the scraping of the tangle of wire and had thought they would lose it. They had not. The front left tyre had gone first, then the rear right. Within a kilometre the two tyres were shredded, and they were detached from the convoy, with the cold of the evening gathering round them. There had been an argument. In a babble of voices, Caleb had said they should stay by the road and the Chechen had backed him. He was the Chechen's favourite.

Four hours later, the taxi van had come down the road. Another argument when it was halted at gun-point. They were outside the part of Afghanistan they knew, they were strangers there. Caleb had said they should use the driver and, again, the Chechen had backed him. Three hours later, and Caleb smiled ruefully at the thought of it, he knew the driver, the driver's immediate family, the driver's distant family and the driver's village. In the heat of the vehicle, he had shrugged out of his camouflage tunic – the floppy hanging trousers, the long-tailed shirt and the wool cap without a peak made warmth enough.

'I saw my friend, Omar. He had gone down the road from the village to see if there was grazing lower on the hill. He is a good man. We used to talk and take coffee together when I was not in the town with the taxi. I was slowing when it seemed as if the world exploded. The taxi was lifted up from the road. If I had not seen Omar and braked to talk to him, the taxi would have gone off the road. I would have been killed, better if I had been killed – but that was not God's will. I was two kilometres from the village, or perhaps a little more, and the noise was like thunder, but greater than anything I had ever heard before. I braked, I ran from the vehicle and lay in a ditch with Omar, my face in the water. I thought the thunder would break my ears . . . Then it was gone. When I dared to look up I saw the trails of the aeroplanes going away. But I could not see our village. There was a great cloud over it, a cloud of dust. The cloud was from the camp that had not been used for two years, right to my village and past it. The old camp and the village were underneath the cloud. And there was quiet. You would like to see a photograph of my family?'

Caleb nodded. He knew how the story would end. A wallet was passed to him and he opened it. He saw the identification card behind brittle plastic. Fawzi al-Ateh. He saw the date of birth. The driver was twenty-five years old, four months older than himself. There was the photograph of the driver – faded, in black and white, probably taken on his wedding day – but with a straggling beard and a wispy moustache. The driver's finger jabbed at the picture beside the identification card. In it, Fawzi al-Ateh stood tall beside a slight woman who wore the dark *chador* robe. Caleb could not see her face. The driver held their son against his shoulder and the wife held their daughter against her hip. He held the wallet down by his knees so that the dashboard lights lit it.

'They were all dead. My wife, my son and my daughter were dead. My parents were dead and my wife's parents. The *imam* was dead. The family of Omar were dead. A helicopter flew over in the afternoon, but did not land. We buried all of the dead that we could find, but there were still some that we had not reached but who we could smell. I think God was kind to me because we buried my wife, my son and my daughter, and my wife's parents, but we did not find my father and my mother. It was six days before help came, foreigners in soldiers' uniforms. They were Americans, and they gave money to Omar and myself. I kept my money, God forgive me, but Omar threw their money back at their feet and they beat him, then took him away in their trucks. I was left. There was me and some dogs and the goats that had been in the fields. I took my taxi down to the town. I . . .'

The spotlight blazed in front of him, its beam

bouncing in the dust encrusted on the windscreen.

He saw the shape of a man, shadow thrown grotesquely forward, rifle at the hip, an arm raised high above the symmetric shape of a helmet.

Maybe the driver panicked. Maybe terror locked his foot down on the accelerator. Maybe he had never been confronted by the half-lit silhouette of an American soldier.

The combi-van surged past the soldier. For a moment it was clear of him and free.

Locked in Caleb's hand, the wallet was unseen, unfelt. There were cries, shouts of awakened confusion behind him and a claw dug into his arm as the Chechen tried to steady himself. As the van swung in the road, the sidelights caught the prone figures of men in camouflage uniforms beside the tarmacadam. Caleb heard the shouts, then the first shots hit the van.

He glimpsed the wide-eyed terror on the driver's face then – seconds later – felt the warmth as the man's blood spattered on his cheeks and in his beard.

The van, out of control, slewed off the road, rolled once from side to roof to side, then came to rest. A door careered open and Caleb was hurled across the driver's torso and head, his breath squeezed from his lungs. The gunfire went on. Bullets hammered the carcass of the van. Shouts burst in his ears. 'Watch the motherfuckers – don't go fucking close – careful, guys, careful – hit the fuckers.' Another endless rattle of firing, on automatic, raked the van. Caleb hugged the ground between the rocks that had broken his fall from the door. It was more than two years since he had heard words in that language. It was from his past, from a rejected culture. A moment of silence,

then a low moan from inside the van. A final rattle of gunfire killed the moan.

He lay on the ground, his teeth chattering, his mouth filled with dry earth. The spotlight played over the van. He had seen men when they were about to die, the haunted faces of men in the trenches as the helicopters went over, men being led across the football pitch to the crossbar of the goal where a noose hung, men who followed the Northern Alliance and had used all their ammunition, all their grenades, and now faced captors who were without mercy. The spotlight's beam roved off the van and edged towards him, seemed to nestle against him, then held him. If he was to be shot, this was the moment. Did they want a prisoner? Or another corpse?

He heard the young voice, shrill with excitement: 'Sergeant, there's one alive. Over here, one of the fuckers is alive.'

He awaited the shot. The only part of his life flickering across his mind was the last two years – because the older past was forgotten.

He heard the answering shout, more distant and anxious. 'Watch him, kid, watch him close. He moves his hands, shoot him. I'm coming. Go careful, take no chances.'

Caleb was his past, and erased. He was Abu Khaleb, and that was his present. In his hand was the opened wallet with the photograph of a taxi-driver, his wife and children, the identification card of Fawzi al-Ateh. His brain, at flywheel speed, worked for his future, and his survival, and his lifeline was the photograph that almost matched his face.

Chapter One

The aircraft banked on its final circuit, then its nose went down and it started the descent.

Above him, the voice was loud, shouted over the increased pitch of the engine noise. 'I tell you, this has been a journey from hell.'

A voice barked back, 'You want to do it every week, sir, then you get kind of used to hell.'

'It's the shit bucket, isn't it? That's the smell I can't get rid of.'

'I'd say, sir, that having to wipe their arses for them is worse than the smell.'

He was ignored, might not have existed. He was as much a piece of cargo as the crates loaded with them onto the transport aircraft after he and the four others had been secured on the steel floor. It might have been four days, or five, since the journey had started. He didn't know. They had landed three times, or four, for refuelling.

Now the aircraft dived. He knew it was the last leg. If it had not been for the straps that held him he would have slid down the floor of the fuselage, then

cannoned into an obstruction. He did not move, could not. He sat on a small cushion of thin foam but the floor rivets were too prominent for the cushion to protect his backside. And the cushion was damp from the urine he had leaked during the bad turbulence on the first leg. He could not move because of the strapping that held him in place, and the others. In the spiralling descent, his sandals bounced into the back of the man in front of him, and behind him feet bruised his lower spine below his fastened wrists. He was coming back as he had gone out, trussed on the floor of the aircraft. His wrists were manacled by chains, then fastened round his waist, and more chains shackled his ankles. Webbing straps that would normally have held cargo in place were looped through each elbow and back to the fuselage sides. Another strap across his chest restrained forward movement, and a last strap was woven through his legs. He wore thin bright orange cotton overalls over a singlet and pants. A gauze mask was over his mouth, removed only when they fed him, baffles were over his ears, and goggles, with tape across the glass, were over his eyes. The baffles and the mask had not been removed in the four, or five, days since he had been taken out of the camp. They didn't talk to him, not when he defecated or urinated, not when they slipped the face mask down from his mouth and fed him. The straps held him as they plummeted down, and with the loss of height his wrists must have bulged because the chains on them hurt more, and rubbed against the plastic bracelet on his right wrist.

'Don't mind me asking, sir, but why are we letting these bastards go free?'

'We pulled six hundred into Gitmo, and letting a

few out, a very few, is good PsyOps. It's the fourth lot. They're nothing, they're useless, they're not Al Qaeda. We demonstrate fair-mindedness – it's like giving out candy. It's about gestures, takes the heat off.'

'Is it a lottery, sir, who gets chosen?'

'You better believe it . . . Look, most of them in Gitmo are just wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time guys . . . The one up forward, he's got stomach cancer, inoperable, going home to die. Next one down, he's at least sixty-nine, and had a stroke, couldn't even lift a hand grenade. The one beside you, he's simple, was sold to us by some warlord on the take. At the back, he's half blind, can't hardly see his own hand . . . Twenty months they've been with us. Mistakes got made.'

'And this one?'

The voice was dismissive. 'Just a peasant from up-country, a taxi-driver . . .'

'If it's not a stupid question . . . If they're useless and not a threat, why are they trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys waiting the chop?'

'Read the book. Standard treatment for the movement of prisoners. Don't ask me, I didn't write it. All I gotta do is hand them over to Afghan Security, get a signature, and that's the end of my watch.'

They moved away. He felt the aircraft level out, then through his ear baffles he heard the rumble of the wheels going down. The engines, on full power, blotted out everything except stifled cries of fear in front of him. He braced himself. It was a bad landing. The transporter hit, lurched, rose, then hit a second time, harder. The guards and the crew in the fuselage clapped without enthusiasm. They taxied, the reverse thrust dinning through the baffles, then he was jerked forward as the brakes went on.

The aircraft crawled to a stop. It was twenty months since he had been dragged on board an aircraft – at this place – shackled, manacled, blind, deaf, and flown to the camp.

The hatch ground down. The chill of the night air engulfed him. Outside, on the apron, there were raised voices. The argument developed. When he was unfastened, he could have shifted and flexed his leg and arm muscles, but he did not. Everything he had learned in the camp, twenty months of surviving there, told him that he should do nothing to attract attention. They had brought him back: his name had been chosen because he had done nothing to stir attention. He listened to the argument . . . Because the aircraft had been delayed for seven hours with maintenance problems in the port outer engine, the Afghan Security men – detailed to meet the freed prisoners and take them into Kabul for interrogation and clearance – had headed back to the city three hours ago. The base night-duty officer was not prepared to countenance the presence of five Afghan prisoners on his territory for the rest of the night: he wanted them gone, like yesterday. A telephone call had been made to the detention wing, but the cells were full. And Afghan Security were not answering their phone. And . . . He heard the night-duty officer brusquely pass the buck.

'You're going to get wheels, a driver and an escort, and you're going to take them into town and kick down the door of Afghan Security – that's the Pol-i-Charki gaol – and you're going to dump them there. That's a non-negotiable.'

'Maybe you don't understand, Captain, but I have been with these ragheads the last four days,

all the way from Guantanamo. I need a cot.'

'Don't you hear, Lieutenant? You drop these losers at the Pol-i-Charki, then you come back here and find a cot. Got it?'

'Yes, sir.'

A secondary argument started up. 'Sergeant, I'm taking these men into town. Their restraints have been removed. I want them put back on.'

'No can do, sir.'

'That is an order. Manacle them.'

'Sorry, sir. As loadmaster sergeant I have authority over all Air Force equipment. Such equipment does not leave my sight, does not leave this aircraft. Manacles, chains, ear baffles, mouth masks, goggles and cushions are air-force property.'

'Goddamnit . . .'

'Sorry, sir. Oh, and eleven hundred hours is take-off time. You better be back by then if you want a ride out. Good luck, sir.'

He knew the book. He had been in military custody for twenty months. He knew how the book was written. The arguments had not amused him and he sat bolt still with his head down. When the goggles were pulled up from his eyes he kept them closed. He gave no sign that he had understood a word of the disputes within his hearing. A vehicle pulled up, manoeuvred close to the open tail and a door was slid open. Hands lifted him up. His eyes were open now but he did not look around him. In a stumbling slide he went down the tail and the freshness of the air caught him. It was the first time he could remember scenting fresh air since he had been with the Chechen, his friend, and the others beside the long, straight road where the pickup had lost its tyres. There had

been no clean air in the taxi van, and when he had been thrown clear at the ambush the stink of cordite had covered him, then the stench of the enemy in the personnel carrier, and the smell of a holding prison that was exchanged for the shit bucket of the aircraft out. There had been no clean, pure air in the camp, not even in the exercise compound.

He sucked in the air. He was to be taken to Kabul and dumped at the Pol-i-Charki. He knew the gaol: he had taken prisoners there for interrogation, men of the Northern Alliance who had fought against Al Qaeda and the Taliban – but that was long ago. Deep in the recesses of his memory, shared with the Pol-i-Charki, was a vague vision of the road from the Bagram base into the city. If he reached the Pol-i-Charki, he would be dead . . . and he had not come home to die. He was lifted up into a van with smoked windows. The driver was yawning, using his forearm to wipe sleep from his eyes. A marine was in the back with a rifle, grumpily making room for the prisoners. As the officer took the front passenger seat, the driver grinned and handed back bars of nougat chocolate. They drove away, and an open jeep followed with a machine-gun mounted on a brace behind the driver.

He remembered the base as a place of ghosts and ruins. He remembered it abandoned and looted. Without turning his head he saw new, prefabricated blocks and tent camps, then a gate topped with coiled razor wire, flanked with sandbags, guarded by men in combat fatigues. He took heart. For twenty months he had existed in a vacuum of time and information. That changed. The gate was guarded, which told him there was still the chance of hostile action on the fifty kilometres of road – through flat and featureless farming

country – between the Bagram base and the capital city of Kabul. As the sentries raised the bar at the base gate, the machine-gun on the jeep was noisily cocked. They left the arc-lights and the perimeter wire behind them, and the driver switched on the radio, caught the forces programme and smiled toothily at the officer's discomfort.

It would take, as he remembered it, an hour at most to reach the outskirts of the city. His sole hope was in open country. They passed a village. The officer ignored the no-smoking sign in the cab and lit a cigarette. The driver grimaced.

If he were in the Pol-i-Charki, if he were interrogated by Afghan Security – the hard bastards of the Northern Alliance – he would fail. He would be dead. Memories of the road silted in his mind. A village, as he had known it more than twenty months before, flashed past in the headlights. Two ruined compounds, gutted in earlier fighting, were on the right. There were open fields and scrub . . . Then, if his memory held, there were trees beside the road, both sides. His fingers played with the sharp edge of the plastic bracelet on his wrist. He coughed, was ignored, and coughed again. The officer turned, irritated, and the cigarette smoke wreathed his face. He looked pathetic and cringed, then pointed downwards. The officer's eyes followed where he pointed, to his groin. The driver, too, had turned back to look.

'Shit, man,' the driver whined. 'Not in here, not in my vehicle. I'm not having him piss in my vehicle.'

The driver didn't wait for the officer's agreement. He braked hard, swerved onto the gravel, stopped.

'I take one-star generals in this vehicle. I'm not having it pissed in.'

The officer climbed out, threw down his cigarette and opened the back door. He climbed out and the officer's hand steadied him. He smiled his thanks. He went to the side of the road and knew he was watched by the men in the jeep who had the mounted, cocked machine-gun. He stepped down off the road and into scrub. He fiddled with the zipper at the front of his overalls. Behind him, the strike of a match lit another cigarette. A torch played on his back. He was coiled, tense. He did not know whether he would be able to run after four days in the aircraft and the months in the camp. If he reached Pol-i-Charki he was dead . . . He ran. The torch wavered off him as he wove. His legs were leaden. He was already panting when he reached the first of the trees. A single shot crashed in his ears. He heard shouts, and the officer's voice.

'No, don't – he isn't worth killing . . .'

He ran, panting, gasping for air, trying to kick his legs forward.

'. . . he's only a taxi-driver.'

He lost the lights and sensed the freedom. He ran till he fell, then pushed himself up and ran again.

Dawn came across the mountains, and the mountain peaks in the east made sharp funnels of sunshine. The light speared the coiled wire on the perimeter fence of Bagram – the sprawling military base, originally Soviet-built, an hour's drive west across the plain to Kabul – and slashed at the night mist, glinted on the bright corrugated-iron roofs of the repaired buildings, caught the wan faces of troopers sleep-walking to the shower blocks, burned the smoke rising in still air from kitchen stacks, lit the dull camouflage of transport aircraft parked on the aprons, then threw

shadows down from the angles of the wings and tail fins of two small white-painted planes that were being laboriously manhandled and wheeled out from under shelters of canvas.

They were like toys in a man's world. Teams of men, not in military fatigues, heaved their weight against the slight wings and directed the planes towards a slip-road leading onto the main runway. They bent their heads away as a bomber careered past them on full take-off power. These two planes were different from anything else flown off the Bagram runway. Length: twenty-six feet and eight inches. Wing span: forty-eight feet and six inches. Height above the oil-smeared Tarmac: six feet and one inch. Width of fuselage: (widest point) three feet and eight inches, (narrowest point) one foot and eleven inches. They seemed so fragile, so delicate – ballet dancers in comparison with the clog-booted brigade that screamed up the runway. The planes were each powered by a single two-blade variable-pitch push-propellor capable of flying the machine at top speed of 127 miles per hour, and at loiter speed of seventy-five miles per hour when fuel conservation was necessary. What a stranger to the base, ignorant of modern technology, would first have noticed about these two planes was that unbroken white paint covered the forward area where there should have been cockpit glass for a pilot's vision. What he would not have known was that the planes, the unmanned aerial vehicles, were regarded by those who knew as the most formidable weapon in the occupying power's arsenal. They seemed so innocent in their bright white paint, so harmless, but their name was Predator.

The dawn light rested on a young man and a young

woman walking quickly away from a camouflaged trailer parked beside the sheeting from which the Predators, designation MQ-1, had been wheeled out by the ground crew. They passed a satellite dish mounted on a second trailer hitched to a closed unmarked van. Marty wore baggy brown shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with a Yellowstone Park brown bear and flip-flops. She wore jeans with frayed hems and patches at the knees, a loose plain green sweatshirt that was crumpled, as if she'd slept in it, and a pair of old trainers. His eyes were masked by thick pebble lenses secured in a metal frame, his skin was pale, his hair a mass of untidy, mousy curls. His physique was puny. Lizzy-Jo was taller, but plumper from the weight never discarded after childbirth. Her dark glasses were hooked on the crown of a wild mess of auburn hair scooped at the back of her head into an extravagant yellow ribbon. The stranger, seeing them, would not have known that, between them, they controlled the Predator.

Temperamentally they could not have been more different: he was quiet, withdrawn, she was noisy, exuberant. But two common factors bound them into their relationship: both were employed by the Agency, took their orders from Langley and were not subject to the military regimen that controlled the base; both worshipped, in their differing ways, the power and meanness of the Predator, version MQ-1. Initially, when they had been posted to Afghanistan, the Bagram base, they had existed inside the inner compound used by the Agency and had lived alongside the Agency teams, and those from the Feds, who ran the detention block behind a double inner fence of razor wire with its own sleeping, eating and

recreation quarters – an apartheid cocoon for the élite that separated them from the Air Force people and the marines' units. At first they had not been part of the general life of the huge base. But the war was winding down, the Al Qaeda targets were harder to come by, and old disciplines were discarded.

The best breakfasts at Bagram were served in the marines' compound. The marines had the best cooks, the best variety of food, the best coffee. And a good breakfast would last them through the day in the stifling heat of the Ground Control Station.

He wore his ID card hooked on his belt. Hers, more provocatively, was clipped to her T-shirt between her breasts. After a sentry had checked them through the gate into the marines' compound, they joined the queue in the canteen.

In front of them, a lieutenant was bitching at a load-master sergeant. They listened, rolling their eyes at each other, entertained.

The lieutenant, dead tired and slurring as if he'd barely slept, said, 'I just felt such a goddamn idiot. I never figured that the little bastard was setting me up to do a runner. What am I supposed to do? Mow the little fucker down? Didn't seem right . . . He was free – useless to us, no risk, but I'd his name on the docket and was tasked to hand him over at the Pol-i-Charki. I tell you, my only piece of luck, the people that were there at the gaol, they never even read the names, never did the counting, just kicked inside the four we brought. I just felt such a fool at falling for that old trick, wanting to pee. Just some simple gook, and free – after where he's been, in the cage at Guantanamo, why would he want to run?'

'Don't worry about it, sir – I mean, he wasn't

bin Laden, was he? You said just some taxi-driver.'

They dressed down, Marty and Lizzy-Jo, to emphasize that they were not military. Foul-ups in the military were always entertaining. It had made a good start to the day.

A half-hour later, with the dawn on full thrust and killing the mist, in the Ground Control Station, Marty took the Predator – *First Lady* – up off the runway, working the small computer-game joystick on the bench above his knees. *Carnival Girl*, the second craft, was back-up and would stay grounded unless needed. Lizzy-Jo thwacked her fingers on the console keys and watched as the first pictures flickered, then settled on the screens above her. The mission that day was for reconnaissance over the Tora Bora mountains to the south-west. The bird climbed, optimum conditions with light north-east winds at fifteen thousand feet. She reached across, tapped his shoulder and pointed to the central screen, which gave the real-time image from the belly camera. She giggled. 'On his way to the garage to collect his yellow cab . . . eh?'

Below the camera, clear and in sharp focus on dun-coloured scree, the figure in the orange overalls was running, but slowly. Marty grimaced – not their business. The Predator hunted meatier prey. The orange-suited figure tripped, fell, and stumbled on. Then the camera's field surged forward and he was lost.

'What do you think it's like in Guantanamo?'

'Don't know and don't care,' Marty murmured, side of mouth. 'I'm going up to seventeen thousand feet altitude, which'll be our loiter height . . . OK, OK, I suppose Guantanamo would be kind of scary.'