

FROM
And West Is West

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They are twined, all but, she and Voigt. He is leaning over her shoulder, his forearm atop her chairback. His lips are so close to her ear that each breath he exhales roars like a gale. This is all she hears inside the dim trailer. The glowing screens before her keep them immobile. They are frozen except for the motion of her hand as she centers the camera. The moment is near. This time he is going to let *her* do it.

“Aldridge. Are you ready for your first?”

“Yes, sir,” Jessica tells Colonel Voigt as if they are in the same room. They are and are not. Sergeant Jessica Aldridge is also eight thousand miles away, ten thousand feet in the air, and so near the figures on the ground below her that she might reach down and pick them up like dolls.

They are five, outlined by their *jalabiyas* and the scarves that circle the glow of their faces. Jessica’s squadron has been tracking them, a band of brothers, for the past two weeks as they acquired the rudiments of a device they are constructing in a desert hut miles from the nearest village and forty from Mogadishu. Tonight they must imagine themselves protected by a moonless darkness that even a hawk’s eyes could not penetrate. Yet they are visible to Jessica. Irradiated by their own heat, each man appears to her as a distinct if ghostly blur.

A buzz returns Jessica to the trailer. Her eyes flick toward the noise, talk from Voigt’s earpiece.

“That’s it. We have a confirm. Go the angel,” her commander says, releasing her to arm the *angel*, their unit’s euphemism for a missile.

As Jessica watches from the desert sky, the men cluster below her. Her partner, airman Bob Sanders, at his parallel station, locks the men’s coordinates. A touch of Jessica’s hand will give the men twenty seconds to live. They are beyond mercy.

“Fire at will, Sergeant,” Voigt, standing behind Jessica, says. And then he waits for her to show him what she, the first enlisted person to pilot a drone strike, will do.

But Jessica takes Voigt’s “at will” seriously as *her* will and she hesitates. She senses something in the positioning of the men. That they are all, for once, traditionally dressed signifies the impending culmination of their mission. But that they have not dispersed to various tasks in or around the hut, that they stand near to each other at some informal attention—as if huddling themselves to be most effectively blasted to bits—this gives Jessica pause. Is their mission to be martyrs to anti-American propaganda?

“They’re waiting, Colonel,” Jessica says.

“Right,” Voigt replies. “It’s like they’re waiting for *someone*.”

And so in the trailer they also wait . . . hovering another half hour until a three-car train of SUVs stops alongside the battered pickup that had carried their initial targets to the hut.

“It’s Yarisi,” Voigt says. Through his earpiece he’s been receiving and relaying information to which Jessica is not privy. But she knows Jabir al-Yarisi. He is a person of interest, a Yemenese suspected of bombing the British embassy in Addis Ababa. Lately he is believed to be recruiting rebels in Somalia, where Jessica’s drone is. “This is the big time, Aldridge,” Voigt says. “You up for this?”

“I am one hundred percent up for this, sir,” Jessica answers.

“Good. We’ll wait for a visual ID. Yarisi’ll be the tall one.”

Men with guns exit the front and rear SUVs. After searching in and around the hut they lead the men in *jalabiyas* to the central vehicle. Airman Sanders relocks the coordinates. A minute passes.

“Yarisi’s not dismounting,” Voigt says, his Carolina accent resonant. He leans closer to the screens and the glow of the monitors paints his crew cut blue. “Okay. We have a passive ID on the caravan,” he says quietly. “Take the shot.”

Just as his command comes, a side door opens in the target SUV. Jessica's trigger hand lets two seconds pass and she sees someone hop out of the vehicle, a slight figure who is followed by her twin. Their heat outlines show them to be dressed in burkas. Jessica can even determine that the pair are also wearing *niqabs*, leaving only a slit for the eyes. Al-Yarisi is known to travel with his wives, some being girls not of high school age.

"They're kids!" Jessica hears herself say.

"Screw my eyes," Voigt responds, and then he presses his earpiece against a shout even Jessica can make out. "Fire," Voigt says, almost whispering. "That's the goddamn order out of Langley."

Jessica's stomach turns. She feels a "But, sir!" rising to her lips.

"Fire," Voigt repeats.

Jessica's hand squeezes the launch switch and the screen hiccups as the angel takes wing. In the moment before the camera refocuses she imagines one of the young men in *jalabiyas* looking up at a shooting star that cuts through the night sky at a strange angle. He will shout a warning in the twenty seconds that remain. Everyone will scatter. Even the invisible man in the SUV will dive out and roll to safety. In her fantasy all this occurs.

But in life it does not.

After a dozen seconds Voigt quietly begins to count down from eight, as if the three of them in the trailer are all supposed to shout "Surprise!" at zero. When Voigt reaches *one* the silence is anticlimactic. The SUVs, the armed men, the boys in *jalabiyas*, and the two figures in burkas are engulfed by a soft, impenetrable halo. The heat of the explosion has blinded the drone's thermal eye. Not until dawn will anyone completely see what Jessica has done. She never will. Strike analysis is above her security classification.



Dear Jessica,

Your last letter puts me beside you at your command station. And even up with you in the desert night. But where do I start about all you have written except to say that angel is a strange name for a missile.

Do you remember when I used to call you angel? You might. You were six the last time your mother and I tried to reconcile. From your

letters I do not think you have changed much. You could not stand to see me squash an ant. So about your wishing that those men would have seen your angel. Your shooting star. I say that was no misguided dream. It was only your natural impulse not to harm other living creatures. You must keep those feelings alive.

Beyond that I cannot judge what you have done. You accuse yourself of taking two innocent lives. But I can only tell you to think of the people you have stopped who would murder a hundred innocents for their cause. Above all you must remember it is not you alone who fires those angels. It is all of us. This whole country. But we are hiding behind you. You take the heat and we do not get burned. There is plenty of guilt to go around so don't take it all on yourself.

And do not worry about me either. I am heartened by the truth that though I have done many bad things in my life they are not the crime that convicted me. I am no first degree murderer so my appeal and some other possibilities are progressing. In the meantime I read and exercise and work. The lye from my job in the laundry has burned off my cuticles but soon I hope to be shelving books in the library. In the meantime the days here in Seminole City tick by quicker than the nights. And the nights come too fast. Already I see I have just a minute before lights out to finish this letter.

Bless you for coming back into my life. And thank you for the cigarette cash as you call it. But I hope this old habit of mine is not yours as well. My one wish is for you to travel a long and happy road.

Your loving father,
Donald Aldridge

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