

SURVIVOR'S GUILT
Marcin "Alu" Jędrecki

PROLOGUE

Underneath the scorching July sun, on the southbound Interstate 5, a station wagon cruised at the speed limit to the tune of Puff Daddy's *Can't Nobody Hold Me Down*. In it, a traditional, two and one american family sits in silence. Shortly before departing Fresno to visit mum's family in McKinleyville, mum and dad had an argument about dad's work.

On the rear seat, a seven-year-old was dozing off with the family dog snoozing in tandem with its head on her lap.

- You do realize, of course - mum's cold voice sliced through the song and the engine's hum - that our earlier chat isn't over, honey?

- I am painfully aware - dad retorted, balancing between not being too snarky and focusing on the road - And I am sure that your mother will have a few choice words with me as well, as I am certain you will have filled her in the moment we arrive, right?

- We need to tell her early. You know full well how she gets when we leave her - mum glanced behind to check on her child - on mom's doorstep unannounced.

- And you know even better, that the Agency won't allow us giving out the information early. Unless you want Margaret... - dad hesitated to call his in-law by her first name - to be under twenty-four seven surveillance, along with her bingo club friends.

Mum frowned. Dad was right. They realized that marriage in the Agency was troublesome and having kids was practically unheard of, unless both parties wanted to be relegated to administrative desk jobs. But, dad was the best field operative in almost a decade and mum was the best support handler. They were a match made in heaven and the Agency knew their worth, so there was some leeway.

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"The life", as they called it had its strain on both of them and their relationship. Of course, they attended social gatherings in between deployments, but they were always "on call". But, they wanted some time off. So, after the last mission, on briefing, they low-key mentioned that they're tired and their daughter misses them very much. The psych evaluation was simple and to the point. Vacation. Two weeks off the grid.

- Ooof - mum yawned and stretched her arms out. Her left hand landed softly on dad's right shoulder - maybe this won't be so bad after all, huh?

- Maybe you're right. We'll tell your mother near the end, after she gets used to us. - dad grinned - She loves taking care of Annie anyway and we'll have some time for ourselves. You remember our first date? Cape Town, was it?

- Yeah - mum closed her eyes and sifted through memories - almost ten years ago. We just finished the Kishun job. We were waiting for evac in that small café, so near our mark it was almost hilariously scary.

- We needed to blend in, so we sat in a window-side table like a couple and ordered...

- Coffee and cheesecake

- It took evac three hours to clear us out.. so we...

On a cliffside northeast of the nearest exit, a man lied in waiting. his body pressed against low rocks and nestled between two boulders, a keen eye could spot the muzzle of a rifle.

One deep breath.

Align the reticle.

Adjust for windage.

Squeeze the trigger.

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A thunderclap.

Two seconds.

- Clean shot, HQ. Confirm, over.

- Confirmed Bravo Four, Tango is down. Proceed as planned. Over and out.

The man stood up and pressed a few buttons on a small metal case lying beside the rifle. He then went to the side of the cliff, grabbed the rope hanging off and jumped down. The case became red, as if melting from within. When the man was safely away from the cliff, it burst into flames, spewing molten metal all around it, catching the rifle in the inferno and melting it into a puddle.

The car's tires screeched for what felt like an eternity. The car skidded sideways and tumbled over the concrete separator between and down the roadside hill to stop briefly on a rock. The metal chassis hooked on the sharp edge, but the traction gave way to the car's weight. The sound of ripped metal echoed through the underneath plains as the metal husk crashed after a thirty foot drop, roof down.

Mum and dad didn't make it. Neither did the dog.