

# The Survivor

By Gabriel Bergmoser

Maggie glanced in the rear-view mirror. Just road, fringed by twin expanses of brown grass under a cloudless late afternoon sky. She pulled over. Waited, still watching the rear-view. Still nothing. Her skin prickled. She took her hands from the wheel and rested them on her knees. Glanced at the shotgun sitting on the passenger seat.

She knew she should have been scared, but it was, she realised with mild surprise, anger that was working its way hot and spitting from her gut.

Keeping her eyes on the mirror, she unwrapped the bandages around her calf. She winced as dried blood and fabric tugged at her stitches. She gave her leg a moment in the air, but blood was seeping from the makeshift sutures and so she quickly wrapped it again, this time in white bandages that would be dark red before too long. Once sure they were tight enough she checked the mirror again. Still nothing.

She had first glimpsed the follower earlier that day, a lone other car on the long road. Which could have – should have – meant nothing. Up until now she had been sure it did. But the car was no longer visible, and there had not been any turn offs between her noticing it and now. It was hanging back, trying to stay out of her sight. Of course they couldn't remain invisible *and* tail her; hence the fact that she'd noticed them at all, but they had done a fairly good job of keeping out of sight. Which meant they were smart. Which meant they were trouble.

She closed her eyes. She had thought it was over. Not *felt* it so much – she knew the dreams would come when the memories didn't, that hours of her life ahead would be spent going over everything she should have done differently, trying to banish the smell of burning and blood. The sounds of whooping cheers followed by gunshots. *The hunt*. She was lucky. She was alive and others weren't. The thought clenched her chest. She pushed it away. Right then, she had to focus on the fact that it seemed somebody had survived and that somebody was not done with her.

Her options were limited. The adrenalin that had seen her through the long hot night was entirely depleted. The one thing keeping her going was the need to get far away as quickly as possible. And while she didn't think her leg was infected, the pain clawed at her, turning the road ahead blurred and wavering as much as the heat or her fatigue did. No, she didn't particularly fancy the prospect of another fight.

A while back there had been a sign for a town ahead. She hadn't planned on stopping there, at least not for long. She might have washed away the last of the blood, but she couldn't hide how pale and worn she looked. Not to mention the limp. In someone as young as her, those things were a bit too memorable to be safe. But a town meant people and people meant

witnesses. The relative safety could give her time to assess. Distractions she could use to her advantage. And maybe a side road to disappear down before the follower knew where she was.

If all else failed, she still had the shotgun. She started the engine.

Maggie supposed that Marriyong was what you might call a one-horse town, if that horse was dangerously underfed with a range of debilitating diseases. From what she could tell it was essentially one street – which was also the highway – lined with a general store, a supermarket, a pub and some other shops that didn't seem to have any clear purpose. There were a couple of other cars parked along the road. Maggie checked the rear-view then pulled over. She kept watching, but the follower was hanging back.

The pub was an old two-storey building, plain brick with a date above the door, next to a sign with a beer logo on it. Maggie crossed the road and went straight into the darkened front bar. A couple of elderly drinkers watched the TV, barely giving her a glance. Good. Walking with the confidence of someone who was meant to be there, she headed for a door at the back of the room, which led into a corridor. At the end was a staircase. She limped up the stairs and into what technically counted as the pub's accommodation area, although the sheen of dust made her wonder how often anyone stayed here. She headed for a door that she knew faced the front of the pub and tried the handle. Unlocked. She stepped into a musty smelling guest room – a single unmade bed and not much else to entice customers. She shut the door then headed straight to the window that overlooked the single street of the town. She hunched low and watched.

There were no new cars parked along the road. The follower *would* be able to park out of her sightline, but there wasn't a lot she could do about that if she wanted to keep out of his sight. What she needed was certainty. One glimpse would be enough. Once she knew what she was dealing with she could act. Lure him here into the pub maybe, then ambush him. She had a pistol tucked into the back of her jeans, another leftover from the long hot night. She didn't want to use it if she didn't have to – gunshots had a way of drawing attention she didn't need.

Minutes ticked past. Still no new cars. If he *was* tailing her then he was being careful. But maybe he wasn't. Maybe it had just been a farmer out checking on fields or something innocuous. She had plenty of reason to be paranoid, but that didn't mean that her paranoia wasn't sometimes misplaced.

God, she would love it if this was one of those times.

She heard the car before she saw it and in hearing it she knew. It was loud, rumbling into view with hateful familiarity. The heavy bulbar. The lights set above the battered cabin. The

vast tray. A country car. A hunter's car. It pulled in and parked. Maggie reached for her gun. Maybe she could make the shot from here. But if she missed, her position would not only be given away to the follower but everyone else in this town.

He wasn't getting out of the car. From here she couldn't even make out a silhouette. She waited, hand on the gun. The street remained still.

The door to the car opened.

Then a pounding on the door of the room.

Maggie turned. From behind the door came a voice, wheezy and laboured and angry – 'I swear if you're up to some funny business in my hotel, I'll call the cops! Come out now!'

Maggie looked back out the window. The car door remained open but nobody had gotten out. Behind her, the handle jiggled.

Maggie dropped and rolled, up against the base of the bed. The door opened. She heard heavy breathing. But she was banking on the fact that this man hadn't actually seen her enter the room. She waited. The wheezing continued but there were no heavy footsteps. Not until the door closed and they came muffled from the other side, receding down the hall to attack the next door.

Maggie hurried back to the window. The car door was closed. There was no sign of the driver.

She rested her head against the glass. She waited until the owner's yelling and knocking ceased and his heavy breathing passed her door and went back down the stairs. She crossed and opened the door again, checking up and down the hall. No-one in sight.

It stood to reason that the follower had come into the pub. It was possible he hadn't, but to be fair it was the only logical place Maggie could have gone. She kept her hand on the butt of the gun as she moved back out into the hall and down the opposite direction from the staircase. She could head back into the bar, try to sneak out a side exit, but he would hardly be waiting around with a beer for her to make an appearance if he was as cautious as he seemed.

At the far end of the corridor was a door that opened out on to a fire escape. She wasn't in luck; an old red alarm loomed through the glass on the outside. She wouldn't be getting out that way without making a racket.

Except.

She looked over her shoulder. Still no-one. Went to the nearest guest room door and checked – also unlocked. She returned to the fire escape. Hesitated for a moment, going over her options, then turned the handle and opened it.

The piercing siren immediately filled the hall, making Maggie want to cover her ears, but she kept one hand on the gun as she crossed to the guest room and slipped inside, closing the door and stepping back. In moments she heard pounding footsteps and wheezing interspersed with what sounded like ‘fucking silly buggers’ and also like a waste of what limited breath this man had. Maggie waited, listening for more footsteps, but it was hard to tell. She heard the fire escape door slam shut and the siren cease, then more muttering as the manager laboriously headed back down the hall, apparently assuming the trespasser had run off through the door. Like he was supposed to.

She went to the window. From this vantage point she wouldn’t be able to make out anyone directly below her, but she was going to guess that the follower, seeing as she hadn’t heard anyone else head up here, was likely to have rounded the pub, planning to catch her on the way down the fire escape.

Which put her in a difficult position. Caution told her to wait, but when the follower couldn’t find her outside, he was likely to head back to the pub. She didn’t have much time to waste if she wanted to be the one to catch him unawares.

She took out the gun. Listened again. Opened the door and stepped back. No gunshots or sounds of an ambush sprung. She lifted the gun and stepped out into the hall.

Then she froze as she came face to face with a man.

He was not, she knew immediately, the driver of the ute or the owner of the pub. He was tall and broad shouldered, wearing a polo shirt and slacks. He was probably in his forties, his dark hair touched with grey and immaculately arranged. He was good looking in a bland, forgettable way, and he was smiling as he took in Maggie and the gun.

‘Seems a little extreme,’ he said.

Maggie did not lower the gun. The man’s unfaltering smile and easy stance told her this was not some guest with unfortunate timing. ‘You’ve been following me?’

‘I wouldn’t go that far.’

‘How far would you go?’

‘Why don’t we talk over a drink downstairs?’

‘What do we have to talk about?’

The man took a badge from his pocket and held it out. ‘Detective Tom Matthews.’

Her mind was racing. If this cop was the follower, then had the ute outside been purely coincidence? A local stopping into the pub or to get some supplies?

She didn’t want to lower the gun but she wasn’t kidding herself that she was going to pull the trigger. Matthews didn’t seem to be armed, which probably boded well. And as much as

she wanted to hold him up and run, she also needed to figure out what he knew before she could make her next move, something that she was going to have a better chance of achieving with a reasonably polite conversation.

She lowered the gun.

Matthews' smile remained. 'Excellent. Shall we?'

Maggie followed him down the hall and the stairs. She hung back a bit as they entered the bar, looking for a flannel shirt and an expression of vicious recognition, but there was neither. The same drinkers as before were here, along with several new arrivals who didn't spare her a glance; one overweight middle-aged man, one squat younger woman and a skinny guy with a pinched, fearful face. No murderous hunters in sight.

The hunched, rotund old man she guessed was the owner spotted her from behind the bar and raised a trembling finger but a shake of the head from Matthews turned his clearly intended yell into a scowl.

'Doug isn't very happy with you,' the detective said.

Maggie sat across from Matthews at a corner table. 'Doug doesn't look like he's happy about much.'

Matthews leaned back, considering her. Maggie wasn't sure what to make of his easy demeanour. Even cops tended to be a bit thrown by having a gun held in their face, but the man's confidence seemed unshaken. Which suggested professional. Which suggested danger.

'What do you want?' Maggie asked.

'To know where were you before Marriyong.'

'Driving.'

'Before that?'

'Also driving.'

'And between? Make a stop at a servo along the way?'

Maggie said nothing.

Matthews nodded. 'Thought so. Left the servo a bit worse for wear.'

'I think you'll find someone else did that.'

'Tell me about the someone else.'

Maggie didn't reply.

Matthews clasped his hands on the table. 'Let me lay it out for you then. There was an incident back along the highway. Well, incident is probably putting it lightly. A servo blown up and a house burnt to the ground. A *lot* of bodies. And only two survivors on the scene; an older guy and his granddaughter. They're claiming self-defence for the bulk of the bloodshed,

and I'm probably inclined to believe them, but the big glaring hole in their story is the reason all this carnage arrived at their door. They reckon it was all because of an injured girl, who had pissed off some pretty unsavoury types. They turned up looking for her, a disagreement followed and here we are. They've been clear and thorough with most of their explanations *except* when it comes to the girl who started the whole mess. They don't claim to know her name. They're foggy on her description. All they know is that she had escaped from, allegedly, a town where the occupants were well used to doing bad things. But seeing as none of the occupants that followed her seem to be alive now, we're very interested in finding that town. Except the girl has vanished. Which makes me wonder what she's so scared of.'

'Monologues.'

Matthews laughed. 'Or maybe she's not entirely one of the good guys herself.'

'And if I told you I have no idea what you're talking about?'

'I guess I'd arrest you for trespassing and work out the rest from there.'

'Do I seem like somebody who'll take kindly to being arrested?'

'Do you think *anybody* takes kindly to being arrested?'

'Not everybody has a gun.'

'Threatening a police officer?'

'Don't they teach you the difference between a comment and a threat at the academy?'

'They teach us how often the two are the same.'

Silence. The cop wanting information on the roadhouse was better than the alternatives. Except any answer she gave would still lead to more dangerous questions.

'I don't know anything about a roadhouse or a town,' Maggie said. 'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Does anyone ever say no to that?'

Matthews shrugged as Maggie stood. 'Worth a try.'

She hesitated. The cop hadn't jumped up to stop her. His smile had barely faltered. There was no indication anything would stand in the way of her leaving now, if she wanted to.

She turned.

The three new drinkers stood. Each of them was aiming a gun at her.

Maggie turned back to Matthews. 'This seems an outsized reaction to trespassing.'

Matthews shrugged. 'What can I say? It's a small town and you're exciting. Their whole police force volunteered for this.'

Maggie had agreed to go quietly and hand over the gun, if only because the quivering finger of the young male cop worried her. Plus, this way there would be less of a commotion, although the agape mouths of the other drinkers in the bar suggested that all eleven citizens of Marriyong would know about this within the hour.

So she was marched out of the bar surrounded by the three cops with Matthews in the lead. The ute was gone.

She was handcuffed and placed in the back of an old police car, the young male cop sitting beside her, staring shamelessly. The woman drove with the older man in the passenger seat and Matthews following in his own car – something predictably big, black and shiny.

‘Keep an eye on her, eh Petey?’ the older man said. ‘Don’t need any more trouble today.’

Maggie didn’t bother to point out that the day’s ‘trouble’ had been a drink in the pub and a suspect brought in with ease. All things were relative, evidently.

‘Leave him be, Kev,’ the woman growled.

Maggie fucking hated that name.

‘Lot of manpower for a trespasser,’ Maggie said.

‘But Tom reckons you’re not just any trespasser, are you sweetheart?’ Kev said with the knowing satisfaction that Maggie assumed he treated teenage drinkers with.

‘Kev!’ the woman snapped.

‘Just a joke, Rose, don’t get your bloody panties in a bunch.’

‘Want those panties down your throat, mate?’

‘Jeeze, let a bloke think he’s on a promise why don’t ya?’

They’d passed out of the centre of Marriyong and turned down a side street – likely the only one in the ‘town’ – lined by ample grass and the occasional ramshackle house. They pulled up at an almost cubic brick building with a faded blue sign out the front. The station, such as it was, sat on a block of brown grass off a cracked stretch of road that, less than a hundred metres away, became dirt.

‘You need a station in a town this small?’ Maggie asked as she was led to the door.

‘We don’t just look after Marriyong,’ Rose said. ‘Not that the other spots around here add a whole lot to our to-do list.’

‘Don’t fraternise with the prisoner,’ Kev barked.

‘Shut the fuck up, Kev.’

The station appeared to be made up of an office area that was four desks competing for space with piles of unsorted paperwork, a door through which Maggie assumed was a bathroom, armory or both, and the single cell Maggie was led into. Rusted bars and a shallow bench with

a single dangling lightbulb – Maggie figured that, like the station, it was a relic from older times. Or else a repurposed storage shed. From the door just past her cell she could see most of the office and the two square windows beyond, through which late afternoon was becoming early evening.

Maggie sat on the shallow bench and waited.

In the office area, Matthews had taken a seat and was going over some papers, not sparing even a glance for her. He leaned back, frowning, then he beckoned the other cops over. A few whispers, something heated from Kev, then Matthews was standing and they dispersed. He walked into the cell room and crossed his arms.

‘Ready to help us out yet?’ he asked.

‘Did you think locking me up was going to make me feel more warmly towards you?’

Matthews was still smiling but it was fainter, now. He seemed to be weighing something up as he leaned against the door frame.

‘I wonder what would happen,’ he said, ‘if I checked our database for anyone matching your description.’

Maggie said nothing.

‘Reckon you can give me a sneak preview of what I’ll find?’

‘A lot of teenage girls with shoplifting raps.’

‘What if I narrow it down to murder?’

‘Can’t say.’

‘Can you guess?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Co-operation looks good to a judge.’

‘I don’t care what looks good to a judge.’

‘Maybe you should.’

Maggie shrugged.

‘Listen,’ Matthews said. ‘You don’t seem like a bad kid.’

‘Based on . . .?’

‘Based on what I heard back at that roadhouse.’

‘Should I tell you what you don’t seem like?’

Matthews raised an eyebrow. ‘Go on.’

‘A city detective.’

His smile flickered.

Maggie nodded past him, to the other police. ‘They’d hardly know you if you were down from the city. Not enough to call you Tom. And the way you sat at that desk – one of four in a station that barely fits two – that was plenty familiar. That said, you carry yourself like a Detective, which says you probably were one. What changed?’

Matthews’ smile was gone.

‘My guess?’ Maggie went on. ‘Something went wrong, and you got slapped with a transfer to somewhere deliberately demeaning. Except now this big case has happened in your general vicinity, and you want to be the one to crack it. To collar the town, the girl, all of it. Something that will make you the hero cop again. Am I far off?’

Matthews was silent.

‘Here’s what I’m offering,’ Maggie said. ‘The location of the town. Find me a map and I’ll circle it for you. But I’ll do it from the door of my car, which you’ll drive me back to before letting me vanish.’

‘I can’t do that,’ Matthews said.

‘Then I stay quiet,’ Maggie replied. ‘Call the cities. Find out what you have to. But if I stay behind bars, here or elsewhere, I will not say a word about that town. And I am the only person left alive who knows where it is.’

Matthews’ jaw clenched. ‘Why should I trust you?’

‘I don’t have an answer to that question,’ Maggie said. ‘The deal is the deal. You get the girl but not the town, or you trust the girl and get the town. Your call, Sergeant. Detective. Constable. Whatever.’

Matthews looked like he wanted to say more, but he was smart enough to know not to push. He turned and walked back out into the office. Maggie watched as he sat at his desk, eyes on the phone. Kev waddled over to him but was sent off by a raised hand.

Maggie waited.

She could hear the hum of voices from the office area, the other cops pushing Matthews for answers on what they were going to do with her as the minutes ticked on and the light out the windows faded.

Would he take the deal? Maggie hoped so. Predominantly because she didn’t have a lot of options if he said no, but also because she was tired and in pain and needed to be far further from the ruins of that roadhouse than she currently was.

But she was as close to confident as she could get in the circumstances. Matthews needed a win and for a cop in his position, tracking down a town of murderers was about as big a win as

it was possible to get. For a cop in *any* position, really – it was more than a career saver, it was a legend maker.

Matthews hovered over a phone. He glanced through the door at her. Looked at the phone again. Rested a hand on it, then straightened up and walked back into the doorway. For a long moment they looked at each other.

‘Alright,’ Matthews said. ‘Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to take you back to your car. And then—’

The top of Matthews’ head exploded.

Screams and thuds from the office as the other cops hit the floor. Maggie flinched sideways as Matthews fell, blood saturating his clothes. She had a straight line of sight now to the hole in the window that the bullet had come through. To the dark night beyond.

Her heart was pounding. A steady throb built in her head, something hot and scared and angry.

She had been right.

She didn’t need to know more. Not right then. The facts were simple. There was a survivor. They had been following her. And now they had her exactly where they wanted her – trapped in a cell, a shift away from the sights of a high-powered rifle.

Out in the office she could hear Kev’s ragged breathing, fast and harsh, hyperventilating. She could hear Petey muttering something to himself – maybe a prayer. She waited for another shot. It didn’t come. The survivor was waiting.

Shuffling and then Rose was there, crawling into the cell, eyes wide and face pale. She came around the door and pressed herself up against the wall, staring at Maggie, mouth opening and closing as if trying to form words.

Out in the office, Kev had started to cry.

‘*Who,*’ Rose rasped.

‘Let me out,’ Maggie said.

Rose shook her head. ‘You brought them here, you – you did this, this was you, this was—’

‘Let me out.’

‘Who are you?’

‘That doesn’t matter.’

‘Yes,’ there was terror and anger and desperation in Rose’s strangled voice. ‘Yes, it does. If they’re here for you . . .’

‘It doesn’t matter what they’re here for. They’ll kill you.’

‘Not if we hand you over.’

Maggie could have rolled her eyes. ‘Do you seriously think somebody who just murdered a policeman—’ Rose flinched at the word ‘murdered’ ‘gives two shits about the rest of you? They’ll kill you to make sure nobody can report on this.’

Maggie leaned forward, hands around the bars and eyes on Rose. ‘Let me out so that I can deal with this.’

Rose stared back at Maggie, still scared but mind working as she tried to figure out the best path forward.

Maggie let go and sat back.

Rose glanced sideways at Matthews’ body. She closed her eyes tight. Then she reached into her pocket and with trembling hands withdrew the keys. She fumbled at the lock and pulled the door open. Staying low, in a crawl, Maggie moved out into the office area. Petey was sitting against the wall, eyes wide and unblinking, hands tight around his gun. Kev, tears running down his face, was doing something with a tea-towel. The moment he saw Maggie he pointed at her with a squawk.

‘What is she – she can’t, she’ll . . .’

‘What are you doing?’ Maggie nodded to the cloth.

‘White flag.’

‘It’s beige.’

‘It’s *something*.’ Kev’s voice cracked. ‘Okay? It’s something. I’ll lift it and—’

‘He won’t shoot then you’ll stand and then he *will* shoot,’ Maggie said. ‘Trust me, he’s making sure nobody leaves this place alive. It’s their MO.’

‘Who’s they?’ Rose asked.

‘What matters isn’t who, it’s how many,’ Maggie said. ‘Do we have a back door?’

She knew the answer before Rose shook her head. ‘It’s an old building,’ the cop said with a note of defensiveness. ‘From colonial times; they didn’t want the convicts getting out . . .’

‘And the shooter knows that,’ Maggie said. ‘Which means maybe there is only one of them. Maybe.’ She closed her eyes.

*What did they have?*

‘A broom.’ Maggie’s eyes shot open. ‘Do you have a broom?’

Rose nodded.

‘What about rope?’

‘Why would we have rope?’

‘Extension leads, then.’

Rose crawled for the second door, to the storage cupboard. Maggie sat back, casting an eye over the cluttered office, over Matthews' body. Looking at him now, the bullet that had erupted through the front of his head had left most of it intact. Nobody would be mistaking him for alive, but watching from a distance with an itchy trigger finger . . .

Rose was back, dragging the broom and the cords.

'Right,' Maggie said. 'I need a gun.'

Kev shook his head. 'No way. You're a criminal.'

To her surprise, it was Petey who handed over his pistol.

Maggie pointed at Matthews' body. 'I need him tied to the broom.'

'What?' Kev spluttered.

'Tie him to the broom.'

'Why?'

'Because after you lift that beige flag, it'll be better if the person who gets shot is already dead, won't it?'

'But . . . but . . .'

Rose looked ill.

'Listen,' Maggie said. 'We need to know where he's shooting from. Which is why Rose and I are going to position ourselves at the windows with guns. Petey and Kev will lift the flag. When our guy doesn't shoot, they'll lift Matthews. He'll be heavy, you have to hold him by the waist, but if he's tied tight the broom should keep him straight and upright long enough. Lift fast – I need to stress that. Fast enough that the shooter doesn't pay attention to *how* he's rising or moving, fast enough that he shoots without thinking and is distracted enough for Rose and I to see where he is and hopefully,' Maggie raised the gun, 'drop the fucker.'

'It won't work,' Kev said. 'It won't.'

Maggie's patience was burning out fast. 'If you have a better suggestion, now's the time.'

Kev did not.

Maggie and Rose crawled for the front of the building, positioning themselves under the windows as Kev and Petey, neither looking happy about it, got to work lashing Matthews to the broom. Across from Maggie, Rose caught her eye.

'Will it work?'

'No idea,' Maggie said.

Petey and Kev were finished. Petey gave Maggie a questioning look. Maggie nodded. Petey nudged Kev, who closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then lifted the tea-towel he'd tied to a baton. It quivered as he held it up.

They all waited. No more bullets.

Kev lowered the baton. He and Petey moved to the grotesque, bloody puppet that had been Matthews. Maggie gave them a nod, mouthing 'fast.'

Petey and Kev hoisted him up. Maggie jumped to her knees, looking out into the night.

She caught a glimpse of the ute across the road, then a muzzle flash as . . .

Matthews' body snapped back. Petey and Kev yelled.

Maggie fired. The glass shattered. She fired again.

The figure, briefly illuminated, jerked sideways with a yell.

'Covering fire!' Maggie bellowed.

Rose opened fire, shooting wildly.

Maggie swept the gun barrel across the windowsill, sending shattered glass everywhere. She hoisted herself up and through then moved fast across the road. The burning in her leg worsened with every step but she ignored it, bringing up the gun and swinging around the tray of the ute to find . . .

Nothing.

She scanned the grass behind the car. No movement. Just gentle swaying in the light breeze.

She checked the tray then, casting an eye over the grass again, moved to the driver's side door. She pulled it open. No-one there. She dropped and, wincing, checked under the car. Darkness.

Slowly she stood, looking out into the night. Saw the blood that flecked the edge of the long grass.

She dove to the side and scurried back around the tray. Against the other side of the car, she exhaled. He was out there in the grass, somewhere, still armed. Her leg seared. She closed her eyes. She needed to be gone from here. Needed to put an end to this. But he had a rifle and a scope and she had very little.

'Hey.'

Rose, hissing at her from a crouch in the doorway of the station. She beckoned.

Maggie didn't move.

'We've called reinforcements,' Rose said. 'They're ten minutes away. Get back in here and we can keep watch. They'll have the area surrounded and weed him out in no time.'

Maggie wanted to scream. Extra cops *might* be able to find and capture the survivor. But they also meant she couldn't stay here. More cops, more questions, and an inevitable return to the cell, this time without the benefit of a rogue killer to give them a reason to unleash her.

'Come on,' Rose said. Even from here Maggie could see the tears in her eyes. Desperate

fear. But she didn't know the danger Maggie was in. That she couldn't stay.

Keeping low, Maggie crossed to the door of the car and climbed in. The keys were in the ignition. Awkwardly, still trying to keep low, she turned them as she clambered into the driver's seat.

A last call from Rose: *'Please!'*

With a thrum of engine, the car came to life. Maggie hit the high beams, sitting up as she spun the wheel and slammed the accelerator. She ploughed the car into the grass. In the harsh glare of the light ahead it looked almost white. She swung the wheel right then left as she went, looking for the lurch of movement from a blinded enemy, looking for the lone figure she needed to run down.

Nothing.

The car jerked across the grass, back towards the main highway. Still no sign of movement. Maggie pushed the accelerator and drove straight, fast, gunning it in case she had passed him and he was taking his chance to shoot from behind. No bullets came. She hit the highway and swerved, back towards the town. She wanted to stop. Wanted to take a moment to plan her next move, to decide if leaving was really the right choice. Every instinct told her to go back, to tear through the grass until she found him and killed him and the last enemy from that nightmare town was gone.

But she didn't have time.

Instead she sped back into the heart of the town, to where she'd left her car. She stopped the in the middle of the road and climbed out. A couple of lights in the sparse buildings had flickered on, the handful of townspeople woken by the racing car or the distant shots or both. Maggie didn't care.

In the tray of the shooter's car she found what she knew would be there, what had been in all the others, back at the roadhouse. A cannister of petrol. She unscrewed the lid and doused the car in it. Then she lit the lighter she had found on the dashboard and tossed it into the tray.

She went fast back to her own car. Started the engine as the ute became an inferno. Shot past it, flames licking the side of her station wagon, and had just reached the edge of the buildings as her rear-view mirror filled with fire and the ground under her shook with an explosion that made her ears ring and her heart gallop and a vicious grin cross her face.

She had half expected a shot from the grassy field but none came. Nor did the careening sirens slow as the flashing lights of the police cars passed her. She kept driving out of Marriyong and back on to the endless road.

The survivor couldn't follow her in a hurry. But still, she didn't like leaving an enemy alive out there. Especially not this enemy.

She told herself that Rose had been right. The police would find him. He was only one against what would now be many. Even if he took out another cop or two, they would get him and that would be that. It was, in the end, their job. Not hers.

But still.

As Marriyong got further and further away the adrenalin slipped with the fear, swallowed by encroaching tiredness. All she had wanted, before the town, was a chance to rest. But she had to get well clear now, before Rose's reinforcements put two and two together and came looking. The survivor, comparatively, was an easy prospect. She had no qualms killing him.

She took the first turn off she saw, something she previously would have avoided. Turn offs, out here, rarely led anywhere good. But this one was paved, at least, and so she kept going until she passed through another small town then took a right up a dirt road then a left on to another empty highway and then the sun was coming up, turning the brown grass gold and the sky a violent pink. Her eyelids drooped and her leg pulsed but she kept going, letting worries and plans and possibilities slip away, her only focus now the road ahead.

She refuelled at a roadhouse that sat across from a fire station about the size of a shed. A lone firey stood out the front, smoking. He gave her a nod, which she returned in kind before continuing on her way.

At around ten she pulled into a small hamlet not too different from Marriyong. Too tired to even check the name, she parked her car on a dirt back road before circling around to the front of the pub. Her vision blurred and she was swaying but she took a few minutes to watch the road behind her. No gleam of metal or growl of an engine. She limped into the gloom, paid cash for a bed and was upstairs and asleep in what felt like seconds, a chair jammed under the door and pistol on the bedside table.

She slept through the day and the night. The next morning she sat in the bar, eating a bacon sandwich and looking over a map the bartender had grudgingly lent her.

She was quite a way from Marriyong now. Further still from the roadhouse and the town. There was part of her, a significant part, that wanted to go back. To find the survivor and make sure it was over. But she wasn't going to let emotion lead her, not now.

Her eyes, almost automatically, tracked up the map, towards its highest point.

She had taken to the road for two reasons. The first was that she had done something bad back in Melbourne and had to be away from there. The second was a vague, misty idea. She

wanted to find her mother. The woman who had walked out when Maggie was too young to even retain a clear idea of what she looked like, leaving her alone with a violent and fractured father.

Maggie had set out with an idea of where to look. What she had found had sent her running again, tailed by a lone survivor. But she had not left with nothing. Her mother, in the end, had been at that town and had herself left, headed north.

What Maggie had learned did not indicate her mother was worth tracking down. But now, with nowhere else to go, north looked as good a direction as any. Even if it was hardly specific enough for her to have any hope of continuing the pursuit.

But she had to put this to bed, this notion that finding her mother would mean anything in the end. The woman had abandoned her, knowing full well what would happen. What was more, she had spent years in the town Maggie had barely survived, accepting their ways – maybe even embracing them. Her mother was an enabler at best, a monster at worst.

But Maggie knew herself well enough to know that the truth had never held enough weight to stop her starting the hunt in the first place. Which meant she had to go in a different direction. South, east, west; anywhere but north. North allowed the fantasy to stay alive and Maggie had to move past that or risk being forever in thrall to the past she had chosen to kill.

She sipped her coffee and as she did a familiar word from the low buzz of the television caught her attention.

*‘. . . Marriyong was the site of a shock shootout last night that left four police officers dead.’* Ice in Maggie’s veins. Rigid, she watched the newscaster.

*‘Coming only hours after the massacre at a nearby roadhouse, police are searching for the culprit and seeking any information on either incident, or whether they are in some way connected.’*

Shots of the tiny station, crime-scene tape strewn across it, rustling feebly in the wind.

Four police officers dead.

*Four.*

Rose, Kev and Petey. She had left them there, not thinking twice about their safety. They were three against one. They had reinforcements on the way. But somehow the survivor had come out on top. Not only that, had escaped again.

They couldn’t have followed her. Not while also having time to kill – the thought made her stomach clench – the three cops. They could have stolen a car but they had no hope of staying on her tail. Maybe they were even now driving around, trying to find her. But they had been smart enough so far and had to know it was futile, especially with all the police attention.

Which meant there was only one place they could have gone.

The thought made her head swim, made the sandwich threaten to come up again. She had to grab the table for support. On the TV the newscaster had turned to something else, some urban drama, speaking in the exact same flat tone. Maggie closed her eyes.

*The town.*

Where else could the survivor go? Many of the townspeople had come for her. But there were many more living there. Many who would have returned after the roadhouse. To regroup and maybe to plan.

She had thought to leave them squarely behind her. To put it out of her mind and run. But the survivor was proof that they would not stop. If one person like that was still alive, more would be. Enough to start again, to indoctrinate, to continue. More screams in the trees, more blood in the dirt. More roadhouses. Not tomorrow or the next day. But they would come. Unless she did something about it.

But what? Wipe out the elderly and the children? Give them a lesson in morality? Maggie actually barked a choked laugh at that. She put her head in her hands. She could feel the tiny tremors race through her as the pointlessness of every move available became clear, the vast and terrible emptiness of the path ahead.

She wasn't going to destroy a town. But she could at least find and kill the survivor.

Back the way she had come, foot on the accelerator and tearing down empty roads. She couldn't slow upon reaching Marriyong. Had to just tear through and then be back towards the place she never thought she'd have to see again.

The road stretched ahead under a clear sky burned pale. She was nearing the roadhouse she'd stopped at yesterday. Still a way to go. Still too much time for fear and doubt and memories to build. Still . . .

Something shot across the road in front of her – a green blur. For a moment she thought snake but it was too long, rising up in a strange wave as if flicked, crossing the road and landing in front of her, then . . . A lurch then a scream of protesting metal from below as the car careened off the road into the ditch. She was slammed forward – instantly she unclipped her seatbelt and threw herself to the side, grabbing her gun as she crawled across the passenger seat and opened the door, clambering out into the dust and the grass. Her leg throbbed. Her thoughts spun. Her heart pounded. *What the fuck?*

Pressed against the side of the car, she listened. Heard the approaching footsteps on the road, no effort made to keep quiet. With the angle the car had landed in, she couldn't shoot from under it. She would have to jump up and fire at an opponent who absolutely had her in his scope.

Something was lying nearby, something so odd that it took her a moment to put the pieces together. She leaned over and grabbed it. A length of green hose, nails stuck through all along at different angles. It was maybe a metre long, the end torn and ragged. This part ripped off by the tyres it had shredded.

So he had been waiting. In the grass, somewhere behind her, for God knew how long. Whether he had figured her out or just got lucky, he had waited for her car, flung the hose, and now here she was. Essentially at the fucker's mercy.

'Alright.' His voice, finally. It was scratchy, but high enough to sound young. 'We gonna have a chat or what?'

Maggie said nothing.

'I'm not gonna shoot ya,' he went on. 'Unless you do something dumb. Was never gonna shoot ya.'

'Tell that to the cops.'

'That was them, but—Not you. I helped ya.'

'What?'

'Yeah.' There was a note of something like eagerness in his voice. 'They'da kept you locked up, yeah? I got ya out.'

Maggie closed her eyes. Went through her options. There were none. Wincing, she stood, turning fast, gun still in hand.

He was young. Skinny too. He stood in the middle of the road, greasy hair hanging in his pockmarked face, crooked yellow teeth exposed in a grin. He wore a flannelette shirt cut off at the shoulders and held a long rifle with a scope, aimed directly at Maggie. There was a bandage around one arm where she'd clipped him.

She didn't move. He didn't fire.

'You're gonna have to drop the gun but,' he said. 'I know you'll kill me if ya get the chance.'

He wasn't wrong there. Maggie held on to the gun.

'Come on,' he said. 'Can't chat if I'm scared you're gonna shoot me.'

'Funny that.'

'I won't hurt ya,' he said. 'We're gonna walk down to the servo. Have a chat in there.'

'About what?'

‘You’ll see. Come on.’ He jerked the gun slightly. His eyes narrowed just a little. His grip on the gun was steady. Naïve, stupid, maybe but not scared. He would kill her if he had to.

Maggie dropped the gun.

‘How did you find me?’

His grin was almost proud. ‘Fuckin’ easy, that. Leaky tin of paint stuck under your car. Left me a trail. Saw you stop in at that pub, figured you’d hear about the cops and come back this way. If ya didn’t, I’d kept following. Worked something else out.’

Simple but clever. She almost admired it.

He jerked his head sideways. ‘That way, ‘kay? You know where the servo is.’

Maggie started to walk. Out from behind the car and on to the road. The survivor stayed behind her, gun levelled at her back. Maggie didn’t like it, at all, but she also didn’t think he’d go to this much trouble just to shoot her in the back. There was something he wanted and whatever it was would give her time to plan.

They walked in silence. The roadhouse was closer than Maggie had realised; in minutes it was there. Maggie had half hoped for a refuelling cop car out the front but no such luck. Even the firey from the day before wasn’t out having his smoke. The whole area was deserted.

There was a small dining area inside the roadhouse, something Maggie took in with a pang of bitter familiarity. The balding, unblinking old man behind the counter didn’t seem remotely surprised by the limping girl and the kid with the gun. He just looked blankly at them as they sat.

‘Been out on a roo shoot,’ the survivor said. ‘Wouldn’t mind a bevvie.’

The attendant said nothing.

The survivor shrugged. ‘Suit yourself, mate. Coupla dim sims’d be nice.’

Maggie sat. ‘I think you have to pay.’

He looked almost confused by that. The attendant nodded. The kid shrugged and sat across from Maggie, the gun across his lap. Up close he looked maybe a couple of years younger than her; around nineteen or so. It was hard to imagine him taking out four cops. But then most people would find it hard to imagine that Maggie had done half the things she had.

‘What do you want?’ she said.

‘Make a deal.’

Maggie blinked. ‘What?’

He nodded. ‘Yeah. Yeah, a deal. A real good one too.’

Maggie leaned back, carefully. ‘Good for who?’

‘Back at the town,’ he said. ‘They’re mad. The ones who are left. But they’re scared too.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of you.’ He grinned. ‘You killed a bunch of us. Shouldn’ta been easy. But shit – you ripped through the bastards and you’re still standing.’

Maggie gave up trying to get ahead of whatever his intentions were. She just waited.

‘So I want you to come back.’

‘To the town.’

‘Yeah. With me.’

‘Why?’

He leaned forward. ‘Think about it. Everyone in charge is gone. The ones who are left don’t know what to do with ‘emselves. They need a leader.’

‘And that’s you?’

‘Yeah, but they won’t . . .’ he faltered. ‘They won’t listen to me alone.’

Maggie would have laughed if it wasn’t for the gun. ‘So – hang on. You want me to come back and, what, be your enforcer? Or—’

‘No, not that,’ he said. ‘Like, a partner.’

‘The Bride of Frankenstein?’

‘What?’

‘You want to be the king. With a killer queen.’

‘Not like that, but—’

‘Enough like that. They would kill me the first chance they got.’

He shook his head. ‘Nah see that’s the thing. They wouldn’t.’

‘I killed their family.’

‘What matters more than family?’

Maggie didn’t have an answer.

The survivor noticed and seemed to love the fact. He was almost bouncing in his seat. ‘*Fear*. You reckon Kev, Steve, Janice, Kate – all of ‘em – you reckon they ran shit because people liked ‘em? Nah, everyone was just fucking scared. But you. You butchered Steve and his mates. Stuck a hook through Kev. Cut Janice’s throat. Scalped Kate.’

Maggie looked away.

‘They’ll never fuck with you. *Ever*. I bring you back, they won’t fuck with me, neither.’

‘As opposed to what?’ Maggie said. ‘Before?’

He didn’t reply.

‘I take it you were fucked with. A lot.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he said, an edge to his voice. ‘Point is, they’re gone and we’re not. We survived. And there’s a prize for surviving.’

‘I don’t want to run your town of psychopaths.’

He didn’t reply immediately. There was no anger on his face. After a moment he smiled and, easily, asked: ‘Where else have you got to go?’

Maggie said nothing.

‘They made a mistake,’ he said. ‘All of ‘em. Tried to kill ya. But they shoulda *welcomed* ya. Made ya stay. Set ya out in the bush with a gun after the pigs. You’d be so beautiful. Still can be.’

Maggie said nothing.

‘Otherwise, what’s out there for ya?’ he said. ‘Prison, maybe? Or else you’ll keep fighting and killing and sooner or later you’ll cross a faster shot and then . . .’ He made a gun with his fingers and pointed it at Maggie’s head. ‘Got no future. Got no home. Nowhere to go. But we’d accept you. More than that. We’d love you. Give you a family. One who won’t run out on ya or hurt ya.’

He knew, then. About her mother. Somehow, the fact stung.

‘You gonna tell me you’re so upset about a couple dickhead cops that you won’t listen to me?’ he pushed on. ‘Come on. They were fucking morons. The moment you were gone they ran out looking for me. I didn’t even have to move to take ‘em all out.’

‘If I didn’t care I wouldn’t be here’ Maggie said.

‘You’re here because you gotta think that,’ he replied. ‘Gotta think you’re one of the good guys. But there ain’t no good guys or bad guys. Just hunters and pigs. And you’re a hunter. That’s why you’re thinkin’ about it, even if you’re pretending not to. You reckon you made us into enemies. What you did really, was show every single fucker left in that town that you deserve to run things. ‘Cos you’ll do it way better than Kev or Steve.’

‘What about you? Do you deserve it?’

He shrugged. ‘If I bring you back, sure.’

‘And if I say no?’

‘Don’t have to bring you back alive.’

Silence over the old roadhouse. The survivor was watching her. Maggie couldn’t see the gun but she knew his hands were tight around it, knew that the slightest move from her would have him leveling it fast. Devastating at point blank range, she imagined.

‘If you don’t bring me back alive,’ she said slowly, ‘you don’t get the town.’

‘Being the one to kill you will go a long way though.’

‘So those are my choices,’ Maggie said. ‘Alive or dead. You gonna drag me there by yourself?’

‘Gonna take your car,’ he said. He looked towards the attendant, pottering around behind the counter. ‘Oi, mate! Give us a tyre.’

He looked at the survivor, blinked, then asked: ‘what kind?’

‘Fuck, I dunno,’ he replied. ‘We blew out one, right?’

He said ‘we’ as though Maggie had been a part of that.

‘Old station wagon. Nothing fancy. Stopped here yesterday, yeah?’

The attendant looked between them, then walked out the back.

‘So,’ he said. ‘What do you reckon?’

The smart option, the only option, was to agree to his deal. She didn’t for a second believe his delusional idea that the others would simply accept her after what she’d done. But saying yes might put him more at ease. And that would give her more of a chance to strike.

But something stopped her. Something in everything he’d said, in the confident certainty that Maggie did somehow belong with the monsters. The way he spoke, he didn’t think that she was going to refuse. And that made Maggie want to refuse. A lot. Because this ratty little prick knew nothing about her, and she’d be fucked if she was going to just roll over and let him spout bullshit about where she *belonged*.

But even as she thought that, another taunting voice that sounded all too much like her father’s asked: *Why are you so angry if it isn’t true?*

The survivor was still watching her. Still smiling slightly.

Behind him, the attendant emerged, holding a tyre. He placed it on the counter. ‘Three hundred,’ he said.

The survivor whistled. ‘Bit steep, mate.’

‘Supply and demand, mate.’

The kid nodded to Maggie. ‘You got the cash.’

Maggie didn’t move.

‘Nah,’ the survivor said. ‘You’re right. We shouldn’t pay.’

He hefted the gun, pointing it at the roof. The attendant didn’t move. Maggie’s hand slipped to her waist.

The survivor winked at Maggie. ‘Just like old times, eh?’

‘Three hundred.’ The attendant’s voice remained firm.

‘Give us the tyre,’ the survivor said.

The attendant didn’t reply.

The survivor pulled the trigger.

And as he did, Maggie swung the nail-studded hose at him.

It hit him hard in the face, nails slamming into his cheek. He jerked sideways, dropping the gun as Maggie flew to her feet, rounded the table and wrapped the hose hard around his head. She pulled. He screamed. She pulled again, yanking him out of the seat as he clawed where the nails had stuck him.

She had not enjoyed wearing it wrapped around her waist, carefully placed to keep the nails from digging too deep. It hadn't been enough. She was bleeding, but it didn't matter. She'd bled before. She pulled the length of hose again.

The attendant was reaching for the phone. Maggie caught his eye and shook her head. On the ground, the survivor writhed and spat and swore. He reached for the gun. Maggie snatched it up. She dragged him to the door. He kicked, rolled, screamed. She was out in the sun now. She dropped the hose. There was a trail of blood from the door. She stood over the survivor, lowering the gun.

'You fucking bitch,' he wheezed. 'You fucking . . .' He was trying to pull at the hose but he couldn't do it, every tug making him whimper. She'd got him good.

He straightened up, on his knees. Looked at Maggie.

'They'll come for you,' he said.

'Okay.'

'You fucked up. Ya could have . . .' Pain snatched the words from him. 'Could have . . .'

'No. I couldn't.'

His wide eyes locked on hers. His hand moved to the knife at his waist. He went to speak.

Maggie shoved the gun barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

His head exploded. Blood, brain, bone and nails splattered the pavement. What was left swayed and fell.

Maggie dropped the gun. She went back into the roadhouse. The attendant stared at her, hand on the phone. Maggie reached into her pocket and threw a note in front of him. He said nothing. She took that as assent. She picked up the tyre and walked for the door.

'The cops . . .' His voice was a croak.

'Give me ten, if you don't mind.'

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'North,' she said, then stepped over the body of the survivor and walked for her car.