

# One Too Many

By Gabriel Bergmoser

Maggie was drunk. She shouldn't have been. But upon finding the bar and seeing the drinks were cheap she figured she'd earned a second and a third and now she didn't know how many she had had. She glanced at the clock, dust covered and hanging at an odd angle above the top-shelf spirits (which looked equally well cared for). Almost midnight. She looked at her beer. Halfway done and this ought to be her last. Probably wouldn't be though. She drank again.

She didn't know how long it had been since her last proper stop. She'd been sleeping in her car down dirt roads, only for as long as she thought she needed. Then it was back on the highways, taking erratic turns towards no known destination. Harder to track that way. She had done too much lately that might attract attention, so unpredictability was her friend. On that front at least, getting as pissed as she was made sense. Nobody would suspect she'd be this dumb.

She liked the bar. It was grubby and old, tucked away down a side street of the large country town that, according to the signs, insisted it was a city. It was the kind of place emulated by overpriced venues in Melbourne going for a veneer of divey authenticity, missing out always on the sticky floors and faint smell of stale urine barely covered by the equally stale beer. With the lights low and the sour-faced woman behind the bar it was the kind of place people were told to avoid. Which suited Maggie just fine.

The door creaked behind her. She paused mid drink. Nobody else had come in all night. The only other drinker was a sad looking old man slumped alone in the corner. The newcomer moved past her. He was hulking, although his thick leather jacket was probably doing a lot of the work to maintain that impression. He had a thick beard and – Maggie noticed with dull interest – was doing nothing to hide the gun at his waist. A biker. Maggie rested the tip of her finger on the edge of her glass and tilted it back, watching him as he leaned against the bar.

Bob Dylan had started playing on the old speakers. *I Want You*. Maggie nodded along as she watched the bartender turn the music up louder before, slowly, approaching the biker. He was doing a bad impression of a man at ease, looking around the place, smiling. The bartender, for her part, was not reciprocating. Her face, already set in a mask of unfriendliness, had taken on the look of someone who dearly wanted to scowl but didn't dare risk it. Maggie looked at the old man in the corner. He wasn't drinking anymore. His right hand was slipping into his jacket.

It would be easy enough to leave. In theory. She was sitting close to the door. She could make a show of getting up, yawning, and staggering off. She could let whatever was happening here happen. But damned if she wasn't curious. And reasonably sure that the biker wouldn't have that gun so prominent if he had any intention of a potential witness walking free.

She slid off the stool, let herself stagger slightly then, picking up her almost empty glass, swayed for the bar. The biker was talking low to the bartender now, who was saying nothing, her heavy brow furrowed. Maggie reached the bar and the biker fell silent. He looked sideways at her. She responded with a bleary smile, tilting her glass towards the bartender. Without looking at her, the bartender snatched it, went to the tap, and filled it. Maggie drummed her fingers on the table in time to the music. The biker didn't look at her. The bartender returned and slid her the beer, then looked back at the biker. Maggie waited. The biker remained silent.

'Want some money?' Maggie asked, voice lazy and slack.

A curt nod. Maggie fumbled with her wallet. Dropped it once. Found a note, slid it to the bartender with a wave, then veered away. She faltered halfway to her table, sloshing beer. Behind her, the biker was talking again.

'Point is, it's time you fucking drop it, okay?'

'His mother's a goddamn wreck, Roo. She keeps calling me with all sorts of mad conspiracy theories. Sooner or later she's gonna figure out one of them is true.'

'Not if you keep your mouth shut.'

'About what? You haven't told me shit.'

Neither of them had noticed that Maggie wasn't at her table. She drank. Couldn't stay too stock still, or else it would look wrong. No matter how focused on their conversation they were, they'd sense something amiss.

'Tell her he walked off a cliff. Tell her he went swimming after an 8-ball too many. I don't give a fuck what you tell her as long as you let it lie. Shouldn't be too fucking hard either; junkies go AWOL every day. Good riddance.'

'Cept he wasn't a junkie before he met your lot.'

'Kid made his choices.'

'Kid was a kid, Roo.'

'Business is business, Sal. Forge wasn't gonna say no to a customer. Not with things being what they are. Not with the cops out for blood after that shit at the school in Melbourne. Yeah, I reckon he coulda been smarter about who he sold to. 'Specially after the kid started getting cocky and getting ideas. Any dickhead knows not to cross a bloke like Forge.'

‘That *dickhead* was...’ Sal’s voice rose and then, sharply, was cut off. Maggie turned. The biker had his hand around her throat. Maggie looked at the old man in the corner. His hand was out of his jacket. His eyes were closed, head lolling to the side. Faking.

Maggie drank. She tipped her beer to the side, pouring it on to the ground.

The biker’s voice had gone low and harsh. He was snarling in Sal’s face. His grip tightening. Maggie tipped further. The last of the beer was gone. Something was rising inside her, something she would usually fight but she was drunk and Sal was gasping for breath and the biker was reaching for his gun.

Maggie came right up behind him, dropped the pint glass slightly so that she was holding it by the base, then swung it up and smashed the top against the bar right beside the biker. Instantly he let go of Sal, flinching away from the broken glass, eyes going to the point of impact just as Maggie, palm on the base of the glass, slammed the jagged top of what remained into his face and twisted.

The biker screamed. His hands went to his face. Maggie’s went to the gun. She pulled it from the holster, stepped back, and as the biker lurched for her she brought it up to the side of his head and fired. His ear vanished in a burst of blood. The biker crumpled with a keening wail. Maggie looked over her shoulder. The old man was standing, eyes wide, hand back in his jacket. Maggie held his gaze. He lowered his hand.

Maggie turned to Sal. Even in the dim light she looked stricken.

‘You got gloves?’ Maggie asked.

The woman nodded.

‘Put them on.’

Trembling, Sal knelt and retrieved a pair of old rubber gloves from below the sink. It took her several tries to get them on. The biker lunged for Maggie’s legs. She stepped back, raised the gun and shot him in the right heel. He screamed and didn’t stop. His foot was dangling from his leg now, a mess of blood and boot leather.

Maggie placed the gun on the bar. ‘When the police check those fingerprints, they’ll have questions. Make sure yours are answered first.’

Sal, wide eyed, looked at the now sobbing form of Roo.

‘You have a witness,’ Maggie said, nodding to the old man. ‘If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll say it was all me. That ought to appease this guy’s mates.’

Sal shook her head. ‘H-he’ll tell them. Roo. If I try anything.’

‘Kill him, then,’ Maggie said. ‘Or don’t. Up to you.’

She turned and walked for the door. The police would be here soon and the moment anyone figured out she had been here, the hunt would start again. And she had to be ahead of it. Again.

She glanced back. The biker was shaking with sobs now. Sal was staring at the gun. She looked at Maggie again. There was a questioning look on her face.

Maggie shrugged, then opened the door and walked out into the bracing night air. Distant sirens were rising. She moved fast into the dark.