

Roadside Assist

By Gabriel Bergmoser

They were halfway back to the house along the tree-lined road when the stationary car passed them out the window. It was gone in seconds but Maggie told Jack to stop.

The older man didn't. 'We already have,' he told her. 'Which I already told you was a downright terrible idea. Anyone catches a glimpse of you and—'

'I know.' Maggie wasn't especially interested in another of Jack's imaginative euphemisms for a violent death. 'But still, stop.'

With an exaggerated sigh, Jack did. 'Well?'

Maggie glanced in the rear-view. 'The car back there.'

'Was there a car?'

'The tyres weren't flat.'

'Hold the goddamn press.'

'It was at an angle,' Maggie said. 'Partly in a ditch. No smoke coming from the front. Woman leaning against it, man standing off the road, watching us pass. Not fixing it. Waiting.'

Jack considered this. 'Could be nothing.'

'Could be something.'

'Could be none of our business.'

'Could be somebody's business who didn't want it to be their business.'

'Like who?'

Maggie shrugged.

'Do I need to remind you to look in the mirror?'

 Jack asked.

Maggie had been trying to avoid that for the last couple of weeks. The three gashes – one above her left eye, two below, knotted and curving and terrible – weren't healed yet and even had they been, they made her way too conspicuous. Especially for someone avoiding police attention.

'I guess you'll have to talk to them,' Maggie said.

'And say what?'

 Jack asked. 'That the wanted fugitive in my car was feeling nosy and so now I'm knocking that ex off my cop descriptor and prying into something that has nothing to do with me?'

'Or you can say you're just being neighbourly.'

'Even I'm not that good a liar.'

'Worst case scenario, you help with a flat battery.'

‘If you thought that was the worst-case scenario, you wouldn’t be asking me to reverse.’

‘Most likely case scenario, then.’

Jack drummed the steering wheel. Glanced in the mirror. Then pulled the car in a U-turn.

The man and woman standing by their station wagon hadn’t changed position. Getting closer Maggie now saw that they were middle aged, the woman with short-cropped hair and a cigarette, the man weathered and saggy in stained overalls. He straightened up as they approached. Wiped sweat from his brow. It was early winter and a cold, overcast day. Here in the valley, cold bit harder. Something to do with the trees and lack of people.

Jack stopped the car across the road. A withering look at Maggie, then he stepped out.

‘All good here?’ he called, without crossing.

Neither the woman nor the man replied. The woman took a drag of her smoke. Her eyes moved to Maggie. She resisted the urge to shrink down in her seat. People only thought you had something to hide if you *tried* to hide.

Jack looked back at Maggie. ‘Reckon they’re all good.’

Maggie said nothing. Tried to think. Tried to work out what it was that felt so completely wrong here.

She got out of the car.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Jack growled, as Maggie walked around to join him.

The woman was still watching her. The man hadn’t moved. Even from here Maggie could see the gleam of sweat was back.

‘Well, here we are,’ Jack said. ‘Facing off across the road. Pistols at dawn or showtunes at noon? Which is it?’

The woman was still watching her.

Maggie crossed the road. Headed towards the man.

‘Stop.’ The woman’s voice was a rasp.

Maggie did. Up close, she saw the man’s expression. He was trying to hide it and his craggy face was doing a lot of the job for him, but he was scared. She looked at his feet. Saw the shovel.

The wind picked up. A sprinkle of light rain. Maggie chanced a look back at Jack, who hadn’t moved. He was wearing his usual oversized jacket. Often it hid a gun. Today, she wasn’t sure.

She looked back to the man. ‘Need a hand?’

He shook his head.

A click nearby as the woman lit another smoke. ‘Off you go,’ she said. ‘We’re fine here.’

Maggie's eyes move from her to the windscreen of the car. There was a dark stain on the back of the passenger seat.

Maggie heard the crunch of gravel and felt the barest rush of air. She dropped to her knees as the shovel swung over her head. She grabbed the man's leg and pulled. He fell backwards. The woman was pulling at the driver's side door of the car. Maggie clambered on top of the wheezing man, wresting the shovel from his loose grip. She stood and turned as the car's engine came to life. Maggie swung the shovel into the windscreen. It shattered and then Jack was there, gun levelled at the woman through the car window. She had barely flinched as glass fell around her. She looked at Maggie. There was no fear in that face.

'Alright,' Jack said. 'Enough of this. Step out of the car, love.'

On the ground, the man was wheezing something.

'Out,' Jack said.

The woman's eyes didn't leave Maggie.

'*Please,*' the man said.

The car roared as the woman accelerated. Maggie dove out of the way, hitting asphalt. Jack swore as the car tore over the man with a terrible pair of wet thumps. It veered on to the road. Jack swung the gun up and fired twice. The car served violently and hit the ditch.

The man's body was twisted and still. Maggie crawled over to him. Staring eyes and a trickle of blood from his mouth. She stood, picking up the shovel as she did. A look at Jack. He nodded and kept the gun raised as they approached the crashed car.

Jack's bullet had taken the woman in the back of the head. She was face first over the blood drenched steering wheel. Smoke was filling the air around the car. Jack pulled on a pair of leather gloves and opened one of the back doors as Maggie peered through the rear window.

'Jack,' she said.

He joined her. Saw what she did. A single old teddy bear, lying behind the back seats. Flecked with dried blood.

Grim faced, Jack beckoned. Maggie followed. Sitting on the back seat, neatly folded, were a pair of child's pyjamas.

Maggie looked back toward the body of the man. *Please*. Something inside her, something deep and searing and angry, flared and was gone.

'Let's go,' she said.

He went to speak. Maggie met his eyes and he stopped. It was then that he heard the sirens. He nodded. 'Take the shovel.'

She threw it in the back. Jack stared the engine. The sirens were closer now, coming from behind. They pulled away, past the wreckage and up the road. Jack didn't speed but he pressed the accelerator, letting the car pick up until it came close to the edge of the limit. Not enough to look suspicious. Enough to get them away.

Maggie closed her eyes. Her wounds throbbed. The heat had gone, in its place leaving a deep and horrible queasy feeling.

Jack squeezed her shoulder. Maggie exhaled.

'It's alright girl,' he said.

'No it's not.'

'No,' he admitted. 'But you did something.'

'Not enough.'

'But something.'

She glanced sideways at Jack. His eyes were on the road. His knuckles on the wheel were white.

She reached out and squeezed his shoulder back. He said nothing. But his grip loosened a little.