

# Simmering Season

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## (EXCERPT)

‘That her?’ Noah asked, scuffing over to Maggie on the pub veranda and swinging an arm over her shoulder with ease. In the last six months her son had shot up to—in the old measure—just on six feet tall, dwarfing Maggie’s very average five-foot-eight.

‘Sure is her, bud.’

The youthful woman behind the wheel of the canary-yellow convertible parked parallel to the kerb—taking up three nose-to-kerb spaces—seemed much younger without the harsh hairdo, the hat, and the ever-present glass of champagne. After a glance in the rear-view mirror and a quick fluffing of her hair, Fiona slid dark sunglasses onto the top of her head to hold back the fiery mane of curls.

‘Here I am,’ she called, smiling and waving.

*Indeed!* But where was the surly, spoilt brat from the funeral? This girl looked all private school, charm and compliance—not counting the parallel park. What had made the difference? Maggie doubted a stern talking to from Phillip would have made any impression on the girl, much less found its way through the veneer of mineral makeup powder and London-look mascara so thick the girl’s gluggy lashes were visible from ten paces. With the same natural Nicole Kidman curls Amber had hated, and the next-to-nothing waistline, Fiona Blair looked remarkably like the woman she’d openly criticised for ... *What were the words Fiona had blurted the day of the funeral? Oh, yes—‘ruining her life’!*

The girl hardly looked ruined in her flowing sensation of a shirt and with the legs of a praying mantis poured into designer jeans; not that Maggie knew too much about designer anything. She knew enough to know the things she couldn’t afford and anything starting with the word designer was right up there on the top of her list. Thankfully, most people around here weren’t into designer anything. In contrast to the comfy country curves of most Calingarry Crossing locals—one of whom Maggie now considered herself to be—there was very little of Fiona.

‘Nice wheels,’ Noah said to Maggie.

‘And hardly practical for the country,’ she replied aloud, while shaking her head at Fiona’s self-righteousness. It was obviously appropriate to despise your dead mother and still take ownership of her car. ‘Remember what I said, Noah. She’s a city girl and she’s just—’

‘No wuckin’ furries, Mum.’ Noah nudged his mother’s arm playfully.

Maggie nudged him back with a warning squint. ‘Please, Noah, you know I hate those words.’ Her arm twitched, itching to smooth the over-gelled hair; the latest addition to her son’s gradual transformation from uncool, clean-cut kid, to something from a Twilight movie.

Generation Y. *Why indeed?* Why so much black, and why was it when kids wanted to fit in they did everything they could to make themselves different? How he even tolerated wearing black in these temperatures bemused and bothered Maggie, until she recalled the number of times she’d let vanity keep her warm when she was young and night-clubbing in the middle of a Sydney winter, wearing very little of everything in order to achieve maximum impact.

‘What about helping Fiona with her suitcase?’

‘Suitcase-*es*,’ Noah grumbled. ‘How long’s she plan to stay?’

‘Go. Now,’ Maggie growled, distracted by Fiona applying a dab of lip-gloss, and the notion that perhaps all the girl’s fat had gone looking for her lips—and found them.

Noah leapt the two steps, hitched the waistline of his jeans up, and swaggered towards the Saab convertible. How long *was* she planning to stay? The invitation, which Maggie had been kicking herself over, was not a two-suitcase arrangement. Calingarry Crossing was sweltering, with higher than average temperatures for this time of year. One bag would have been ample for a short stay: a few light tops, shorts, sandals. Although Maggie had initially offered for Fiona to lodge at the pub, she’d thought the girl might have stayed with her grandmother, rather than a stranger. After all, Fiona was five stars and Maggie’s pub might be awarded one, maybe two. Then again, Fiona’s grandmother—the one Fiona hadn’t known about until recently—was as much a stranger to her as Maggie was.

*You’ve got a big mouth, Maggie!*

She groaned at her son’s body language: the puffing up of a budding chest and the flick of his head that momentarily shifted the one gelled clump of fringe from his eyes. From memory her son’s eyes were a cerulean colour, like his father’s, only it felt like she hadn’t seen them for so long—his or Brian’s.

Ethne came from inside and sidled up to her boss. The brash British barmaid was a pseudo sister, aunty, mother and a friend, with her fleshy, flabby proportions comforting whenever Maggie needed a hug.

‘Awright there, love?’ she asked Maggie. ‘Bit of peacockin’ going on, by the looks. Makes you realise how grown up he’s gettin’. Not sure which one’s puffin’ up more, though. Sure is a pretty Miss Priss, and a tempting one.’

‘Oh please, do not let my mind go there. Besides, she’s too old for Noah.’

‘Hmm, yes, older woman and younger man. Never happens.’ Ethne nudged Maggie’s shoulder.

‘He’s hardly a man.’

‘Look again, love,’ the barmaid said, trying to tame the grey fairy-floss hair.

Maggie knew how fast Noah was growing up without looking. The signs were everywhere. ‘Don’t suppose it’s legal to chain your son up to his bed at night, is it?’

Ethne’s trill when she laughed always sounded at odds with the woman’s very generous proportions. In the purple promotional T-shirt, she was a bulging signboard for bourbon whiskey, while on the bottom she wore a flowing peasant skirt in shades of green.

‘It is the first day of October,’ she added, looking up at Maggie over her half-glasses.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘Summer storm season officially starts today,’ Ethne announced.

Maggie knew that. Tracking weather patterns was part and parcel of a life in the country where one intense event could mean the difference between bumper crops or no crops at all. They’d had so much rain already this year. One extreme, then the other. Politicians were gleefully announcing, ‘No more drought’ and ‘The drought is over’. The reality was though, now they’d finished lamenting the dry, locals would soon curse a new menace. Too much blasted rain. If the early heat first thing in the morning and increasing grey clouds each afternoon hadn’t been enough to let Maggie know storm season was close, the half-dozen men in orange in the beer garden yesterday had reminded her. The week before, there’d been a briefing for the local State Emergency Service volunteers and Ethne had needed time off work to attend. What a remarkable sight. Ethne in the bright orange SES overalls, which she wore with pride and always kept handy so she’d be ready when needed.

‘Tell me, Ethne, what’s the official start of storm season got to do with anything? Looks like a perfectly beautiful day to me.’

‘Some storms are sneaky bastards,’ she said. ‘The SES suggests people batten down and prepare in advance of an impending catastrophe and, if you ask me, it’s looking like we might see our first-ever inland cyclone—called Fiona.’

Maggie chuckled. ‘Ha! Ha!’

‘Thinkin’ I might look up the manual to see what the SES suggests you do with your son when a Category Five storm like that one hits town.’

‘Even funnier. Thanks. You’re a lot of help, Ethne.’

‘I try. Come on, boss. Time to welcome your guest.’

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Dinner that night was the quietest on record: Maggie angry at herself for having created this situation, Fiona apparently angry at the peas for refusing to stay on her fork, and Noah? He seemed less angry at the world and different from the sullen, silent son he'd been morphing into over the last year or so.

‘All settled in, Fiona?’ Maggie enquired.

‘Yes. Thanks.’ She added the word as an afterthought, or perhaps because her attention was on something more interesting on her mobile phone.

At the last minute, when showing Fiona to her accommodation earlier, Maggie had changed her mind about the spare room in the residence, instead preparing a single room in the pub. Calingarry Crossing’s hotel was much like every other two-storey country pub: a corner position on the main street, decorative balustrades, weathered boards on the outside, high ceilings and fancy cornices inside, and small but comfortable upstairs guest rooms. Recently spring-cleaned, Maggie had added a small vase with lavender stems she’d picked from the bush growing with little attention at the back of the hotel. As Maggie had left Fiona to settle in, the vase of lavender was the first thing pushed aside to make way for the Gucci carryall.

Maggie could only pray that after familiarising herself with the town in the next day or two, Fiona would feel comfortable enough to move in with her grandmother. Until then, Maggie would have to be patient. Tonight’s meal was providing practice enough.

‘How was school today?’ she asked her son, hoping for more than a one-syllable response.

‘Same.’

‘Did you remember to feed the dogs tonight?’

‘I’ll do it after *X Factor*.’

‘Dog’s first, Noah.’ Maggie was learning to dislike reality TV shows, particularly those that fed false hope to people seeking stardom. What was it her father always said? ‘A person can’t be a star. The only stars are God’s creation and they are firmly set in the sky.’ In Maggie’s experience, reality never lived up to the dream. At the same time, she didn’t want to quash her son’s enthusiasm for his music and while he had talent, she wanted him to see there was more he could do with that talent than sing on a stage. ‘And homework before *X Factor*, buddy,’ she added.

‘Geez, Mum, give me a break.’ Noah glared, first at Maggie, and then in Fiona’s direction, his cheeks reddening. What had once been an adorable blush on her baby boy was suddenly an agonising flush of embarrassment.

Maggie took a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry, Noah, but you do have homework, don’t you?’

‘I’ve done most of it.’

‘Well, the rest shouldn’t take too long then.’

With a groan, Noah picked up his plate and left Maggie alone with Fiona, who had one hand still poking peas around the plate with her fork while the other hand poked her phone. Even from her seat on the opposite side of the table, Maggie detected the scent of a woman bathed in lotions and potions meant to allure as much as beautify. She’d noticed the trifecta of sickly sweet fragrance, hair product and moisturiser waft by as Fiona swept past her on the way into the hotel earlier. Maggie examined the girl more closely while she had the chance. Unlike Amber’s classic sophistication, Fiona’s beauty was in her bohemian look, exaggerated by big gypsy earrings, eyeliner that turned up at the outer corners of big, blue get-whatever-you-want eyes, and a tiny nose stud—diamond, naturally—in the crease of one nostril. Then there was the tattoo of a feather Maggie had spotted on the side of her neck; easy to see tonight with her locks pinned on top of her head with what looked like two small gem-encrusted chopsticks. They probably weren’t chopsticks, any more than they were fake gemstones, Maggie surmised. She was, after all, Amber Bailey-Blair’s daughter.

‘Fiona?’ Maggie tried again. ‘Did you want to talk about anything?’

‘I have a call to make,’ she said, pushing the plate with her half-eaten meal into the centre of the table for the invisible servant to carry to the kitchen and wash up. ‘I’ll be in my room.’

Open-mouthed, Maggie watched the girl leave before letting her own knife and fork drop heavily, the clunk of metal on ceramic covering her huff. *That went well, Maggie!*

‘Here ya go, love.’

A glass of red wine came from behind and slid under Maggie’s nose. ‘Thanks, Ethne, but I shouldn’t.’

‘Yes, you should. Medicinal,’ the woman said. ‘Remember, I’m trained in emergency situations and this is an emergency. No different to giving brandy to someone unconscious in the snow.’

Maggie twisted to stare up at the woman. ‘Our rural emergency service training teaches you what to do with unconscious people in the snow?’

‘Of course not. This one’s my personal remedy. Figured you’ll be unconscious soon enough if you keep hittin’ your head on that brick wall. Wine’s less traumatic on the brain.’

‘You heard her, huh?’

‘Heard what? The sounds of shitty-livered silence?’ Ethne waved her cleaning cloth in the air before focusing on a red-wine stain on the adjacent table. ‘You know it can take a few days for the new chick to settle in.’

‘Hmm, yes, but she’s not my chick. Therefore, not my problem.’

‘I hope, for your sake, Maggie-girl, she’s not going to be a problem.’

That night, the dining room saw only a few locals, plus an older couple who were passing through on their way to relatives at a station further west. After warning them about the state of the pot-holed private road and the number of gates they’d have to access to reach the homestead, Maggie offered them a discount on a room if they wanted to wait until morning. They grabbed at the idea and promptly ordered a bottle of sparkling wine. The couple told Maggie they were touring the state. ‘Having ourselves an adventure to spend the kids’ inheritance,’ the man had explained with a chuckle. Then the pair kissed and giggled like newlyweds, while Maggie watched from the bar, envy dragging her down.

‘So mother bird,’ Ethne said as she sidled up to Maggie. ‘You want me to stay on ’til close tonight?’

Maggie signed. ‘Would you mind? I’m in no mood to be chatty and no one wants a grumpy barmaid.’

‘Best get some sleep then. You’ve got that brekkie meeting about the centenary fair day tomorrow. More brick walls to hit your head against there too, I reckon.’

‘I’d prefer sticking my head in the sand until it’s all over. Why, oh why did I volunteer, Ethne?’

‘As I recall, you were volunteered, and sticking your head in the sand around these parts will only get it bit by bull ants.’

‘Like I said ...’ Maggie raised an eyebrow in droll self-mockery. ‘Sounds preferable to me.’

Ethne sniggered. ‘Awright, you go on, love. Old Barney’s holdin’ up the bar ’til close. He can make himself useful and help me lock up.’

‘Old Barnacle Bill?’ Maggie undid her apron and folded it while whispering out of the corner of her mouth. ‘He’ll help you do more than that if you let him.’

Ethne chirruped. ‘Yeah, like that’s going to happen at my age.’

Or mine, Maggie mused as she headed off to an empty bed with hopes of something that resembled sleep.

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