

## Where the River Ends - Extract ...

Chapter 12, pages 133–145

Maggie Dumas paused at her desk and considered the view from the window. Past the orchard and gardens she could glimpse the muddied remains of the salt claypans and the immediate low scrubby mulga, leaves silver in the early morning light. On the unseen endless plains beyond, tiny seeds, moistened by the rain, would already be sending tiny shoots towards the sun. In a few weeks the land would be covered with silver-tipped barley grass and clumps of wild indigo.

As Maggie watched, a flock of galahs, their pink and grey feathers a whirl of muted colour, rose from the trees near the creek and shrieked away towards the east. Thoughtfully she tapped the tip of her pen against her closed lips. It had been weeks since she had been able to ride. The floods had seen to that. Frustrated, she had been confined to the house and immediate yards, watching as the water lapped at the perimeter of her world. It had hemmed her, closed her in. Now she was impatient to inspect the property, to see what damage had been done.

Most of the sheep had gone. The stockmen had managed to save only a few hundred and they were penned at the rear of the shearing shed. If she listened carefully she could hear their muffled bleating. Thankfully Martin was on his way with more, though she knew that it would take several years of careful breeding to re-establish the size of their flock.

A waft of breeze brought with it the sour stench of drying mud. Maggie wrinkled her nose in distaste. An odd anger had been burning up within her all morning, churning at her stomach. Resentment, outrage at the path her life had taken. All the hard work of the past year, hours spent in the paddocks with the sheep, the cold nights watching as the ewes lambed, now amounted to nothing.

And Gerald? she thought with cold fury.

She had gone through the whole gamut of emotions following his death. Confusion, disbelief, grief and then, finally, rage. The shock was only eclipsed by the eventual discovery that he had left her almost penniless. In some obscure way she had sensed his gambling, his free and easy way with cash. But the extent of his obligations? It seemed he owed money to every storekeeper in Bourke. For the last twelve months she and Martin had scrimped and saved until finally all outstanding monies had been paid. No one could accuse Maggie Dumas of welshing on a debt.

As she thought of Gerald, all the hatred came welling up again. The lies, the pretences: he had certainly fooled her, but only on some accounts. She had married him for love. He, as it turned out, had married her for the land. Land which, when it finally came into his possession, he had sought to destroy.

With Gerald's death, Wirra Downs had at last come under her command, if only for a short time. Martin would have full control in three years, when he turned twenty-five. Or earlier, the will stipulated, in the event of Martin's marriage. Maggie relaxed as she considered that option. Martin was as dedicated to the land as she was. There was no time in his life for romance. He scarcely went into Bourke and seemed to avoid the occasional balls and other social happenings in the district. Wirra, that was the most important thing to him.

She had already cast her eyes over the local station-owners' daughters, several good hardworking country girls, one of whom would make a suitable wife for Martin eventually. Meanwhile she had three years to prove her own worth before handing over control of the land she had waited so long for.

Gerald? she wondered bitterly, her thoughts returning to her dead husband. Would she ever be free of the pain?...

There was a knock at the door. 'Come in,' Maggie said wearily. There were always interruptions to her day.

A dark face appeared around the doorway. It was Dinnie, the Aboriginal housekeeper. 'Down to d'last bag of flour,' she said abruptly. 'No flour, no bread. Can't make miracles, Missus.'

'I'm fully aware of the situation, Dinnie, and I don't need you to remind me,' Maggie snapped.

'And Narairree broke two more plates t'is mornin'. She says she's awful sorry but they jest slipped outta her hands.'

'Dinnie,' said Maggie, trying to be calm. 'I've told you before not to let Narairree handle the china. She's too young.'

Dinnie's daughter was six now, bright, intelligent and growing fast, but decidedly clumsy where Maggie's best Doulton and Co. dinner service was concerned.

'Yes, Missus,' replied Dinnie, her eyes flashing annoyance as she stomped from the room. 'But I can't do everyt'ing in the house and keep watch on her. Not enough hours in t'day.'

Not enough hours! How well Maggie knew. Trying to manage the property, to keep the household functioning smoothly, she seemed constantly to be running out of time. And Dinnie? with her insolent ways. Maggie would have liked to be rid of her. Would have too, if not for Gerald's will stating that Dinnie and her daughter were to remain at Wirra Downs as long as they wished. Gerald again, tying her hands, stitching her life into neat little sections, making her powerless over her own existence. Forcing her daily to face...

Maggie sighed as she pushed the ledgers to one side. It was imperative that Guy should return soon. Though she had eked them out carefully, the supplies were low. After she had dispensed the usual weekly rations the previous Sunday, there was probably only enough to last another week, two at the most. In a few days the

ground would be almost dry enough to send the buggy into Bourke. Maggie frowned at the idea. Sheer extravagance, she thought. Prices would be exorbitant in the town after the flood. No, she resolved firmly. She would wait for Guy and only the threat of total starvation would change her mind.

A shrill whistle broke her line of thought. For a moment she sat, not registering the sound. From the hallway came the sound of running steps. Short measured strides. Purposeful. It would be Davie, her small grandson, Maggie knew.

The study door flew open and he burst into the room in a whirl of excitement. 'Papa here! Papa here!' he announced excitedly in his little piping voice.

Behind him stood Louisa, her face lit by a shy smile. 'It's Guy,' she said. 'He's home at last.'

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The first homestead at Wirra Downs had been compact and small, with a bedroom and dining room and a lean-to kitchen at the rear. Maggie had been just a child, and she had only vague memories of the house, which had been destroyed by a flood several years later. Her father had imprudently built near the riverbank, in a location he admitted later he had chosen more for its picturesque qualities than its durability.

Built of locally milled timber, the new homestead sat on a high knob of red soil between the river and the surrounding salt claypans. It was large and spacious and edged by wide verandahs which somehow seemed to catch the summer breeze as it idled upwards from the creek. The rear of the house, where the land sloped away, was supported by long poles. Underneath, on sturdy trellises, grape vines, passionfruit and wisteria grew in profusion, blocking the light and creating a dark cavernous underbelly. The occasional snake could often be found there in the cool darkness where the earth always smelt moist. Nearby, twelve metal rain-water tanks

on high stands, the life-blood of the property, were covered with trailing bougainvilleas.

The house and surrounding yards were shaded by a dozen large peppercorn trees and several date palms. Beyond lay the huge fenced station garden where Horrie Ling, the Chinese gardener, presided with firm regimentation over neat rows of vegetables, trailing vines of pumpkin and an assortment of melons, as well as a selection of fruit trees. Floral beds containing an assortment of candytuft, mignonette, larkspur, hollyhock provided fresh flowers.

Behind the garden lay the station store, stables and numerous outbuildings for housing wagons, feed and the numerous farm implements that were necessary for the running of the property. Maggie, a stickler for cleanliness, insisted that the buildings were kept immaculately whitewashed and the horse yards and stables were raked or swept daily. Further back, the workers' huts and shearing shed were surrounded by old pepper trees and an assortment of straggly coolibahs.

Maggie noticed none of these as she hurried across the wide sweeping lawn. Ahead lay the river, still muddied and brown, and the *Curlew* sitting snugly as the water eddied around her bow. Guy sprinted lithely down the gangplank onto the small wharf. Quickly, past the boathouse and dressing shed, he came towards them. Louisa and Davie, running ahead of her, were caught in his embrace.

Laughing, Maggie came to a halt and Guy pulled her into their circle and gave her a quick hug. 'Welcome home, son,' she said. 'Louisa and I have been praying for your safe return.'

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Roxy stood on the wharf and watched as Guy greeted his family. Louisa and Davie she recognised immediately from the photograph in the cabin. The older stocky woman with grey hair, she supposed, must be Maggie Dumas.

This was not how she had imagined her arrival. Where was Martin? Somehow she had thought he would be there, had imagined him running frantically to meet her, as Louisa had run to Guy. Instead she stood on the wharf feeling like an intruder on their domestic scene, not part of them at all.

Suddenly Guy pulled away and turned towards her, holding out his hand. 'Mother, Louisa,' he began, 'I'd like you to meet Roxy.'

All eyes turned in her direction and she felt herself flush under their gaze. For a moment no one moved. Slowly, one step at a time, she walked towards them across the lush greenness of the grass, aware of their stares.

'Roxy,' added Guy as she came to a tentative halt in front of the little group, 'is Martin's new wife.'

'Wife?' Maggie's head shot sideways. 'Did you say wife?'

Roxy's stomach lurched. 'Isn't he here? I thought he would be.'

Maggie appeared to ignore her. 'Martin's married?' she queried, her voice shrill.

Roxy glanced wildly around. 'I'll be home before you, he said. I was expecting...'  
Her hopes were crumbling in front of her, sliding away.

Maggie spun sideways and clutched Guy's arm. 'How could this be? He didn't let me know. No one told me.'

Louisa stepped calmly forward and put her arms around Roxy. 'There's been no news of Martin. We don't know where he is. Oh you poor darling. What a welcome. It's just that we didn't know, did we, mother?' Louisa glanced meaningfully at Maggie and nodded her head.

Roxy thought that Maggie's face had turned a paler shade. For a moment no one spoke. Finally Maggie seemed to regain control. She took her hand from Guy's arm and pulled herself upright. Her mouth twisted in some semblance of a smile though her eyes remained frozen, holding no sign of warmth.

'I'm sorry, please forgive my rudeness. It's been rather a shock, that's all. I'm Maggie Dumas, Martin's mother. Welcome to Wirra Downs,' she intoned stiffly.

'Well, anyone for a cup of tea?' asked Louisa brightly as Guy hoisted Davie onto his shoulders.

'Yes, you'd better come up to the house,' added Maggie in a tone that suggested she would rather Roxy didn't.

Afternoon tea was an awkward affair. Louisa and Guy chatted happily while Davie ran around excitedly with a new toy his father had brought. Maggie sat, silently sipping her tea, her mouth compressed into a tight line.

Guy's men brought Roxy's belongings from the steamer and set them on the verandah. Maggie regarded them with a frown and walked back inside. 'It's definite then,' Roxy overheard her say to Guy. 'She means to stay?'

Maggie came back out onto the verandah. 'My housekeeper is clearing my belongings from the master bedroom suite. It will only take a short while.'

'I... I'm sorry,' stammered Roxy. 'I don't understand.'

'The rooms that my husband and I shared. They are quite large and roomy. I'm sure you will be comfortable there.'

Roxy was horrified at the thought of Maggie giving up her own rooms. 'Please,' she said faintly, 'that won't be necessary. And Martin would not expect it. Another room will be fine.'

'No.' Maggie seemed to be making a point of her relinquishment. 'I insist. Those rooms are for the head of the household. And now that Martin has married, I must make way for a new mistress of Wirra Downs.'

Roxy was too surprised to argue. And Maggie Dumas, she realised, was obviously used to getting her own way. Quietly she acquiesced and watched as her trunks and cases, under Maggie's direction, disappeared along the wide hallway.

Louisa, as though sensing her distress, linked her arm through Roxy's and drew her down the front steps and across the lawn. They came at last to a halt and Louisa wrapped her arms around Roxy, hugging her close. 'I'm so pleased for you and Martin,' she said as she pulled away and held Roxy at arm's length. 'And I know we'll be like sisters. I've never had a sister, have you?'

Roxy shook her head, unable to speak.

'Take no notice of Maggie,' Louisa continued. 'She's just upset. It was wrong of Martin not to warn her and your arrival certainly surprised us all. She and Martin are very close. Just accept Maggie for what she is and in time she'll come round.'

A sudden wave of homesickness washed over Roxy as she thought of her own parents. They would have welcomed her with open arms, not with the barely concealed hostility that had been shown to her by Martin's mother.

'I don't care what you say,' replied Roxy. 'I think she's a horrid old toad.'

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Maggie excused herself from the table soon after supper was finished and made her way to the new bedroom Dinnie had moved her possessions to, hours earlier. Situated at the opposite end of the house, the room had previously been a guest bedroom, seldom used, though quite spacious, with a separate dressing room and walk-in wardrobe. Perhaps not quite as large as the rooms she had shared with Gerald, Maggie noted, but satisfactory for one.

A faint musty smell permeated the air, the odour of disuse. Quickly Maggie walked across the room, flinging open the double glass doors that opened onto the verandah, allowing fresh air to flow into the room. She stood looking down towards the river. Lights from the *Curlew* twinkled across the water and she could hear the faint sounds of an accordion, men's laughter. Inside, the house was quiet.

Pulling the screen door closed, to keep out the inevitable moths and other nocturnal insects, Maggie leant back against the doorway and gazed around the room with exasperation. Dinnie had certainly taken no pains to tidy her belongings. Clothes were slung across chairs, the end of the bed. Her precious silver-backed combs and brushes, pots of creams and essences, jewellery, all scattered in disarray across the dressing table alongside a bone-handled manicure set, trinket tray, cut-glass scent bottles, a collar-stud box of Gerald's.

The box! Slowly she walked to the dressing table and picked it up. After Gerald's death she had swept through the house in an almost-frantic cleaning session, eliminating all traces of him from her home, her life. Thoughtfully holding it as though testing its weight, she was surprised that its presence had eluded her for over twelve months. Carelessly she let it drop from her fingers onto the polished boards, relishing the sound of breaking metal as the lid broke away, watching as the studs spilled like bright prisms.

Maggie's gaze settled on a selection of hat boxes, a camphorwood chest, an odd assortment of shoes and a cabin trunk laying haphazardly in a corner. What a mess!

Wearily she rubbed her hand across her face. Tomorrow was another day. She would attend to it then.

Automatically she went through her usual bed-time rituals until at last, washed and suitably night-gowned, she sat on the strange bed that was now her own. The events of the day buzzed annoyingly though her mind. Martin married! She still could not comprehend the fact. It seemed nonsensical that he could disappear from her life for such a short span of time and come back with a bride. Worse still, he had never bothered to let her know! At least she could have been prepared, she thought wryly.

Maggie took the photograph from the bedside table and studied it. *Martin & Roxy Dumas*: the words had been inscribed on the back. Roxy had given it to her earlier, cold hard evidence of her son's marriage. She had glanced at it briefly before putting it away, not wanting to appear too interested at the time. Now, in the solitude of her room, she carefully scrutinised the sepia images.

She had known that Martin would marry eventually. He was tall and handsome, intelligent too, with a drive to succeed that matched her own. And while Wirra Downs was not yet one of the most productive properties in the area, it was certainly one of the largest.

Yes, she considered reflectively. Martin Dumas was a good catch for any woman. But an actress? Guy had told her a little of Roxy's past before dinner, over a small sherry in the study. A good solid country girl, that was the sort of bride Martin should have taken. Someone born to the land. Someone who would understand its faithless ways. What would an actress know about shearing sheep or running a property?

Maggie put the photograph, which was mounted on thick board, back on the dressing table and picked up a small bone-handled pocket knife lying nearby. Purposefully she ran the knife down the centre of the photograph. It made scarcely a mark.

'An actress! Ha!' she muttered to herself. A little more pressure on the knife and she watched with pleasure as it sliced deeper into the bromide. 'City girl. Not used to the bush. Give her a few months and she'll be running back.'

Her hand was working harder now, slashing with the knife in quick deliberate strokes. She had to repeat the process several times until the images of Martin and Roxy were separated.

Finally, in one hand she held the image of her son; in the other, his wife. Slowly she opened the top drawer of the dressing table and reverently laid the section containing Martin's likeness face upwards. The other half she returned to the top of the dresser. Carefully, calculatingly, she picked up the knife again. Tears ran down her face, blurring her vision. Sobs racked her body. She brought the knife down, slashing blindly, carving small cross-hatchings across Roxy's face, her body, Madame Reymonde's wonderful wedding gown. On and on she went until the photograph was reduced to a pulpy mass.

Through her tears, Maggie didn't notice the deep gouges that her knife had left in the top of the valuable antique. Jagged, like raw wounds.

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