

Thorn Birds 5

Between 1921 and 1928

Meggie's eldest brother, Frank, left home after a row in which Paddy told Frank he was some other man's son. Paddy explained to Father Ralph that Frank was born before Paddy and Fee, his wife, met. Meggie's youngest brother, Hal, died, and Fee then had twin boys, James and Patrick (Jims and Patsy). Meggie left school, as she had to help her mother at home.

Mary Carson, planning a big party for her seventy-second birthday, and jealous of Father Ralph's relationship with Meggie, wrote a new Will.

Episode 5

Everybody had new clothes for the party. Meggie's dress was long and pinkish grey. Her red curly hair was cut short. Paddy looked at her and realised that she wasn't a little girl any more. In a month, she would be seventeen. It was a splendid party. Mary Carson's neighbours had come from many miles away; they knew how rich she was, and expected there would be wonderful food and wine.

Father Ralph didn't speak to Meggie during dinner or afterwards. He couldn't explain to her that everyone in the room was watching him. Most were watching her, too; she was the most beautiful woman there. He felt proud of her, but he also felt sorry that she was growing up.

At three o'clock in the morning Mary Carson stood up. 'I'm going to bed now,' she told her guests. 'But please don't stop dancing. Father Ralph, will you help me to go upstairs, please?'

But they didn't go upstairs. She unlocked a downstairs room and they went inside.

'It was a good party, Mary,' he said.

'My last. I'm tired of living and I want to stop.'

He felt tired, too. He had no real friends in Gillanbone. He was now thirty-five years old, and he wasn't going anywhere. He wouldn't become a powerful man in the Church now.

'I've often wanted to be younger, Ralph,' she said. 'If I were younger we'd be more than friends, you and I. I hate my life – and I think I'd like to destroy yours.' He laughed, feeling uncomfortable. 'Oh, my dear Mary! I know that.'

'But do you know why? It's because I love you, and you don't love me. I want you, and I can't have you because I'm too old. But I'm not too old to have feelings.'

She stared at him for a long time, with a hard look in her eyes. Suddenly, he felt afraid of her.

'Ralph, there's an envelope in my desk. Will you bring it to me, please?'

He gave her the thick white envelope.

'It's yours,' she said, and laughed. 'I know exactly what you'll do when you open it. It'll change your life. I've lost you to Meggie, but she'll never have you.'

'Why do you hate Meggie?'

'Because you love her. But I don't want to talk about Meggie. I'll never see you again, and I don't want to waste time. Now promise that you won't open that envelope until I'm dead.'

'All right. I promise.'

'Goodbye then. I'll die tonight.'

He didn't believe her, but he didn't want to argue.

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Outside it was still dark, and inside the big house the party continued noisily. Father Ralph walked through the garden, wanting to get far away from Mary Carson and her plans. He felt alone in the world. Then he heard someone crying in the darkness. It was Meggie and he knew he must go to her.

'Darling Meggie, don't cry,' he said, sitting down beside her on the grass. 'How long have you been sitting out here?'

'Since midnight. I told the others I was going to bed.'

'What's the matter, Meggie?'

'You didn't speak to me tonight!'

'I thought that was it. Meggie, you were the prettiest girl at the party. But I'm a priest, and I'm afraid of what people think. I'm still quite young, you know. Do you understand?'

She shook her head.

'People might say that I was interested in you as a man, not as a priest.'

'*Father!*'

'And although you're not a little girl now, Meggie, you haven't learnt to hide the way you feel.'

She stared at him. 'Yes, I see. I didn't realise.'

'Why don't you go home now? Your family mustn't know you've been out all night.'

She got up. 'Yes, I'll go. But I wish people didn't think like that. You're not that kind of man, are you?'

Father Ralph felt hurt. 'No, Meggie. You're right. I'm not that kind of man. Go home!'

Her face was sad. 'Good night, Father.'

He kissed her hand. 'Good night, dearest Meggie.'

He watched her walk away across the grass, then he turned and went back to the big house.

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In the late afternoon the housekeeper, Mrs Smith, woke him up.

'What is it, Mrs Smith?'

'It's Mrs Carson, Father. She's dead.'

Father Ralph got up quickly and hurried to Mary Carson's room. The windows of the room were closed and she had been dead for many hours. The smell was

terrible, and there were flies everywhere.

'Quick, Mrs Smith! Open the windows!' he said as he moved towards the bed, his face white. 'Then go to Mr Cleary. We must bury her as soon as we can.' Father Ralph returned to his room and remembered the letter Mary Carson had given him. Downstairs he could hear the servants running about, getting the house ready. He took out the envelope and opened it. There was a letter and a will inside.

*My dearest Ralph,*

*You will see that there is a will with this letter. There is another will in Harry Gough's office in Gillanbone. This is a later one.*

*Nobody knows about this will except you and me. This is the only copy. I planned it that way – after you have read the will, you will understand my plan.*

*When I first knew you, you came to Drogheda because you wanted my money.*

*Then later, you came because you wanted to be with Meggie. But did you ever realise how much money I had? I'll tell you – I have thirteen million pounds.*

*Read my will, Ralph, and then decide what you are going to do about it. You can give it to Harry Gough or you can burn it. The old will in Harry's office leaves everything I have to Paddy.*

*I know that making this decision will hurt you, Ralph.*

She hadn't signed the letter. Although the priest wanted to burn the letter and the will without reading the will at all, he knew he couldn't do it. He had to know what was in the will.

The will left all her money to the Church, because of Mary Carson's respect for Father Ralph. Father Ralph de Bricassart would be responsible for looking after the money and Drogheda. Drogheda must never be sold, and Padraic Cleary would continue to manage it and live in the big house. Father Ralph de Bricassart would receive ten thousand pounds a year for the rest of his life.

Father Ralph stopped reading and looked out of the window. Thirteen million pounds! With all that money the Church wouldn't be able to ignore him.

Paddy and his family had worked hard for Mary Carson for seven years and never complained. Paddy loved Drogheda; it should be his.

But with thirteen million pounds Father Ralph would at last have a chance to be Cardinal de Bricassart. What about Paddy, Fee, the boys and Meggie? How well Mary Carson had understood them all! Paddy would be angry, but he wouldn't try to change the will.

Father Ralph stood up and went to the door of his room. He knew already what his decision would be.

Paddy was waiting for him downstairs.

'Oh, Father!' he said. 'Isn't it awful! What am I going to do?'

'Have you seen the body? She'll have to be buried early tomorrow morning. I'll have to go back to Gillanbone tonight.'

'Come back as soon as you can, Father!' Paddy said.

In Gillanbone, Father Ralph drove to Harry Gough's house. The lawyer was

sitting down to dinner.

'Mary Carson is dead, Harry.'

'She'll be buried tomorrow? I'll phone people and tell them. And tell Paddy I'll come tomorrow and bring Mary's will with me.'

'I'm afraid there's a problem,' said the priest. 'Mary made another will, you see. She gave me the envelope last night. When I opened it day I found a new will.'

'Mary made a new will? Without me?'

'Yes. Here it is.' The priest took out the will and handed it to the lawyer.

When he had read the new will, Harry looked up at the priest. His eyes showed Father Ralph how he felt.

'Well, Father, congratulations! You've got everything. Is this the only copy of the will?'

'I think so.'

'Then why didn't you destroy it and make sure that Paddy got it all? Why should the Church have everything?'

The priest spoke calmly. 'But that wouldn't be right. Mary could do whatever she liked with her own money.'

End of episode 5

1522 words including intro