

### Thorn Birds 3

This part of the book takes place between 1921 and 1928.

Meggie Cleary and her family have travelled from New Zealand to Australia. Her father, Paddy, has an older sister there, Mary Carson, a rich widow in her late sixties, who has offered him the job of farm manager. Mary has made a friend and confidant of the young priest, Father Ralph de Bricassart. She gives him rich gifts, supposedly for the Church, but really her interest in him is far more personal.

Meggie is now nine.

#### Episode 3

It had been freezing cold at night in the train, but now, as the sun rose in the sky, it became hotter and hotter. They felt uncomfortable in their heavy winter clothing, even with the train windows open. As the sun went down, they arrived at Gillanbone, a small town of wooden and iron buildings on either side of a broad, dusty street.

A shining black car was standing outside the station, and a tall young priest came towards them, the red dust rising round his feet.

'Hello, I'm Father de Bricassart,' he said. 'You must be Mary's brother.' He looked round at the family. Meggie stood behind the boys, looking up at him with her mouth open. He bent down and held her. 'Well! And who are you?' he asked her, smiling.

'Meggie,' she said.

'My favourite name,' he said, and stood up. 'It will be better for you all to stay with me in town tonight. I'll drive you to Drogheda in the morning.'

When his guests had gone to bed, Father Ralph thought about them. Paddy was like Mary Carson, Fee was tired but beautiful, the boys, except for Frank, were like their father, but Meggie was the most beautiful child he had ever seen, with red-gold hair and clear grey eyes which shone like silver.

In the morning he drove the family to Drogheda. 'Are we going to live *here*?' asked Meggie as they approached the great stone house.

'Not exactly,' said the priest quickly. 'Your house is beside the river, behind the big house.'

Mary Carson did not rise from her chair when her brother and his family came in.

'Well, Paddy,' she said to her brother. She did not greet Fee and the children.

'You must be anxious to get home, Father,' she said to the priest.

Father Ralph was carrying Meggie in his arms. 'Not at all,' he said. 'I've promised Meggie to show her her new home.'

'Meggie?' said Mary Carson.

'Yes, this is Meggie,' said Father Ralph, and introduced the whole family. Mary Carson hardly listened, she was staring at the priest with Meggie in his arms.

## A New Life

Gradually the family began to settle down in their new home. The Drogheda lands were enormous, and the nearest small town, Gillanbone, was forty miles away. Paddy and the boys loved the life. They often spent days away from home, riding their horses and sleeping under the stars.

Although it was still early spring, the weather was hot. Then in the middle of January, black rainclouds appeared. Paddy and the boys worked long hours, moving the sheep away from the river on to higher ground. Father Ralph came to help. He rode a horse that Mary Carson had given him, as he went with Frank and the dogs to move the sheep from the banks of the river. Frank looked at the priest and envied him his beautiful horse and his expensive clothes. Of all the boys, Frank was the least happy at Drogheda. He wanted to leave and go to Sydney. On the evening of the second day, when Frank and Father Ralph had managed to move all the sheep, the rains fell. Within minutes the ground was a sea of mud, and as they approached the river they had to get down from their horses. When they got to the river the horses were able to cross but the men couldn't; it was too deep and too fast. At last Paddy came with a rope and pulled them across.

'I'll change my clothes at the big house,' said Father Ralph.

Mary Carson watched him as he dried himself and thought again that he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. 'Do you need women, Ralph?' she asked.

'No!' he said.

Mary sat in her chair and wished that she was a younger woman. When at last the rain stopped and Father Ralph returned to Gillanbone, he had a cheque for one thousand pounds in his pocket. The bishop would be pleased with him.

At the beginning of February Meggie and Stuart started school in Gillanbone. It was different from their school in New Zealand. Here the teachers were kind to them, it was quiet and peaceful, and nobody ever shouted at them. Father Ralph visited them at school often, and they often stayed with him at his house. He had Meggie's room painted pale green, and bought new curtains for it. In the meantime, work at Drogheda continued. Frank had been working away from home for two weeks. When he returned he noticed that his mother was again expecting a baby.

'Oh, God!' he said angrily. 'He has no right! He should have left you alone!'

'Don't talk like that, Frank,' said his mother.

Frank turned and left the room.

## Paddy and Frank argue

When winter came it was time for the Gillanbone Show. Fee wasn't well enough to go, so Paddy drove Mary Carson into town in her car.

Paddy offered to buy Frank a drink in a bar, but Frank refused and went off on his own. He went to the priest's house and found Meggie.

'Come on, Meggie, I'll take you to the show,' he said, holding out his hand.

'Why don't I take you both?' Father Ralph asked.

Meggie, with the two men she loved most, was in heaven. The show was wonderful, with lots of things to see and do. The biggest tent was occupied by Jimmy Sharman's boxing show. Eight boxers were standing outside. 'Come on, boys, who'll take a glove?' a big man shouted. 'Who wants a go? Take a glove, win five pounds!'

'I will!' Frank shouted. 'I will! I will!' He pushed himself to the front of the crowd. Some of the crowd laughed because Frank was so small. Father Ralph wanted to stay and see what happened, but he thought it would be better to take Meggie away. But Meggie began to scream, and people turned to look at her.

'I want to stay with Frank!' she screamed. So the priest got out his money and they followed the crowd into the tent. He found a place near the back, and held on to Meggie tightly.

Frank was the first one to fight. It was unusual for someone from the crowd to beat one of Jimmy Sharman's boxers, but Frank knocked the first boxer down and offered to fight another. The crowd became excited and more and more people crowded into the tent. By the time Frank was finished he had fought four men and he had won twenty pounds.

Meggie rushed out of the tent, feeling sick. She started to cry, and Father Ralph gave her his handkerchief.

Frank came out of the tent, his lip bleeding. He looked happy for the first time since Father Ralph had met him.

\*\*\*

Paddy's day with his sister had not been easy. So when he got back to Father Ralph's house and found Frank, Meggie and Father Ralph resting beside the fire and drinking tea, he felt angry. He looked at Frank's bleeding lip.

'What will your mother think?' he shouted. 'You've been fighting again!'

Father Ralph started to explain, but Frank jumped up and waved the twenty pound notes in Paddy's face.

'I knocked out four boxers. I earned all this money in a few minutes! You might not like it, but everybody else thinks I'm great!'

'Oh, grow up, Frank.'

Frank's face turned white. 'Jimmy Sharman says I've got a great future as a boxer. He wants to train me and he wants to pay me! I can knock down any man, including you. I'll teach you to leave my mother alone!'

Meggie screamed. Father Ralph held her shoulders tightly. Tears ran down her face. 'No, Daddy, no! Oh, Frank, please! Please, please!' she screamed.

But only Father Ralph heard her. Frank and Paddy faced each other angrily.

'I'm your mother's husband,' said Paddy, trying to be calm.

'You're no better than a dog,' shouted Frank.

'And you're no better than your father, whoever he was. Thank God I'm not your father!' shouted Paddy. Then he stopped and his anger left him. 'I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it,' he said.

Father Ralph seized hold of Frank. Meggie sank to the floor, her eyes full of

tears. She didn't understand what was happening but she knew it was something terribly serious.

'You meant it,' said Frank softly. 'And I think I've always known it. Let me go, Father. I won't touch him.'

Father Ralph was angry. 'Look what you've done to this child, both of you. I couldn't take her away. I was afraid you'd kill each other.'

'It's all right. I'm going,' Frank said. 'I'm going to join Jim Sharman's show and I won't be back.'

'You've got to come back,' Paddy whispered. 'What will I tell your mother? You know how much she loves you.'

'Tell her I'm going because I want to be somebody. It's true.'

Frank picked up his hat and coat and walked out of the door.

End of episode 3

1613 words including intro