

Thorn Birds 4

Between 1921 and 1928.

In the last episode, 9 year old Meggie and her large family arrived at Mary Carson's Australian farm, Drogheda. A sixth brother, Hal, was born before they left New Zealand.

Father Ralph, the young Catholic priest, befriended them, and looked after Meggie and one of her brothers when they were at school in Gillanbone, the nearest town – 40 miles away. At the Gillanbone Show, Frank, Meggie's unhappy eldest brother, won money in a boxing competition. But Paddy, Meggie's father, had a row with Frank and revealed that Frank was not his son. Frank walked out, leaving Paddy and a distraught Meggie with Father Ralph.

Episode 4

Paddy stared with shocked eyes at Meggie, who was extremely upset. He got up to go to her, but Father Ralph pushed him away.

'Leave her alone. You've done enough! I'm going to put the child to bed. Then I'll come back and talk to you.'

Father Ralph took Meggie to her room and put her to bed. He talked gently to her as he did so, but he didn't know if she heard him. Her eyes were full of pain. 'Is she all right?' asked Paddy as the priest came back into the room.

Father Ralph poured himself a drink.

'I don't know. Paddy, why did you get so angry? Why did you say those things to Frank? It's true, of course. I realized Frank wasn't your son. He's got black hair, and all the others have red hair, like you. Why don't you tell me about it?' Paddy stared at the fire, then he began to speak.

'I don't know who Frank's father is. Frank was born before I met Fee. When I arrived in New Zealand, I went to work for a very rich family, one of the wealthiest in the country. Fee was the only daughter. I never spoke to her, but sometimes I'd see this beautiful young lady walking with a little boy. Except for her grandmother, all her family were ashamed of her – she had a child and she wasn't married. When her grandmother died, her father came to me and offered to pay me five hundred pounds if I would marry her and take her far away. Well, Father, it was a lot of money. I wanted to get married, but I didn't know any girls in New Zealand. So I accepted the offer. I spoke to Fee for the first time on the day that I married her. At first I was frightened of her, she was so strange and so beautiful.'

'She's still beautiful, Paddy,' said Father Ralph gently.

'We've had a hard life, Father, but she's been safe with me. I love her very much, but she loves only Frank. Now I've sent Frank away, and she'll never forgive me.'

'Don't tell her about the fight, Paddy. Just say that Frank went away with the boxers.'

'I couldn't do that, Father,' said Paddy, shocked. 'And what about Meggie? She

heard everything.'

'Don't worry about Meggie. I'll talk to her. I don't think she understood what you said.'

Meggie wasn't asleep. The priest sat down beside her.

'Frank has gone away, Meggie,' he said.

'I know, Father. I'm going to go with him. He needs me.'

'You can't, my Meggie. You see, Frank's got his own life, and it's time he went away. He's wanted to go for a long time. Do you understand that, Meggie?'

Her eyes, which were tired and full of pain, moved to his face. 'I know,' she said.

'I know. Will I ever see him again?'

'I don't know,' said Father Ralph.

A Death in the Family

It was August and very cold. Fee wasn't well, and she needed Meggie at home to help her. Stuart didn't want to stay at school without Meggie, so he came home too.

Fee felt too tired to look after little Hal, so Meggie became like a mother to him. It was hard work for the girl, but she was happy. Nobody mentioned Frank. Fee waited for a letter from him, but it never came.

Then the twins were born, two little boys, James and Patrick. Fee felt too ill and tired to look after them, but the servants from the big house loved Jims and Patsy, as they were called. Soon the twins were spending most of their time at the big house.

Father Ralph watched Meggie as she brushed Patsy's red hair. Then he turned and stared towards the big house, hidden behind the trees. What was the old spider, Mary Carson, planning?

'What are you thinking, Father?' asked Meggie.

'Er.....nothing. Let's go and see your Auntie Mary, shall we?' They walked together up the path to the big house.

As Father Ralph came in, holding Meggie's hand, Mary Carson stared at Meggie coldly.

'Go to the kitchen, girl. Have your tea with Mrs Smith,' said Mary sharply.

'Why don't you like Meggie?' Father Ralph asked as he sat down.

'Because you do,' she answered.

'Oh, come now, Mary!' he said. 'She's just a little girl.'

She laughed. 'You've changed, Ralph,' she said. 'You're less ambitious than you were once. Don't you want to be a cardinal?'

He looked unhappy. 'It's impossible now!'

'We'll see,' she laughed unpleasantly. 'I know what you really want, Ralph.

Maybe I will help you to get what you want in the end. But I'll make sure it hurts you. I'll make sure you suffer for it.

The sky filled with clouds and Paddy began to hope for rain.

'Dry storms,' said Mary Carson. 'We won't get any rain for a long time.'

The grass began to get thin and the wind blew clouds of dust across the brown fields. One day little Hal started to cough, and his health quickly got worse. At first Fee wasn't worried, but by the time Paddy came home, the child's lips were blue, and he couldn't breathe. Paddy telephoned the doctor, forty miles away, but the doctor couldn't come. Meggie held her little brother and prayed. She was frightened because there was nothing she could do. Then Paddy and Fee started to pray. At last, at midnight, Paddy lifted the child from Meggie's arms and laid him on the bed.

Meggie was half asleep, but her eyes suddenly opened wide. 'Oh, Daddy, he's better!' she said.

But Paddy only shook his head. 'No, Meggie, but he's at peace. He's gone to God.'

'Daddy means he's dead,' said Fee.

'Oh, Daddy, no! He can't be dead!' But Meggie knew that her little brother was dead. He looked like a doll, not a child.

Father Ralph found Meggie sitting on her own when he came in with the doctor. He knew how much she loved her little brother, and as he watched her, sitting so patiently, he thought she looked older. Who had taught her to be so brave?

'Oh, Meggie,' he said helplessly.

She looked at him and gave him a smile of great love. As he looked into her eyes, he suddenly felt afraid for them both.

Mary's Will

Mary Carson was planning a big party for her seventy-second birthday. Sitting in her usual chair, she gave orders for the garden to be tidied up and for the biggest room in the house to be made ready for the dancing. A band was coming from Sydney and special food was ordered.

While everybody was busy, Mary Carson took a big piece of paper and began to write. It was something she had planned to do for years. She finished writing, and then a laugh from outside the window made her suddenly angry.

Father Ralph was teaching Meggie to ride. He had bought her riding clothes in Gillanbone, and for a few hours every week gave her riding lessons. Meggie was growing up and, although she knew it was impossible, she often dreamed of what it would be like to be kissed by the priest.

As Mary Carson watched through the window, Father Ralph and Meggie walked past with their horses. Mary wished that she could stop the riding lessons, or ride with them herself. She hated their friendship, and she wondered why Paddy and Fee did not stop their daughter spending so much time with the priest.

Mary took another piece of paper and began to write again.

4

End of episode 4

1402 words including intro