

## Thorn Birds 12

In 1937, Meggie suffered terribly at the birth of her daughter, Justine. Luke didn't come to see her, and after a few months Anne and Luddie sent Meggie away on holiday to Matlock Island while they looked after the baby. Anne managed to get Luke to see the baby, and tried to persuade him to join Meggie on the island, but he made excuses and left for Sydney. It's now the beginning of 1938.

### Episode 12

The next day a postcard arrived from Meggie, saying that she was feeling well. Anne decided not to tell her about Luke's visit.

As Anne sat with Justine outside her house, she saw a red car coming along the road towards the farm. It stopped in front of her and a tall, handsome man, dressed only in a pair of shorts, jumped out. At first she didn't recognize him.

'Well, Archbishop,' she said. 'What a surprise.'

'At the moment I'm not an archbishop, only a priest on holiday, so you can call me Ralph. Is this Meggie's baby? May I hold her?'

Justine seemed to like the priest and fell peacefully asleep.

'Where's Meggie?' he asked.

'She's not here. Luddie and I sent her away for two months. She's got another seven weeks to go.'

Anne realized as soon as she spoke that he was disappointed.

'I came to say goodbye to her,' he said. 'I'm going to Rome. It's a great opportunity for me. I can't refuse to go.'

'How long will you be away?'

'Oh, a very long time, I think. There's going to be a war in Europe. I can speak a lot of languages. I could be very useful to the Church in times like these.'

'Well, if you've got time, you could still see Meggie,' said Anne before she had time to think.

He looked at her with cool, intelligent eyes. He seemed to know what she was thinking. For about ten minutes he said nothing.

'Where is she?' he asked at last in a perfectly normal voice.

'Meggie's in a cottage on Matlock Island. It's a very small place, there are hardly any people there this time of year. If you're going you'd better pretend to be Luke.'

He gave the sleeping baby back to her. 'Thank you,' he said, going to his car.

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Old Rob's car approached along the road to the cottage, stopped, and let out a man dressed in shorts and a shirt, with a suitcase in his hand.

'Bye, Mr O'Neill,' Rob shouted as he went.

But Meggie would never again mistake them, Luke O'Neill and Ralph de Bricassart. Even at a distance she knew it was Ralph. She stood silently, waiting for him.

'Hello, Ralph,' she said, not looking at him.

'Hello, Meggie.'

She made him some tea, and they sat drinking it in silence.

'What's the matter, Meggie?' he said at last. She looked at him, and he realized that she saw him as a man, while he still thought of her as a beautiful child. As she looked at him, he saw that she had realized her mistake. She turned to run out of the cottage, trying to escape from her confused feelings, but he caught her before she got to the door. He held her tightly, and they kissed. Suddenly, his feelings changed, and he realized that this was what he had wanted all these years. He picked her up and carried her to the bed.

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For the first time in his life, Ralph woke up in the same bed as another person.

'If I had the energy, I'd go for a swim and then make breakfast,' he said.

'Have your swim. I'll make the breakfast,' she said, smiling at him. 'There's no need to wear any clothes. No one comes here.'

He sat up and stretched. 'It's a beautiful morning.' He stood up, then turned and held out his hand. 'Come with me? We can have breakfast together afterwards.'

The sea was beautiful, the sun was hot, but the wind was cool.

'I feel as if I've never seen the world before,' he said, looking around him.

Meggie took his hand. 'You haven't seen this world before. This is our world, for as long as we're together.'

'What's Luke like?' he asked her later.

'He's like you a bit. He doesn't need women either. You both think that it's weak to need a woman.'

'And you still want us?'

She smiled. 'Oh, Ralph. It's made me so unhappy, but it's the way things are. I can't change you. If I'd really wanted to, I'd have married a good, kind man like my father, someone who did want and need me.'

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Day followed day and night followed night. They walked and lay on the beach and swam. He was teaching her to swim. Sometimes he looked sad, knowing that he must go back to the Church.

One day he turned to her as they lay on the beach.

'Meggie, I've never been so happy, or so unhappy.'

'I know, Ralph.'

'You've always understood me. Is that why I love you?'

'Are you leaving?'

'Tomorrow. I must. My ship leaves in less than a week. I'm going to Rome.

For a long time, perhaps even for the rest of my life.'

'Don't worry, Ralph. I'm ready to let you go. I'm leaving Luke. I'm going home to Drogheda.'

'Oh, my dear! Not because of this, not because of me!'

'No, of course not,' she lied. 'I'd decided before you arrived. Luke doesn't want me or need me, he won't miss me. But I need a home, and I think Drogheda is always going to be home to me. I don't want Justine to grow up in a house where I'm the servant.'

'I'll write to you, Meggie.'

'No, don't. I don't need letters, after this. No one must ever know about this time we've had together.'

He held her close, stroking her hair. 'Meggie, I wish I could marry you. I don't

want to leave you. But we can't change what we are. Remember always that I love you.'

The next day Rob appeared and drove Ralph away. Ralph sat in the car and didn't look back. When Rob shook his hand to say goodbye he thought that Ralph's face looked very sad and very human. The expression in his eyes had changed for ever.

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When Meggie came back to Himmelhoch, Anne knew at once she would lose her. It was the same Meggie, and yet, in some way, she had changed. When her eyes met Anne's, they were shining with happiness.

'Thank you, Anne.'

'For what?'

'For sending Ralph to me. It meant so much to me. Before Ralph came, I'd decided to stay with Luke, but now I know I have to leave him. I'm going back to Drogheda, and I'm never going to leave it again.'

'We'll miss you, but I'm glad. Luke would only make you more unhappy.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'Yes, he's coming back from Sydney. He's cutting cane near Ingham.'

'I'll have to go and see him. I've got to tell him, and although I hate the idea, I've got to sleep with him.'

'What?'

Meggie's eyes shone. 'I think I'm going to have a baby.'

Anne stared at Meggie, shocked. 'What a mess!' she said.

'But Anne, don't you understand? I could never have Ralph. I've always known that. But now I've got part of him. I've always loved Ralph, but he'll never be mine, he belongs to the Church. But his son – I know the baby's going to be a son – will belong to me.'

'Oh, Meggie,' Anne said helplessly.

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As Meggie took the little train to Ingham, she thought that she was ready to do anything for Ralph's baby, even sleep with Luke.

When she arrived at the little town she went to the cleanest looking hotel and found a telephone. She left a message at the farm where Luke was working, then went back to her room to wait. She took her clothes off and sat on the bed, nervous and shaking.

At nine o'clock Luke arrived. He knocked on the door of her room and she opened it slowly without speaking. Luke thought she looked beautiful. He reached out, picked her up and carried her to the bed.

Meggie didn't speak to Luke all night, although her touch had been very welcoming. In the morning she moved away from him.

'What brings you to Ingham, Meg?' he asked.

Her head turned, and she stared at him coldly.

'I came to tell you I'm going home to Drogheda,' she said.

For a moment he didn't believe her, then he saw the expression on her face.

'But why?'

'You're a fool, Luke,' she said. 'You've treated your wife and daughter like dogs. You've got twenty thousand pounds in the bank, and you won't even take me to Sydney with you.'

'Oh, Meg!' he said, astonished. 'I've never been cruel to you. You've had enough to eat, somewhere to live –'

'Oh, yes,' she interrupted. 'It's useless talking to you. It's like talking to the wall. You can keep the money in the bank, Luke. But you're not going to get any more money from me. I'll need it for Justine, and for the new baby if I'm lucky.'

'So that's why you came,' he said. 'You wanted another baby, not me.'

'That's right,' she said. 'And I never want to see you again.'

After she had left, Luke sat and stared at the closed door for a long time.

Then he got up and started to dress. If he hurried, he could get a ride back to the farm with his friends.

End of episode 12

1635 words including intro.