

From the author of the
acclaimed *The Bookshop*
of the Broken Hearted



The
BRIDE
of
ALMOND
TREE



ROBERT HILLMAN

Chapter 1

HE SAW HER for the first time since returning from the war out on Cartwright's Track. He'd hitched a lift home with Nat Fish. She was walking. He didn't get Trout to stop for her because she was almost home but he waved, and she waved back. She was two years older since he'd last seen her, and her fair hair was longer, and in her green summer dress she seemed more a full-grown woman. They were friends, he and Beth, if friendship were applied in a broad way. He had always chatted with her down at the Almond Tree shops, where she'd run a stall each week selling donated odds and ends—jams, teddy bears, potted plants—to help support the strugglers of the town. The commitment to charity must have come down to her from her mum, Lillian, who knitted jumpers

for pensioners. It didn't show up in her other daughters. Gus and Maud, both older than Beth, were more devoted to marathon arguments with their husbands and Franny, the second youngest, to marathon flirtation.

Wes had admired Beth for her kindness. As one of the small Almond Tree community of Quakers, he saw in her far less self-absorption than among his brethren in the faith. She considered herself a Marxist—she'd told him before he went away to war.

'Are you, then?'

'Well, not officially. You don't get a placard or anything. But Di Porter's been coaching me.'

'Di from the high school?'

'She used to be. Now she writes to me from the city.'

She said this in an embarrassed way, as if it might seem a type of boast for a young woman from a country town to claim membership of a cadre in a massive world-wide movement. All the same, as shy as she was about it, she didn't make a secret of her Marxism: that would be a betrayal of convictions. She was ridiculed, as she knew she would be. But not by Wes.

Now, when Beth waved to him she smiled, and the smile roused something in him he'd never experienced before: attraction to a woman. It was as if, by bits and pieces, certain vital components had been patiently accumulating in his heart, waiting their opportunity to be connected.

The smile; its welcoming quality: a bolt.



What next? A shower and shave; clean shirt and trousers; give your boots a bit of a birthday. Go and see the young woman in question, show that you like her. Hope that she also likes you. All going well, maybe the pictures. Or bonfire night, which was tomorrow. Beth might enjoy coming to the bonfire night with him.

He called in the next day at the Hardy farm off Cartwright Track with a bunch of beach daisies and tinsel lilies. Hardy ran a dairy herd of three hundred with a contract down the rail line that gave him the money he needed to extend his shack north, south, east and west for his four daughters. Gus and Maud, being older, had been given boys' work and roared about the farm on old Nortons from the age of ten and eleven, doing tasks they kept up after they married, shouting at the Ayrshires and whistling up the dogs. Hardy ran sheep as well, a thousand, and bred angora rabbits galore, the special province of Franny, second youngest to Beth.

Wes was directed down to the paddock of granite outcrops where Hardy was looking for a headstone. The grave he intended to mark was not for a human but for a horse called Kildare which had given up the ghost after a legendary life that included two Almond Tree Cups and a swim of a mile across Scullin Reservoir. Other horses had died over the years; they were picked up by Denny Christian from the abattoir and on-sold to a pet food factory off the highway at

Maccleworth. Only Killy merited a burial.

Wes found Hardy at work with a set of cold chisels and a mason's hammer, attempting to knock a chunk off a boulder the size of an elephant. Wes, like most Quaker males, had been trained in masonry and carpentry and, although not yet a master like his father, knew what to do with a cold chisel. He handed Hardy the tinsel lilies and daisies and had a block free of the boulder in ten minutes.

Hardy gave the bouquet a shake. 'What am I supposed to do with these?'

'For Beth.'

'What's Beth supposed to do with them?'

Wes lifted his shoulders. 'Stick them in a vase.'

Hardy nodded. 'She'll be reading,' he said. 'The collected works of Red Joe Stalin. Can try the flowers if you like. This is courtship, is it? Romance?'

'That sort of thing.'

Hardy handed Wes the bouquet and picked up his tools. 'Stay for a cuppa? Then you can try your luck with the professor.'

Bob Hardy wished Wes all the luck in the world. Of all his daughters, he loved Beth the most, and while he admired her intellect, hated the idea of losing her to the university in the city. He wished she would see in Wes the makings of a decent sort of husband. The army was over for him, nothing to impede him settling down. As Bob knew from chatting with Wes's father Marcus at the

shopping centre, he'd come back from the islands with bullet holes in his shoulder and left thigh, now healed, and a medical discharge issued by a surgeon who'd judged he'd never walk again. Twenty-one, tall and cheerful, he'd started to build a place of his own on a patch he'd purchased from Neddy Gosling above the high-water mark of the river. Strolling back to the house with Wes, Bob imagined Beth giving up university, marrying Wes, raising three or four kids.

But that was nonsense. She wouldn't be marrying anyone. Could he blame her? Maud and Gus lived with their husbands under the vastly extended Hardy roof and nothing in their domestic habits acted as an enticement to marriage. All the luck in the world, but he had to concede that he was going to lose his daughter to the university. And to politics, of course.

Fetched from a region of the indoors, Beth appeared in the kitchen doorway dressed in what would normally adorn a scarecrow of the fields—a faded brown twill shirt left unbuttoned at the cuffs, and a bunchy blue woollen skirt. Wes stood to show courtesy but Bob gestured for him to sit down.

‘Wes! How lovely to see you.’ And a smile full of warmth.

‘What are the flowers for?’

‘You.’

‘Me? Why?’

‘Friendly gesture.’

Beth chuckled, not quite at Wes's expense. 'Wes, were you going to ask me out? You were, weren't you?'

'Thought you might like to come to the bonfire tonight, Beth.'

'You and me?'

Beth's mum had just put down a pot of tea on the table, cups and saucers, sugar and a jug of milk. And some shortbread biscuits. She was humming the wedding march from *Parsifal*, satirically.

'Mum, could you put these flowers somewhere? In a vase.'

Beth waited until Wes had taken a few sips of tea before enclosing one of his hands in both of hers. 'Wes, you're a lovely man, but I'm going to university in the city. I'd barely see you. And in all honesty, I don't want a boyfriend. I have politics. The Eureka Youth League takes up all of my spare hours. Do you see? You'd be wasting your time.'

'This is going well,' said Lillian.

Bob Hardy, leaning against the wall, was looking at his feet, shaking his head.

'And in any case, Wes, I never go to bonfire night. It's to celebrate the torture of a human being with fire. It gives me the creeps.'

Bob Hardy allowed a snort of laughter to escape.

'Hadn't thought of it that way,' said Wes, rubbing the back of his head. His dark curls had returned after his army haircut.

‘Well, you might. As a Quaker. Does that sound pompous? Sorry.’

Wes plunged in again. ‘Your dad here says you’ve been reading.’

‘Nothing escapes Dad’s attention.’

‘The Life and Times of Red Joe Stalin,’ said Bob Hardy. ‘That’d be right, professor? She says that Red Joe clobbered the Germans on behalf of the working man.’

‘Dad, I said nothing of the sort. I simply said that if the Soviet Union hadn’t defeated the Germans, the Allies would have lost the war. Just common knowledge.’

‘Want to make your way with the professor, Wesley, better get yourself a big red flag.’

Beth said: ‘Dad, give me a break. You don’t have to find fault with everything I say.’

Franny called from outdoors: ‘Casey, you mongrel! Let it go!’ Lillian raced to the back door.

‘Just be Casey with a rabbit,’ said Bob Hardy. ‘Get out of their hutch, the buggers. Want to persist with my lovely daughter, Wesley? No shame in backing off.’

Wes nodded and took a last sip of his tea. ‘No, Bob. Beth has been clear.’

Beth said: ‘I’m sorry I disappointed you, Wes. I truly am.’

As Wes stood, he glimpsed through the window above the kitchen sink Franny, long hair flowing, in pursuit of a dog with a huge white bundle of rabbit between its jaws. Behind Franny came Lillian.