

## Chapter 1 Bram Wilkie

Hiram Abraham Wilkie was in love. He stood staring agape at the most beautiful, alluring, enrapturing young woman he had ever seen. She was small and slight of build; dainty, in fact; and her brown hair glowed with a slight red tinge in full sunlight. She, an older fellow who might be her father, and a lad who could be a younger brother were talking to Mr. Applegate. All were nodding and smiling. Hiram glanced over at his coworker, Jimmy Stover. Jimmy was gazing upon her also, just as enthralled as he.

Mr. Applegate shook hands with the three, turned toward Hiram, and said wonderful, wonderful words: "Hey, Bram. C'mere. I want ye to help the Flahertys here pick out three ponies."

Delighted beyond words, Hiram jogged over to them.

Mr. Applegate was beaming. "This be H. Abraham Wilkie. Bram."

The ethereally beautiful lady was even more beautiful up close, with glorious green eyes. She extended a hand. "Mr. Wilkie, how do ye do." Her voice was so pleasant.

Mr. Applegate laid a hand on Hiram's shoulder. "Bram here knows every pony in me herd on a first name basis, the Connemaras and the Shetlands both. He trained them all. He knows what each of them likes and all their little quirks. Truth be told, he was midwife to a dozen of them. He can help ye pick out exactly the right ponies to best serve y'r needs. Bram, these folks are turning their farm into a resort for city folk and figure to need gentle ponies for the little ones. Oh, and that's Jimmy Stover."

What a dream assignment! What a stroke of marvelous luck! "Thank ye, Mr. Applegate." Sure and Bram meant it! "Please come with me."

He led them past the paddock near the barn, scooping up a handful of lead lines and draping them around his neck. "The ponies in there are quite young and need work yet. That is why I am keeping them close at hand. Y'll want seasoned ponies, older, not so frisky."

"Exactly," the lady replied. "And we would like them to be photogenic. Picturesque, if you will. The parents will be taking pictures of their children on the ponies, and they should be beautiful ponies."

"Beautiful ponies we have in abundance." Bram noted that Jimmy was tagging along. He didn't like that. Jimmy was all right for things like bucking hay bales and scooping up piles, but he did not even care about the ponies and knew nothing about them. Bram could not understand why Mr. Applegate kept Jimmy on.

Bram opened the pipe gate and ushered them out onto the lea where over four score ponies grazed peacefully. He looked at the lad. "Did ye happen to bring along a saddle?"

"Aye, sir, that I did."

"An old favourite saddle?"

"Aye, i' tis. We had a Connemara pony for many years, Rosie, and a fine pony she was. She died of old age three years ago."

Good. They had taken good care of her if she lived into old age. "If ye would, bring it out here and we'll choose at least one pony that fits the saddle well. Then ye need not sell it and buy another. Jimmy, would ye go with him, please." It was not a request. "We'll wait."

Jimmy scowled at him, but the two went off together. Bram was standing very close to the lovely lady and it made his whole body tickle a bit. They chatted, small talk. Delightful!

When the two returned, Bram led them all downslope to the rill, where most of the stock were congregating.

The older gentleman looked about. "Sure and we've come to the right place. Tis no wonder Mr. Applegate brings a paddock full of ponies to the shows."

"We've ninety-seven, all told. Ah, now this be Lulu. Pure Connemara, coming nine years old, four times a mother, gentle with children." Lulu, a pretty dappled grey mare, walked up to Bram and pressed her face against his chest. "So ye think I've a treat for ye, aye?" Grinning, Bram slipped her a chunk of carrot.

"She is utterly charming!" The lady cooed. She frowned. "But Da, why am I here? In a fortnight I will be moving with Joe to America. I will not be on the farm at all. Tis y'rself should be choosing, not I."

Bram's heart went *thunk!* America! No!

"Because ye've a way with animals just as Declan has, and we value what ye offer. F'rinstance I'd not have thought of the photographs. Tis an excellent idea, especially since we cannot yet afford a lot of advertising. Happy children on lovely ponies will be most attractive to potential visitors."

Bram laid the saddle on Lulu's back. He pushed his fingers in between the withers and the pommel. "Now this is a good fit, y'see? Nothing rubs or rides on her withers, and the saddle is neither too narrow nor too wide."

"So docile," the lady purred. "Not even a halter or bridle."

The lady, and the lad as well, asked excellent questions and heeded whatever Bram had to say. Jimmy hung close and sometimes made inane comments, but the Flahertys pretty much dismissed his counsel. Indeed, they seemed to dismiss Jimmy himself. That pleased Bram immensely, for he could tell that Jimmy was very much taken by the lady. Who would not be?

They chose Lulu and Sweetypie, a little Shetland skewbald with an especially thick and charming mane. For the third pony they were undecided between Jewel, a dun Connemara, and Polly, a particularly shaggy Shetland. Bram suggested taking both back to the house and deciding there. They did so. And thus went the most glorious afternoon of Bram's life. Could it be any more wonderful?

*Yes it could!*

The Flahertys left and Mr. Applegate came down to the paddock as Bram and Jimmy were finishing tidying up. "Bram, y're quite the salesman, ye are."

"Which did they take, sir? Polly or Jewel?"

"Them both. Though they intended to buy three when they came, they bought the four, and twas y'rself what sold 'em for me." He leaned on the gate. "Does it bother ye to spend so much time on the ponies only to see them get sold off?"

"Not at all, sir, when they're going to a good home. Tis why I'm here, to prepare ponies for good homes, and that will be a very good home."

Mr. Applegate watched them a few moments, then said, "I got a call from me friend in America. He says the pony market is very good there, and he wants me to bring over three dozen Connemaras, a place called New Holland in County Pennsylvania. Bram, y'rself is to come with me, for ye know the ponies. With y'rself talking 'em up, they'll sell much better."

America! And Miss Flaherty was going to America! "I would love to, sir, very much. I Thank ye!"

Jimmy commenced a long, whining conversation, begging to be allowed to go along. Mr. Applegate said no, but Bram wasn't paying attention. His mind swirled with America! Where the heavenly Miss Flaherty was going!

Mr. Applegate left and Bram's dreams spilled out in a gush of words to Jimmy as they worked. He knew that Jimmy, of course, did not give a damn, but Bram just had to tell someone. Folks claimed that America was large, but surely the country was not so big that he could not look her up while he was there. Perhaps take the train. He would bring flowers when he came calling, of course, and they would talk of ponies and things. America!

That night as the moon was entering first quarter, Bram walked up to the side paddock where the sold ponies were kept until the trailers came. As was his wont, he always said goodbye to the ponies that were sold. He entered the paddock, gave them each a chunk of carrot, and scratched them thoroughly behind their ears. *Fare well at the Flaherty farm. I know ye will.*

He closed their gate behind him and walked to the barn. He heard rustling of some sort as he entered. Time to set the rat traps again.

From behind him a hand suddenly seized his face, his nose, and yanked his head back; something rasped across his throat. He struggled, but not effectively. What...? Hot slippery blood ran all down the front of him. But then all those sensations faded, faded, faded with the night.

See all the friends and strangers who had come to her wedding reception here. Bridgid looked around this outdoor event venue. She and Da had chosen an old demesne with a castle-like manor house and vast, manicured front lawn that held a dance floor and marquee. Still it was crowded. Mrs. Patel the wedding advisor had engaged wonderful serving girls; the moment Joe and Bridgid had cut the cake after singing a duet of "Let it be me" (that was Bridgid's idea), the women had swiftly cut the rest and distributed it. Mum had complained that the cake was much too large, but it was not. Only a bit of the bottom tier was left.

She sat at a table off to the side of the dance floor with her wonderful bridegroom Joe Rodriguez, her cousin Tommy, and Tommy's pretty blonde girlfriend Gretchen. "This is wonderful. The whole affair is absolutely wonderful. So many people here."

"Of course, free booze." And there was that twinkle in Tommy's eye that Bridgid loved so well.

"I've been watching them, your friends especially." Gretchen was smiling. "Joe is a major attraction. Here's this handsome, foreign James Bond type who came over to sweep the local girl off her feet. They all want to size up that bastard. Incidentally, Tommy, great toast. You're right; giving them a thumbnail biography of him was perfect. Not many people here know him, or about him."

"I agree," Joe added. "I was expecting embarrassing stories, because you have plenty. Thank you."

"Y're welcome. Refill?" Tommy asked Gretchen.

"Sure."

And off he went with both their glasses.

Tommy's vacant chair was filled almost instantly by Jimmy Stover. He grinned inanely at Bridgid and Joe. "I want to wish me best to ye both, and Mr. Applegate sends his regards as well."

"Thank ye, Mr. Stover. Joe, this gentleman is one of Mr. Applegate's employees at the pony farm."

Joe smiled. "Mr. Stover, I remember you greeted us in the receiving line at the wedding. Bridgid says you care for a herd of ninety-three ponies."

"That I do, sir."

"Wait." She frowned. "This is the last day of the big pony show. Why are ye not tending and transporting Mr. Applegate's ponies? He always shows so many."

Mr. Stover shrugged. "He hires on extra for the show; he can get along without me. I like to keep contact with 'is customers, so here I be."

Bridgid wagged her head. "Eh, Mr. Stover, ye must truly have y'r hands full since the shocking murder of y'r assistant, that Mr. Wilkie. I extend me condolences."

"Aye, me hands be full indeed. Mr. Applegate is looking for another, but he's not hired one yet. Thank ye, Miss."

Tommy stopped beside him. "Tis Mrs. now. We must all get used to that."

Mr. Stover mumbled some other things and took his leave. Tommy handed Gretchen's drink across to her and plopped down in his chair.

Joe's eleven-year-old son, Rico, still in his tuxedo, came over bringing his own chair. He sat down between Joe and Gretchen.

Gretchen smiled. "Rico, this whole day, you've been doing nothing but grin. I take it you're glad that your dad is marrying."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"When he..." He glanced at Bridgid and licked his lips. "Pop wasn't much fun after Mom died. Oh, he loved us and took good care of us and all, but he was... well, sober. Somber."

"Understandably."

"Sure. He got a little happier as we got older, even when that driver ran over him and broke all his bones, and we figured, that's just Pop. But then he met Bridgid, and he changed. Brightened up. Even Glo sees it. We have never ever seen him so happy, Gretchen. So yeah, this is the best thing in the world, for all of us."

Bridgid had that much of an effect? She didn't know what to say.

"Ah, here comes Uncle Seamus." Tommy nodded toward Da as he approached.

*Oh, I so hope I can remember those dance lessons I took!* Bridgid stood and put her hand in Da's. He led her out onto the floor. Da was not a dancer, but just now he did not have to be. They swayed more or less from foot to foot, in place. "Da, this whole wedding is beyond wonderful. Meself be in a daze. I thank ye ever so much."

"Twas Tommy and Joe who footed the bill, ye know, but y'rself planned splendidly. I agree tis a lovely, lovely event."

Now Joe was here. He laid a hand on Da's shoulder. Da kissed her forehead. "God's blessings on ye both, m' luv." He stepped back and Joe stepped in, the new husband symbolically taking over the welfare of the lady from her father. Bridgid had a special fondness for symbolism, and a wedding is rife with it.

Across the floor, Mum leapt up. "Seamus, no! She doesn't know how to dance! She'll make a fool of herself! Don't let her!" as Gilbert dragged her back down to sitting.

The music shifted from a fox trot of sorts to *The Anniversary Waltz*. And they were dancing. Joe's hand on her back was just right, firm but not rigid. She knew that when he was going to college, he and his sister had earned a part of their living as instructors in a dance studio, and she was concerned that she would not be good enough as a partner. Apparently those concerns were unfounded. They

swept gracefully around the perimeter of the floor, floating joyously. His smile was quite as broad as hers.

He murmured “side” and they did six bars side by side. When he muttered “turn” he sent her out into a pirouette and drew her back in, so smoothly. Not only was this beyond her wildest dreams, she realized that the feeling she had when taking the lessons was absolutely valid; she loved dancing, just loved it. Perhaps they could go dancing in America.

And there was the policemen’s ball, of course. Fel claimed that Joe never missed the policemen’s ball. Indeed, not long after his wife died, he attended anyway, with Fel as his escort. Joe and Bridgid ended with a dramatic dip that set the guests applauding. They could just barely hear Mum complaining that Bridgid could not *really* dance, she was just faking the dancing in order to embarrass Mum. Apparently, Mum’s venom was never going to end.

Bridgid danced with Peter Waite, the children’s grandfather. Joe danced with Margaret, the grandmother. No matter that she got about on a walker. They put the walker aside and, holding her closely, he danced her around the floor. A bit worried-looking at first, she relaxed and ended the dance with a broad, happy, beautiful smile. They even did a dip. Mrs. Waite must have been quite the belle in her day.

And Bridgid did not want for dances. Tommy “took her for a spin.” Gilbert danced with her. Even Joe’s son Rico danced with her. He wasn’t bad, either.

An hour later, with warm goodbyes all around, the Waites left the reception, taking Rico and Glo with them. Joe and Bridgid would join them in Bedford two days before flying home. What a whirlwind. Tour around Ireland for a few days, visit the farm briefly to say goodbye, then to England for the children, then home. A new home. In a foreign country. Flying six thousand miles away. How unimaginable for this humble farm girl.

Joe took her hand and led her to their table. “I’m exhausted and I don’t know why. The difficult police action before I came, the long flight over, the time difference, the hassle getting here, the ceremony; but I doubt that can be it.”

“Surely not. Obviously, y’re just lazy, as am I. I too am wearied.” The chairs for the bride and groom were broad and padded, with comfortable arms, almost thrones. Hoping she would not fall to the ground, she sat down not in her chair but beside Joe in his, so he scooted over for her. She lay back against him totally knackered, her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her, drawing her in still closer. She felt so good. “I’ve a confession to make.”

“Now you tell me.”

She giggled. “Not that sort of confession. Joe, I was so muckle flustered. Mum was being quite the pill as we knew she would. Ye were late and for a time it appeared the wedding might fall through completely, then ye told of hiring a whole airplane just to get here...”

“A charter. A small plane.”

“Aye, but ye hired it. And finally the wedding itself.... I was all churned and scrambled. I’ve no idea a’tall exactly what I vowed.”

He laughed loud and long. “Alright, I guess I should confess too. I was sleepwalking through the whole ceremony, like I am right now. Jet lag, plain weariness, numb from too much happening too fast, and some of it really ugly. I have no idea what I promised you, either. I hope it was good.”

A Guinness magically appeared in her hand and another in Joe’s.

He smiled. “Thank you, Seamus.”

“The lot of ye look bedraggled.” Da swung another chair around to join them, his own Guinness almost half gone.

“The American saying from our Old West is, ‘Rode hard and put up wet’.”

Da laughed heartily. So much laughter here today; you could hear it all over. And that pleased Bridgid immeasurably.

Inspector Daniel of the local Clifden police force came over. Joe started to stand up but he raised a hand. “Tis appearing ye might fall over should ye rise. Best ye sit there, where y’ll not fall so far.”

“Do join us,” Bridgid invited.

“Gladly.” He pulled another chair over and sat.

This time it was Tommy who placed a Guinness in Insp. Daniel’s hand. Gretchen was across the floor chatting with Fel, but Tommy joined the group. Bridgid noted the men all seemed quite relaxed with each other. Of course, all except Da were police officers, and Da was always relaxed in any situation, especially when Guinness was a factor. Bridgid was going to have to become accustomed to being surrounded by police officers who were simply friends and people, not officers. But as a fully licenced paramedic, she was already comfortable in the world of firefighters. Joe had said that people in public safety—fire and Garda—gravitate to one another.

Insp. Daniel saluted Joe and Bridgid with his bottle. “Me best to ye both. Ye realize this comes as nae surprise to me. The way the two of ye meshed during that little altercation at y’r farm last year, ye seemed soulmates. Still do.”

“And will be, I hope, forever.” Joe gave Bridgid a bit of an extra squeeze.

“But I wish y’rself and Tommy could hang about a bit longer. I could use ye just now.”

“That murder on the pony farm?” Tommy asked.

“Aye, the very thing. A robbery, it was. Some gold trophies and loving cups from pony shows, some quite expensive saddles, cash in a register in the barn. They had to smash the register to get it open, it being locked.”

Joe perked up, like a weary hunting dog on a fresh scent. “So the thieves knew the most costly things to steal.”

“Aye. We surmise that with the pony show in town all this last week, there be many horse folk about who know the value of saddles and such, and they’ve come in from all over the world. Although the murder occurred a fortnight ago, many came in early, to secure accommodations. So I’ve no shortage of suspects.”

Tommy was nodding. “The trophies can be melted down, of course. And y’ve no leads?”

“No fingerprints that should not be about—the victim’s, Mr. Applegate’s, the hired help. We checked ‘em all. We even rolled the Flahertys’ here, since they were the last customers on the farm. Their prints did not appear anywhere.”

“The victim was attacked in the barn?” Joe asked.

“Aye, near the tack room. Tis quite a large room, for it doubles as a showroom. They sell saddles, harness, and other tack as well as ponies, and there be pony traps out back. Indeed, one of the traps was taken; quite a fancy one and the costliest of the lot.”

“Ah,” purred Tommy. Obviously he too was a hunting dog on a fresh scent, wrapped up in the puzzle. “Then most likely y’r perp probably drives a pickup truck, a ute, able to carry away the cart. Or hired a trailer. Except on farms, trailers be not common in Ireland, so there’s another prospect. The guilty fellow is a rube, as we would call him in America. Of rural circumstances.”

Joe studied nothing on the floor. "Have you explored the possibility that one of Applegate's employees is responsible? When Mr. Stover came by to wish us well, he said that Applegate hires additional help just for the pony show."

"We investigated that line thoroughly, aye."

"And Mr. Applegate himself as the perpetrator?" Tommy added.

"Aye, since he would know how to sell the stolen goods for the best price. Twould all be profit, for he's filing an insurance claim. But his frustration seems genuine. Mr. Wilkie was by far his best employee and a most profitable one. Indispensible. Twould be like killing the goose that lays golden eggs. Part of the frustration stems from losing Mr. Wilkie and all that merchandise only three days before the show. Monstrous bad timing, and a great financial loss. Mr. Wilkie had a knack for talking up the ponies so well that people who were just looking, if ye will, would end up buying. Mr. Applegate was counting on him."

"Aye." Bridgid shifted a bit. She was getting stiff. "What is the American idiom, Joe? Schmooze? He was very good at schmoozing the customer, hearing what was wanted and exactly serving that need. Da and I talked casually of hiring him away from Mr. Applegate to run the animal husbandry aspect of our resort farm. If Declan goes off to school, we'll need someone."

"From what I've ascertained, he would've been a fine one. Have ye considered hiring the other full-time employee, Mr. Stover?" The inspector shifted in his chair. He was sitting in one of the folding chairs, not these comfortable throne ones.

Da wagged his head. "Nae. Sure and the lad is bright, but twas obvious that he has nae heart for animals. He cares for them, but he does not care about them. Declan noted that. Declan has a big heart for animals." Da appeared a wee bit saggy as well. He was probably quite as weary as Bridgid and Joe.

They continued chatting, talking about various cases, and Bridgid found herself starting to drift off. Imagine falling asleep on your wedding night instead of...*Honestly, Bridgid! Think shame. Aye, but what if she did, Heaven forbid?*

Eventually people started drifting away. The wedding coordinator, Mrs. Patel, stopped by, and for the first time today she was smiling. "It is appropriate for you two to leave whenever you wish now. Mrs. Rodriguez, I've directed many, many weddings, including some where fights broke out. This was the happiest, most positive and beautiful event in quite some time. That bodes very well."

Bridgid stood and took Mrs. Patel's hands in hers. "I especially thank ye for y'r perfect management. Twas y'rself made it flow so smoothly. And explaining the symbolism to me, which made it so much richer. I be most grateful."

Joe rose also, and when he took Mrs. Patel's hands, Bridgid noticed him slipping her some bills. Tipping, a fine Yankee custom. She was going to have to become accustomed to remembering that.

There was far more to which she would have to become accustomed. For example, she had never before slept in a bed with another person in it. And the future was all going to commence tonight, her wedding night.