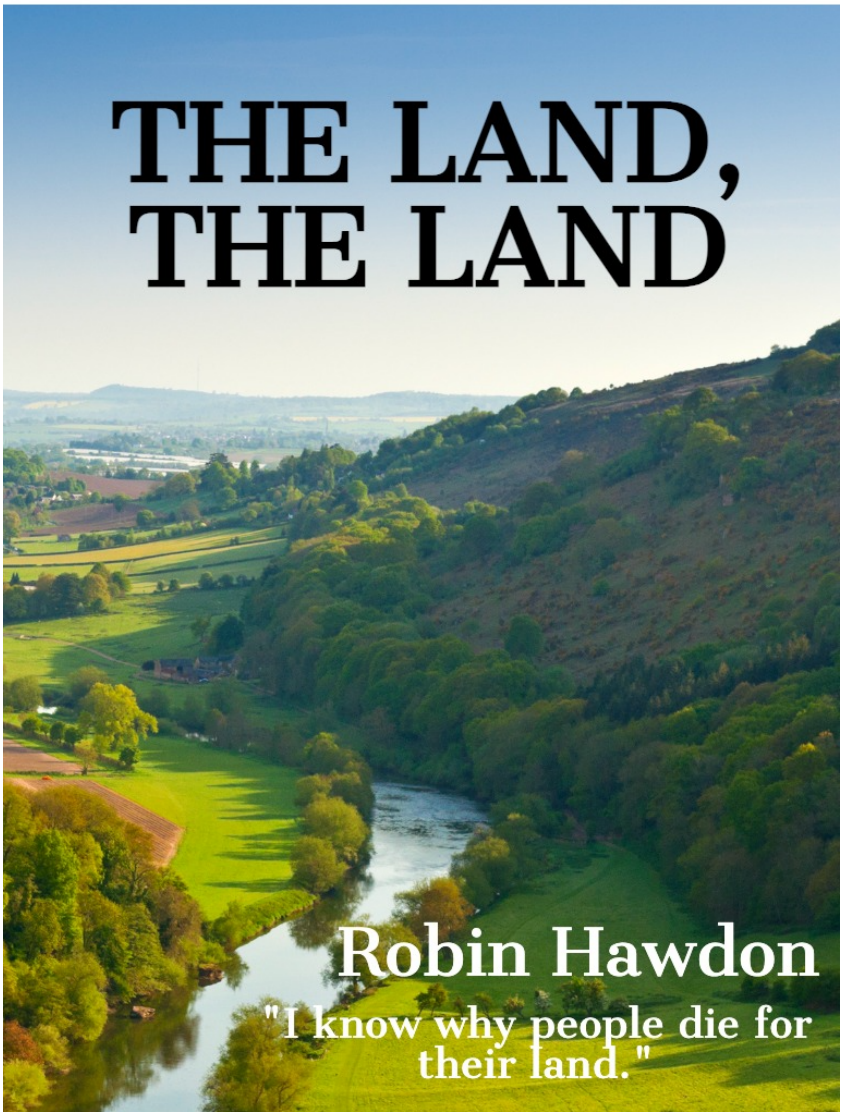

For my wife, who came from the land.

"The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it's the only thing that lasts"
- *Gone With The Wind.*

CHAPTER ONE

I know why people die for their land.

I don't mean die for their country. I mean die for their *land.* I'd die for my land. I'd die for a single acre of my land. And I've got near a thousand of them.

A thousand wild, bucking, rolling, diving, cruel, angry, languid, tender, loving, magnificent acres – more beautiful and more brutal than you'll find anywhere. They rise from rich pastures along the valley where the river runs and our few cattle graze, up the hillsides where our several hundred sheep survive all weathers amongst the rocks and heather, then leaping fifteen hundred feet to the high fells, which belong to nobody except some billionaire grouse shooter, and where nothing endures except rabbits and snakes and a few mad hikers. I love them more than anything else. More than life, more than people, and as much as my family. Because they are my family. Without them my family wouldn't be here. Without them *I* wouldn't be here. I'd be lying in some gutter in some dirty town, pissed, drugged, useless. My land is me.

I know every stick and every stone. I know every contour of the heaving hills, every ripple of the streams, every branch on every tree, every trout's rock, every otter's cave, every fox hole, every plover's nest, every hawk's cloud, every mood.

I am my land. My land is me.

It was my dad's. And his dad's before him. And it will be my daughter's. I have a son but he's younger than her, and he couldn't farm it anyway. He's brain damaged. A touch daft as they say in Yorkshire. Not severely, but enough to stop him doing the stuff that's necessary. But my daughter's as good as a son. Not to look at her. She's slim and svelte as a willow stem, but underneath as tough as any biker thug. You don't mess with her. Mess with her and you'll end up with a pea-soup brain if it's mental, and searing balls if it's physical. A lot of the local lads have tried. They've all been sent on their way. She knows what she wants, and it's not a Yorkshire farm boy. And it's not what I want for her.

My son can produce puzzles from his strange brain that would fox Einstein, and my daughter can ride a horse like a Wild West rodeo girl. Glued to the saddle, swinging with the animal like it's part of her. She'll always take the horse to move the sheep or bring in the cows, rather than take the jeep or the land buggy. She and her mare will go up Shere Fell like it was a hiccup on a race track, with Trigger the sheep dog sprinting to keep up. They'll leap a gully or a dry-stone wall like it's a grass tuft. Doesn't matter how often we tell her not to, she'll still jump everything. Thank God we

got her a good horse. Chardonnay, she called it – Shard for short - because that's its colour. And Shard loves jumping things as much as she does. She's the best horse woman in a county full of horse women. And Chardonnay's one of the best trained horses. But then they had a good teacher. Me.

And she loves the land as much as I do. Never welded to her smart phone like all her class mates, numbing their brains and blinding their eyes. And to do him credit so does my son. He can't go round the farm like she does, not unless one of us takes him in the buggy, but it's there in his soul. She'll go out in all weathers, all seasons, but he'll just sit on the porch or in his bedroom window, one of the farm cats on his lap, looking after her as she gallops off. Then watching out for the sheep, the birds, the beasts – anything that moves. Including the sky and the foaming grasses. He has binoculars and he keeps notebooks full of the stuff that's going on out there, although only he can read them. None of us can interpret his scrawls. But an environmentalist could learn a lot if he could read them. He is simpleton and sage in one body.

Still, being young, neither of the kids have the endless patience with the land that I do. In the evenings they and their mother will be playing fierce card games, or chattering. Or watching the soaps and the game shows on TV. I never saw the attraction in all that stuff. And the adverts make me want to throw things. No, I'll be out on the porch with Trigger, watching the sun go down over the western ridge, and listening to the snipes drumming. Or of it's too cold to sit, we'll wander down to the valley meadows to see if the grass is still growing and the river still running. There is serenity in watching nature do nothing. Trigger and me can stand and watch water run or a tree grow for hours. We can watch a cow grazing and tell you to the nearest pound how much grass it gets through in half an hour. We can tell you the exact times the fish will start to jump for the evening insect hatch, the heron goes home for the night, the barn owls start their hunt. We can hear if a sheep is having trouble in labour a mile away, or a fox is giving it to his missus. We can smell the universe in the night.

My wife doesn't have the land in her bones in the same way. She comes from town stock – cars and pavements and tidy gardens. She's a smart city girl, with culture in her blood rather than nature. But she accepts it because she knows there's no other way. I met her at a posh function in York, and loved her at first sight and my hormones and me wouldn't take no for an answer. I dragged her off from her sophisticated university professor's home, and her shops and theatres and restaurants, and I brought her here to the wilds seventy miles away. She came because she loved me too, and because her hormones wouldn't take no for an answer either. But it wasn't what she would have chosen. It took her a while to get used to the huge, heavy silence of the land. And the huge, heavy sounds. She likes it when it's pretty and warm and sunny, and when she can tend the peonies

and the raspberries in the garden, but she doesn't love it when it's vicious and dark and flailing under the wind, like we do. She likes it when she can rock in the hammock under the copper beech, not when she has to plough through two feet of snow to bring the shopping in. She likes it when it's Mozart, not when it's Wagner.

And she's always a bit nervous. Always underneath a little bit scared of the dangers. Scared for herself and for her son. Doesn't show it but I know it's there. Because there are dangers. Dangers from storm and whirlwind. From falling rocks and tearing waters. From stampeding animals and clattering machinery.

Danger from people.

One of those is our neighbour. Brad Faulkner. He farms over the western fell, a mile as the crow flies, four miles by road. He's a mean one. Bad farmer. Always looking to supplement his struggling flock with other people's sheep. He'll steal them at a cricket's click, soon as your back is turned. Doesn't give a damn about die stains or ear tags, he'll find a way. Have them whisked off to slaughter, ready or not, and people in London are having them for Sunday lunch before you even know they're gone.

Then there's government danger. Wanting to put through roads going from somewhere to nowhere. Wanting to dam the river because there's not enough water in a county where it rains enough to drown a herd of elephants. Wanting to put up a forest of wind turbines because they think the skyline's too bare and needs decorating. Always wanting to interfere with the natural order.

Then there's big business. Wanting to dig mines because we've got some of the best stone and minerals in the world. Wanting to plant pine forests because the whole planet wants houses. Wanting to bring Arab sheiks to shoot anything that moves anywhere in sight.

Never mind danger from all the rest, who just want to tramp everywhere, wrecking the gates and the fences, stampeding the sheep, leaving their trash to fertilise the ground with plastic and aluminium.

Yes, people are the worst.

But I manage to see them all off. Mostly. They get the message that I'll kill for my land.

For instance, the other morning. It started just like any other day. I was over in the far meadows in the buggy, checking the gates and fences after a stormy April night. Leave the slightest hole in a fence, and the sheep will be through it in a trice, the calves will nose it big enough for a bus to get through, or the foxes will be creating genocide in the chicken runs. Only Trigger was with me. I often take my son because he loves to ride in the buggy, but this time I didn't take him, even though he screamed and shouted, because I had it filled with wire and posts and stuff.

Then, while I was fixing an old gate for the umpteenth time, Trigger growled. I followed his stare and noticed figures high up in the sheep pastures. Just two of them. Didn't look like hikers. One of them standing at the side of a track, the other actually balanced on top of the dry-stone wall alongside, with binoculars. Both peering out across the valley. How did they get there, I thought? Half a mile off the lane, and in town clothes. We often get trespassers, but usually just idiot walkers lost their way. These were different. Then I noticed the car further back. Black saloon. The buggers had opened a gate and driven through.

I whistled to Trigger to jump in the back of the buggy, and drove straight up the hillside to where they stood. They saw me coming, and the one with binoculars jumped down from the wall, bringing a top stone thudding down with him. When I got close I could see they were proper city types. Dark suits, ties, black shoes. The one on the wall a good looking youngish bloke around thirty. The other older, solider, greying hair. They smiled as I drew up beside them. False friendly – I didn't trust them as far as an Iraqi with a backpack. And I've met some of those.

'This is private property,' I said, stopping the buggy a yard from running them down.

'Oh, yes... sorry,' the younger one said. He was still smiling and his accent wasn't Yorkshire. Southerner probably. 'We just wanted to see the view from here. Beautiful valley.'

'It's still private,' I said, staying on the buggy. 'How d'you get in?'

'We, er...' He pointed back up the track. 'Well, I'm afraid we opened the gate. Naughty of us, but we didn't know how far along we'd have to come to see the view.'

'There's views all over the Dales. Why d'you want to see this one?'

The older man spoke. He was heavy jawed with thick eyebrows. Looked like a judge, or a business boss. He couldn't have climbed the wall even if he'd wanted to. 'No particular reason. It just looked a good route for a hike. We're planning a walking holiday, you see, and we got a bit lost finding the direction.'

Walking holiday my backside. 'There's plenty of hiker's maps for the area. You can find them in the village or online. They tell you how to avoid private property. Where to find the proper trails.'

'Yes, yes,' he grunted. Deep upmarket voice. 'Yes, we do have a map. We just missed our way a bit.'

A curlew's cry echoed far across the hillside. I noticed it but they didn't. It was calling its mate – 'catch me if you can'. I pointed at the wall. 'That's loose stones, you know. Been there two hundred years. Takes a lot of skill to build that.'

'Ah, yes,' said the other. He looked contrite, false or genuine, I couldn't tell. 'Sorry. I won't make that mistake again.' All charm and blue eyes. I was glad my daughter wasn't with me.

‘Well, be sure to close the gate when you get back to the road. The sheep need any excuse.’

‘Of course.’ He hesitated. ‘Are you the farmer here?’

Stupid question. ‘Yes.’

‘Nice property. How many acres?’

Hello, what was he after? ‘A thousand.’

‘All up the valley there? Both sides of the river?’

‘Yes.’

He nodded. ‘Beautiful. You’re not a tenant farmer.’

He said it as though he knew the answer. I shook my head. ‘Been in my family for a hundred years.’ I was uneasy. I was never easy with smart-collar business types like these two. I met up with such sometimes, usually when I went to London on Farmers Union business, and I could handle those discussions all right, but I always felt we were speaking different languages. I always came away feeling that we were two different species. Feeling town and country could never really mix. Just as Pekingese and Fox Hounds don’t mix.

A gust of wind spoiled their haircuts. The day was dancing like a street rapper. ‘Well, thank you for warning us,’ he said. ‘Sorry to be trespassing. We’ll get out of your way now.’

They went to their car. The wind followed, speeding them up.

‘You won’t be able to turn there,’ I called. ‘You’ll need to back up the track.’

‘Oh, right.’

They got in quickly, as though the breeze carried typhoid. The young one was driving. Smart Audi model. He backed it up the track, bumping over the ruts. Serve them right if they went over the edge, I thought. Walkers my bollocks.

‘What did you think of them. Trigger?’ I said.

He was a Border Collie – sharp as a whistle, brightest breed on the planet. He was nine years old, but had a good few in him yet. He could round up a hundred sheep in ten minutes. He wagged his tail, saying ‘Bugger them – what’s for lunch?’

We went back to the house, and I thought little more of it. Except in the night. Then I lay awake in the sweeping black, wondering. What did they want?

‘What’s the matter?’ Annie mumbled beside me. Her long brown hair was spread over the pillows. Almost in my face, but I didn’t mind. I liked the smell of it. Hay and baking and shampoo.

‘Oh nothing. Just me. Thinking as usual.’

‘Go to sleep.’

That's the trouble. Whether it's strange visitors, or uncertain weather, or fractious animals, I invariably found it hard to sleep. Too many imaginings in the dark. But that's farming for you. You never know what's round the corner.

I'd learnt that the hard way. I've only got one arm. Because I didn't know what was round the corner.