

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman in profile, looking out over a vast landscape at sunset. The sky is a warm, golden yellow, and a flock of birds is flying in the upper left. In the distance, there are rolling hills and a prominent red wooden barn. The foreground is filled with tall, golden grass.

THE SOWING SEASON

A Novel

KATIE
POWNER



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To my dad
I still miss you.





CHAPTER ONE

*April 2019
Greenville, Washington*

Cow manure spewed from the burst pipe and rained down on him like retribution. With a tight-lipped growl, Gerrit Laninga rolled up a flannel sleeve and exposed a clean bit of skin to wipe the muck from his eyes. This wasn't how he'd imagined his last day on the farm. But . . . well, it was fitting.

The sun had already passed its zenith. He'd better hurry if he was going to make it to Jim's office in time to sign the papers. If he didn't value his old Dodge so much, he'd be tempted to drive to the meeting exactly like this. Covered in crap. That would give Nicholsen an idea of how Gerrit felt about him and his so-called "deal of a lifetime." And an idea of what Nicholsen was getting himself into with this god-forsaken piece of property.

Gerrit trudged across the field with unwilling steps, the wind drying the manure so that it cracked and crumbled off him as he walked. After sixty-three years, he'd gotten so he

hardly noticed the cow smell anymore—most of the time. But even he wrinkled his nose at the stench coming from him now. “Smells like money,” he’d heard other farmers say. But he’d never made a dime off this place.

The farm was supposed to stay in his family forever. He’d meant to retire at the ripe old age of a hundred and be buried in the back forty under a cottonwood tree. But after last winter? Neither his old bones nor his bank account was going to make it through another year. Which he mentioned to the vet, who mentioned it to Grant Nichol森 down the road, who swooped in with an offer Gerrit couldn’t refuse before sunrise the following day.

After cleaning up and changing his clothes in the office behind the milking parlor, Gerrit climbed in the Dodge and sat with his arms resting on the wheel. In a couple of hours, Nichol森’s crew would show up for the afternoon milking, and the farm would hum with steady progress, but for now it was quiet and still. Holsteins flicked lazy tails at fat black flies. Barn cats bathed themselves in the sun. The breeze blew bits of sawdust from the top of the pile.

Everything about this place felt like home and reminded him of his failures. He hated it, but he loved it. It was death, but it was the only life he’d ever known.

For the first time, he was glad Luke was dead.

GERRIT SHIFTED ON the fancy leather chair and stared at the manure under his fingernails. He still stunk. And his back was killing him.

Beside him to his left, his older brother’s widow, Luisa, sat with the same sort of steady grace Luke had always had. She

was surely no more surprised to be waiting on Jakob than he was. Gerrit had been waiting on Jakob most of his life.

“You’ve got manure in your hair, Gerrit,” Luisa whispered, her Italian accent still strong even after thirty years in the States.

He ran a hand through his untamed brownish-gray mane. A dried clump of manure fell onto the lush beige carpet.

From behind his massive oak desk, Jim Dyk cleared his throat. “Okay then. Any idea where your brother might be?”

Gerrit shrugged. “Check the nearest casino.”

“We can’t wait much longer.” Jim tapped his desk three times with a pen. “Nicholsen is anxious to—”

“Nicholsen can put a—”

“Gerrit.” Luisa’s rebuke was just sharp enough. “This was your decision. Don’t take it out on Jim.”

He grunted. He could take it out on whoever he wanted, but he forced his shoulders to relax. He wouldn’t cause a scene in front of Luisa. She didn’t deserve that, not after everything he’d put her through already. Yet he’d seen the smug look on Nicholsen’s face as Gerrit passed him and his lawyer on the way into Jim’s office, and part of him relished the fact that Nicholsen had to wait.

The door swung open with a thud. Jakob shuffled into the room looking twice his age and scrutinized Gerrit with bleary eyes.

Gerrit glared back. “Where you been?”

Jakob took the seat on Luisa’s other side in silence, pulling his bright blue windbreaker tightly around him.

Luisa patted his knee. “Good to see you, Jakob.”

Jakob nodded.

“All right.” Jim straightened the papers in front of him.

“Time to get down to business. We covered all the details at our last meeting, so I just need you to warm up your writing fingers. There are a lot of papers to sign here.”

Jakob leaned forward. “And what if I don’t?”

Gerrit stiffened. “Then you can take over the farm all by yourself and run it into the ground.” He wanted to add a few more choice words but held back for Luisa’s sake. Jakob shouldn’t even be here. Didn’t deserve a penny. But their father had made sure years ago that Jakob would always have an equal share in the family business.

Such as it was.

Jakob huffed but offered no further resistance. Jim went over the pages of the sale agreement one by one, pointing out each place that required a signature or initials. He hurried them along as if afraid one of them might change their mind. And Gerrit considered it. He really did. Who was he without the farm? What would he do? But his back reminded him of the relentlessness of the work. The sunshine outside reminded him of the endless hours of labor ahead during the summer season. And his heart screamed that he had no choice.

It was time.

When the last piece of paper had been reviewed and signed, Jim shook hands with each of them in turn and dismissed them with a sigh of relief. Gerrit was the last to leave. In the hall, Nicholsen waited to take his place with an eager expression, and a strange feeling pressed against Gerrit’s heart. *Take good care of her*, he wanted to say. *She’ll need all you have to give*. Instead, he nodded, just once.

Jakob was long gone as Gerrit walked Luisa to her car. He held the door open for her and searched for the right words, knowing there weren’t any. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? Wanting to enjoy your life for once?” She patted him on the cheek. “Luke would not blame you.”

He nodded, but inside he wasn’t so sure. After all, who else was there to blame? Jakob, of course. But Jakob wasn’t the one who decided to sell to Nicholsen.

He hung his head. “I wish it had been more.”

She waved his words away. “A hundred and thirteen thousand dollars is plenty for an old lady like me. And I’ve got that money from my father. Don’t worry.”

“You’re not old.”

“Hmmp. Tell that to the bunions on my feet.”

He lumbered to his truck, the numbers taunting him. One hundred and thirteen thousand each, all that was left for the three of them after paying off the farm’s debts. All that was left of a lifetime spent believing his sacrifices would be worth it someday.

He heaved himself into the Dodge with an unshakable weariness. If he was careful, he could make the money last. Over the last ten years, he’d sunk his and Hannie’s entire savings into keeping the farm afloat—a decision that haunted him now. But their mortgage would be paid off in a year, and Hannie brought in a little money from her shop. So long as nothing terrible happened, they would be okay. Right?

So long as nothing terrible happened.

“I’m tired, Luke.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “You don’t know what it’s been like all these years without you.”

With a heavy sigh he turned the key in the ignition. Forty years of hard time could do something to a man. Could whittle his spirit down to a splinter of what it was and change

him so that even his stride reflected the rigid structure of boundaries. Limits. Gerrit knew.

The Dodge hacked up some phlegm, pounded its chest, then roared to life. Gerrit gripped the wheel tightly. He was going home a free man, but he felt like a prisoner.

It took more to be free of a place than just driving away.