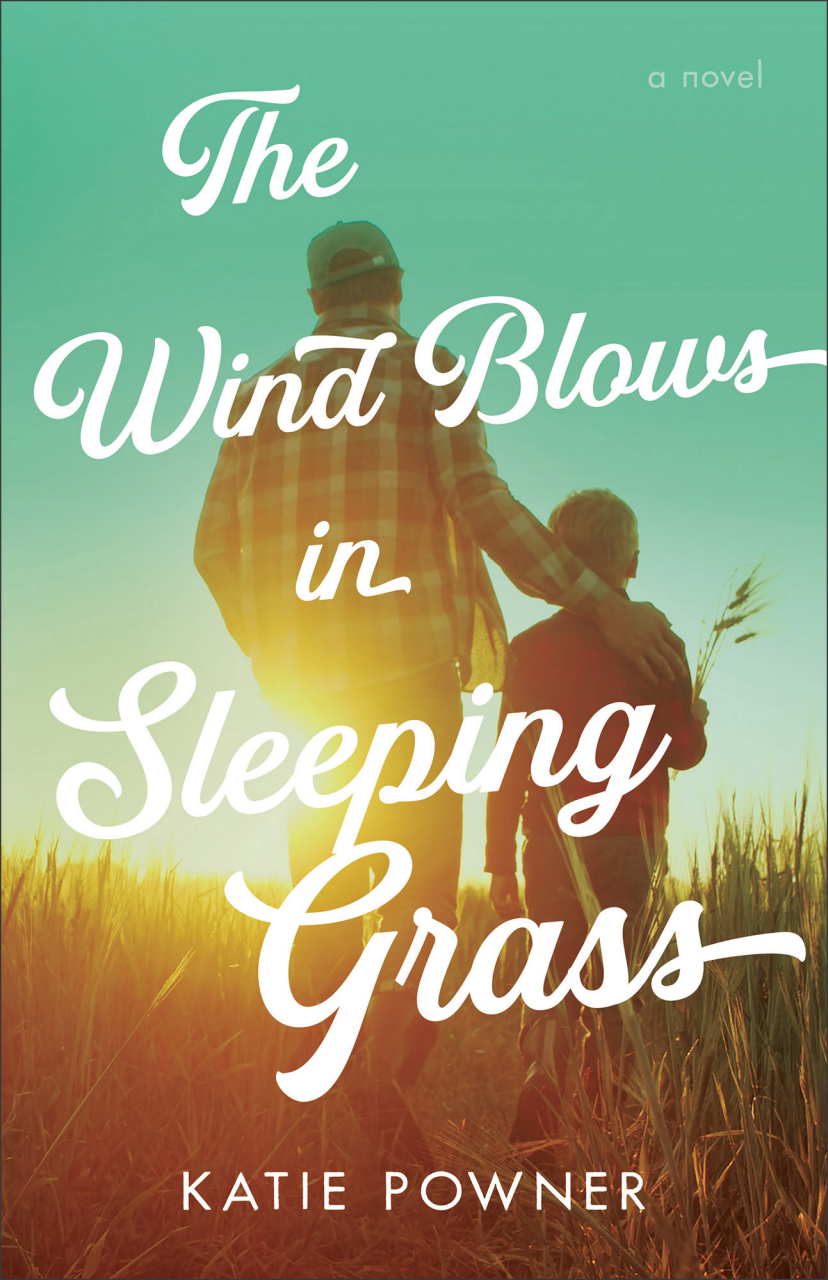


a novel



*The
Wind Blows
in
Sleeping
Grass*

KATIE POWNER

Books by Katie Powner

The Sowing Season

A Flicker of Light

Where the Blue Sky Begins

The Wind Blows in Sleeping Grass

*The
Wind Blows
in
Sleeping
Grass*

KATIE POWNER



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To Andy
I love you forever and always

one



The garbage truck grumbled to life like a grizzly waking from hibernation. Pete Ryman stepped down, blew out a breath that hung suspended in the frigid air, and turned to the seventy-nine-pound pig at his side.

“I told you, Pearl.” Pete tugged on the zipper of his insulated coveralls. “If the truck runs, the route runs.”

Pearl grunted. Pete unplugged the block heater as they made their way back to the passenger side, which was on the left in this particular vehicle—a beat-up, hand-me-down Xpeditor that the town of Sleeping Grass had purchased from nearby Shelby when Shelby bought a new Kenworth T370. Pete opened the door and set Pearl’s portable pet ramp in place. The floor of the cab was almost four feet off the ground, so once Pearl had grown too big for Pete to lift, the ramp had become a necessity.

He made an exaggerated sweeping gesture toward the ramp. “Your Majesty.”

While Pearl pranced up into the truck like the Queen of England’s prize swine, Pete puffed out another breath. At zero degrees, his coat stiffened when he walked outside. At ten below, his nostril hairs froze. At twenty below, the

early morning seemed to be a still life painting with only the crunch of his boots and slow rise of steam off the creek to prove it wasn't.

It was twenty below.

Once his sidekick was safely in her seat, he folded the ramp and hurried over to the right side of the truck. Pearl sniffed at the makeshift outfit she was wearing and gave him a long-suffering look as he buckled.

"I'm sorry." Pete shivered as he laughed. "It was the best I could do."

Pete had always believed an animal should wear only the covering God gave it. He'd mercilessly teased Windy Ray about the sweaters the old man put on his scruffy little dog. But what kind of protection did a potbellied pig have against a morning like this? He'd shortened the sleeves of an old hoodie with scissors, then tied up the back with a rubber band to keep the sweatshirt from dragging underneath her. She looked . . . well, ridiculous.

A gust of wind rammed the truck, poking frozen fingers through the cracks in the old beast.

"Don't even think of leaving this house without a coat."

The words pelted him like sleet, and he shook his head. For most folks, February was the shortest month of the year. For Pete, it was the longest. In February, the wind carried his mother's voice.

He turned up the radio and glanced over at his partner in crime. "Ready to roll, oh Pearl of great price?"

She stomped the fleece blanket with her front hooves, spun a cumbersome circle like an overweight dog, and nodded before settling in. At least that was how he took it. After nearly three years together, they seemed to have an understanding. "All right, then."

The Autocar Xpeditor shuddered into drive and rumbled onto Seventh Street. He should've gotten up earlier to let the

truck warm up. Even with a knit beanie on, he could feel the cold seeping through the bald spot on the back of his head. It would be an hour before the cab was comfortable. In the meantime, he and Pearl would tough it out.

Lights were starting to come on in some of the houses, and Pete could see inside the windows that weren't covered by curtains. Mrs. Baker sat at her kitchen table, scooping the guts from half a grapefruit one spoonful at a time. Everett O'Malley sat in front of a giant flat-screen TV that flashed and flickered. Did that man ever sleep?

Pete knew their names because they left him Christmas cards. A handful of folks around here did that, even though he kept to himself and interacted with others as little as possible. One lady even left a neatly wrapped tray of homemade caramels every Christmas and a gift certificate to The Hog House in Shelby on the first day of every summer. She must not know about Pearl. She never signed the card.

Pete routinely caught glimpses of the private lives unfolding in Sleeping Grass, but folks rarely paid any attention to him. So long as he did his job, the garbage man remained largely unnoticed. He just drove and dumped, drove and dumped—week after week, month after month. Which was fine with Pete. He didn't want to be noticed.

“Hey, Pearl.” He turned down his first alley and pulled up to the battered blue garbage bin waiting stoically for him like an old man at the bus stop. “What do you suppose we'd see if we ran the route backward one day? Just flipped it right around?”

She seemed to shrug. He'd be tempted to do it if it wouldn't send everyone into a state of panic and confusion. Folks would surely notice him then.

The hydraulic mast clutched the bin and dumped it effortlessly into the truck's hopper. At the next stop, a shabby-looking baby walker leaned against the bin, so Pete hopped out to grab it. Snake on a rake, it was cold.

This house had already used up their two “hand pickups” for the month, yet Pete never reported anyone if they went over the allotted amount. If the Sleeping Grass Public Works Department could look the other way when he had a potbelly tagalong in his cab, he could handpick a few extra items without complaining.

The walker was filthy—crayon marks covered the tray, and mashed Cheerios were crusted to the seat—but he saw no broken pieces. All four wheels were present and accounted for. No rips in the fabric.

It wasn’t easy to wrangle the walker into the cab and over the center console. Thankfully it was collapsible. Pearl snorted irritably when Pete wedged it down in front of her seat, forcing her to reposition.

He quickly shut his door on the cold. “It’s not my fault folks insist on throwing away perfectly good stuff.”

Pearl snorted again, and Pete huffed. “And where would *you* be if I never rescued anything from the landfill?”

She nudged the chair with her snout.

“That’s what I thought.”



Pete was nearly two hours into his route when the sun peeked over the frozen prairie. It brought little warmth, but the temperature could rise to zero by noon. Maybe. On days like this, he kept the heat cranked up and recited Robert Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night” to his unwitting cab companion.

Sleeping Grass was enduring one of the cold snaps common to February in the northern plains of Montana, an area along Highway 2 referred to as the Hi-Line. It had never bothered him when he lived here as a child, but now that he’d returned to the place where so many cold memories lived, the bitter chill weighed him down.

“Oh, February, you most unbearable and endless of months,
cold and dark and empty with no sign of spring.
Why must you breathe your stinging breath
all over everything?”

He liked to recite his own poetry to Pearl, as well. Her expectations for his body of work were, thankfully, not very high.

Pete turned down another alley while repeating the words of his poem in his head. December was cold and dark, too, but there were glimpses through windows of Christmas parties and holiday lights and gingerbread houses. And January’s cold and dark were tempered by the promise of new beginnings, the hope of starting over. But February?

February was the reason not everyone made it on the Hi-Line.

He stopped alongside the trash bin belonging to a tiny gray bungalow buttoned up tight against the cold. A wisp of smoke rose from the chimney. He maneuvered the joystick to lower the grabber while peering over the fence. Though run-down and nondescript, this was his favorite house.

The house where *she* lived.

There were never extra items to handpick here, only a bin full of beer cans and tequila bottles, week after week. He was sure those belonged to Jerry, the other resident of the house. He’d often seen Jerry out carousing, and Pete had faced him down twice now when he’d met Pete at the truck to chew him out over letting the lid of the trash bin hit the fence.

Pete had seen the hard set of his jaw and the mean glint in his eye. He’d never seen *her*, though, except for a few brief glances through the window. He’d never met her. Didn’t know her name. But he knew it couldn’t be Jerry who was responsible for the burgeoning flower beds in the backyard. The picnic table painted yellow with white daisies stenciled

across its top. The bird feeders and wind chimes and well-kept crabapple tree with a barn-shaped birdhouse perched in its branches.

She had done all that. And she'd been the only reason Pete hadn't broken Jerry's nose that last time. That and the fact Pete was tired of never lasting more than a couple years at a job before being fired for losing his temper. Tired of having to find a new place to live. This time he was planning to stick it out, if only to watch her backyard stutter to life every spring like a foal finding its legs. He was getting too old for fighting.

There were no flowers now, not in godforsaken February. The picnic table lay under a tarp. But he could picture it all, and he believed the hands that nurtured this oasis must be beautiful hands indeed.

Surely they must be.

*The hands that cultivate the seed
Must be beautiful indeed . . .*

Pearl grumbled, and Pete blinked, his face warming as he realized how long he must've been staring at the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Daydreaming in rhyme. Boy, was he ever stupid. Stupid!

He saw Pearl looking at him as he quickly drove forward to the next bin. He chuckled. "What are *you* staring at?"

Pearl tolerated him at least. Pearl and Windy Ray were his only friends in Sleeping Grass. He'd feared coming back here would mean running into all kinds of folks from his past, but he hardly remembered anyone. That was what almost forty years of being away did. It made it easier to pretend he had no past here at all. No history.

Except when February rolled around.

two



Pete helped Pearl down from the Xpeditor and into his twenty-year-old Dodge Dakota. She was a good truck, had taken him all over the country, but she wasn't pretty. Pete set the baby walker in the bed of the pickup and climbed into the cab. Pearl nestled into the blanket he kept on the passenger seat for her.

"Sit tight." Pete turned the heat to high. "We'll get your bacon sizzling in no time."

They drove to the outskirts of town to a small cabin that reminded Pete of a bunkhouse you might've found on a cattle ranch a hundred years ago. Pearl gave a squeal of protest when Pete opened her door and the cold air entered the truck.

"Don't give me that." Pete helped her down and hurried toward the front steps. "You know there's better food here than at our house."

Every Monday, rain or shine, Christmas or Fourth of July, Pete and Windy Ray played Chickenfoot at Windy Ray's house. It was the only game they'd both known when they first met, and they had honed their skills to the level of an art form.

Pete knocked twice and opened the door. "*Oki.*"

The Blackfeet greeting Windy Ray had taught him filled the small space, landing gently on the various piles of rocks placed throughout the two-room house. A pot that smelled of sage simmered on the stovetop.

“Pete the Poet.” Windy Ray sat at a rickety card table, the dominoes already laid out. “I thought maybe your hands would be frozen to the steering wheel and I would have to come rescue you.”

Pete smiled. “I might be able to stand on the back of your bike, but what about Pearl?”

Windy Ray didn’t have a car. Wherever he went, his dog, Apisi, rode in the wire basket attached to the front of his red tricycle, and his oxygen tank rode in the rear basket.

Windy Ray eyed Pearl carefully. “Perhaps you would carry her on your back.”

Pearl parked herself in front of the woodstove next to Apisi and gave Pete a look that seemed to say *You wouldn’t dare*.

Pete settled into the chair across from his friend. “Let’s hope it never comes to that.”

Pearl had been a piglet when he found her at the dump, listless and covered in dog food. She’d weighed four pounds. The vet he’d taken her to said she was sickly and had probably been the runt of the litter and not expected to live. She’d likely been tossed to give the other piglets a better chance at survival.

That hadn’t sat well with Pete. Against the vet’s recommendation, he’d taken the pig home, and he and Pearl had been inseparable ever since. He was thankful she was a runt, however, or she might be twice her size.

Windy Ray had found the double-nine domino, so he made the first move. “I feel I must address Pearl’s sweatshirt.”

Pete’s face scrunched. Windy Ray never let him get away with anything. “It was awful cold this morning.”

Windy Ray turned his gray eyes on Pete. “And we wouldn’t

want our beloved animal friends to be cold, would we? The friends we feel it is our duty to nurture and protect? Whom the Creator has given no one in the world but us as their humble caretakers?”

Pete grinned sheepishly and made a play on the table. “Okay, okay. I promise I’ll never make fun of Apisi’s sweaters ever again.”

Windy Ray nodded solemnly as he took his turn, but there was a spark of humor in his expression. “Apisi would be grateful.”

Pete played another domino. “What’s in the pot? Smells good.”

“Elk stew.” Windy Ray stood and lumbered over to the stove, carefully arranging his oxygen tube as he went so he wouldn’t trip over it. He was taller than Pete and, despite his advanced age, had long black hair that flew behind him like a raven when he faced the wind behind his house and shouted into it, letting it carry his heartache away. It all sounded like heartache to Pete. He’d never asked what the shouting meant, and Windy Ray never offered to tell. He merely accepted the nickname his behavior generated around town with a dignified air of inevitability.

Windy Ray stirred the contents of the pot. “I have it on good authority it’s your birthday on Friday.”

Pete’s eyebrows shot up. He’d never mentioned that to anyone. “What good authority?”

“The wind never lies.”

“Fine, don’t tell me. When is *your* birthday?”

Windy Ray’s eyes twinkled as he replaced the lid on the pot and returned to the table. “I was born before harvest.”

Pete was used to such vague answers. His friend rarely spoke of his past. Pete knew he’d been born outside a town even smaller and more isolated than Sleeping Grass, to a Blackfeet father and white mother. He knew he’d been taught

both Siksika and English, though the family hadn't had much contact with the tribe. Pete hadn't been able to pry out any other details, however.

"How old are you, then?"

"Old enough."

Pete shook his head and glanced in the direction of the woodstove to check on the animals. They were curled up together, napping. "How old is Apisi?"

Windy Ray's smile was like the break of dawn. "Nine years and four months as of two days ago."

Pete laughed.

With a clink, Windy Ray played his last domino and won the first round. "I need a ride to Great Falls next week."

"Oh?" Many folks in Sleeping Grass drove the two hours to Great Falls once a month to stock up at Costco and go out to eat—maybe spend the day at Electric City Water Park in the summer—but Pete rarely went there. He had no need for a forty-eight-pack of hamburger buns. Not to mention the years he'd been forced to spend in Great Falls as a kid were ones he'd just as soon forget.

"I have business to attend to in the big city." Windy Ray's large hands deftly mixed up the dominoes in preparation for the second round. "Will you take us?"

"What kind of business?" Pete's voice had a wary ring to it. The last time he'd driven Windy Ray and Apisi to the "big city," he'd ended up being thrown out of a KFC for defending Windy Ray against a punk kid who thought the old man was an easy target for whatever anger and fear were festering in his soul. Of course, Windy Ray had not been entirely innocent in the matter, having felt the need to comment on the young man's low-riding, baggy pants.

Windy Ray's face gave nothing away. "I need to see a man about a horse."

Pete harrumphed. "When do you want to go?"

“At your earliest convenience.”

“Wednesday would be best. Would that work? I’m usually done by one-thirty.”

Windy Ray bowed his head gallantly and made a big play on the table. “Thank you.”

Pete scowled at his friend’s dwindling pile of dominoes. “You’re going to beat me again, aren’t you?”

Pete lost these Monday matches more often than not.

“You don’t focus. Your mind wanders.”

Pete couldn’t argue with that. “This time when we’re in Great Falls, could you keep your comments to yourself?”

The corner of Windy Ray’s mouth twitched. “Perhaps you should keep your fists to yourself.”

Pete scowled again. He’d gotten better at that over the years, but it was still easier said than done. He turned to Pearl and jerked a thumb at Windy Ray. “We’ve got a wise guy over here.”

Pearl did not so much as flick an ear in response.

“She agrees with me,” Pete said.

“Yes.” Windy Ray laid down his last domino. “I’m very wise.”

Pete stared at his hands as he helped his friend mix up the dominoes for the third round. They were gnarled and scarred. They’d been in many fights. Some men aggravated and hurt others for the fun of it, but Pete didn’t enjoy fighting. He never intended for it to happen. Yet sometimes it did, and his fists had cost him over a dozen jobs. It was becoming more and more difficult to find anyone to take a chance on him anymore, which was how he’d ended up back in a place he never thought he’d see again.

He tucked his hands away. Maybe all those folks who’d given up on him when he was a kid—families who had kicked him out of their homes, counselors who had added incriminating reports to his case file—had been right.

He would never amount to anything.

