

Chapter One

The farmer climbed our front porch steps, his worn-out blue jeans frayed at the knees, a red seed cap pulled tightly over his head. Tractor grease stained the fabric of his T-shirt in dark, finger-wide streaks, and several days of neglected stubble shadowed his deeply suntanned face. He held a jumbled sheaf of receipts in his hands, the bills and invoices of the season. Somewhere in that pile, he had promised, was a large check that would save our family farm. He rang our doorbell with a calloused, blunted finger.

It was the mid 1990s, and we were suffering the worst drought in decades. All summer, the Shenandoah Valley had been scorched by the sun, baked week after week into listless tones of sepia. Heat shimmered in opalescent waves above the brown hills. Our cattle wandered from field to field, mouthing tufts of dry, sparse grass.

My mother and I met him at the door. Dust coated his work boots, the same dust that covered the farm. Beads of sweat lay on his forehead, and he absently wiped them away with a handkerchief as he greeted us.

The farmer, Albert, had managed our land that year, and was here to give us an accounting of the season. He had planted our rolling hills with corn and soybeans earlier that spring, and had recently harvested the crop. It was the first time in a generation that grain was

grown on our land, and my family was relying on him to make sure that everything went just right.

The previous week, combines had augured the corn and soybeans into large, cumbersome trucks, hauling it away to waiting railcars. As on most farms, the harvest had to carry us through the frozen winter, paying for our electricity, fuel, and food. Rolling the dice, we sacrificed reliable cow pastures for fields of crops, hoping the reward would be worth the risk. Once the unending drought arrived, we knew this year we would be cutting it desperately close.

I had graduated from college only five months earlier, wild-haired and bearded, my Birkenstocks worn to rags and a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* tucked under one arm. Growing up on the farm, I had spent summers baling hay and tending to our small flock of chickens, but college was to be my passport away from the hard and grueling life of agriculture. I returned home penniless, an unreliable truck and a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles my only assets. Degrees in Literature and Geology, I was convinced, left me positioned for some wonderful career opportunity. I just didn't know what it would be yet.

On commencement day, my grandfather on my father's side, a retired chemist of forty years, summarily looked me up and down and loudly asked my gathered family, "How does he expect to get a job with all that *hair*?" I didn't know the answer myself. For the time being, helping out on the farm would be a useful diversion until I figured out my next move.

After a week back at the farm, his question still echoing in my ears, I acknowledged that he had a point. My education had prepared me for something more challenging than frying and holstering french fries but had otherwise done little to bolster a résumé of marketable skills. My college roommate, who wrote his thesis on the Mexican

peso crisis, had already turned down several job offers before securing a plump salary at a bank in Manhattan. I remained confident that the right job would eventually fall into my lap.

Strangely, as I sat near the phone stuffing envelopes with poems addressed to obscure literary magazines, no Manhattan banks called to inquire about my services. In fact, no one at all called, not even my skeptical chemist grandfather. I spent the hot summer days doing odd jobs around the farm, nailing sagging fence boards, tacking down the sheet metal on the barn roof, and watching Albert working in the distance.

The farm had been passed down on my mother's side of the family. Although she believed that agriculture was a noble pursuit, she never became a farmer herself. After marrying my father, his job in the USDA Forest Service took them to Seattle, almost as far away from the Shenandoah Valley as they could go. It wasn't until her own father, the farmer, fell ill that she returned East; when he passed away, she was unexpectedly thrust into the role of ownership. She hired managers to run the farm, while she and my father commuted to jobs in nearby cities.

This was 1984, and I was ten. My sister Betsy and I eavesdropped as my parents farmed by phone each evening, arriving home exhausted and microwaving a round of TV dinners before calling the manager to check on daily operations. The news was rarely positive. Cattle and apple prices, our two main crops, were at historical lows. Our tractors, dated from the 1950s, were in sore need of an overhaul. My parents bickered as their city paychecks began to subsidize bills that our farm's modest production couldn't cover.

The operation became a revolving door for managers. Despite their best intentions, my parents had enlisted drunkards, thieves, liars, desperadoes, and dimwits. With no daily supervision, and no greater bond than a handshake, these men were usually gone in less than six months.

Albert was their first attempt to tweak the pattern. They had finally given up on the system of managers and farmhands, and recruited him in hopes of collaborating on a crop of corn and soybeans. He owned his own equipment and possessed arcane knowledge of fertilizer applications, harvesting protocols, and strategies to sell at the proper time to ensure the highest returns. Most important, he was honest and had sterling references. We supplied the land rent-free and Albert provided his experience, splitting the profit fifty-fifty. The partnership was a perfect fit.

This new arrangement with Albert left us cautiously optimistic, but my sister and I couldn't help but be influenced by decades of desultory results. Six years older than I, she had studied horticulture during her first year of college, but family and teachers talked her out of the farming life. She pursued nursing school instead. In my sophomore year of college, I walked a wooded campus path with my future wife, Nancy, trying to explain my own conflicted emotions.

"More and more, I'm thinking of becoming a farmer," I told her, kicking absently at the autumn leaves that swirled around our feet. My mind was back at the farm, hours away. "If I don't . . ." The words trailed into the evening air. Farming had been little more than an afterthought my entire childhood, yet suddenly I couldn't get it off my mind. For reasons I didn't understand, I felt a burgeoning responsibility for our farm's future.

"If you don't?" she asked, gently prompting. She had visited the farm several times, and, though she had been raised in the city herself, Nancy had immediately fallen in love with the sweeping views, the rustic buildings, and the open spaces. "If you don't, what do you think will happen?"

I shook my head. "It's just a feeling I've had lately. My grandfather's gone, and no matter who we've hired, we just can't turn the place around. My parents are barely hanging on. The only thing keeping the farm going right now is inertia."

She was thoughtful for a long time. "I've never worked on a farm," she said at last, "but doesn't it make sense that a farm would need a farmer?" She slipped her hand into mine. "Maybe that's what you've been feeling. Maybe the farm needs *you*."

Two years later, as the hot, dry summer after graduation wore on, I revisited this conversation over and over again. With the rest of my family away at their day jobs, and Nancy now in graduate school, I had the farm mostly to myself that season. I stretched lengths of barbed wire along distant fencerows, enjoying the peaceful solitude. I had never minded getting dirty, accumulating calluses on my rough palms. July slipped into August, and I awoke each morning to the simmering heat of the endless drought. I sweated, strained my muscles, and worked outside through all types of weather. Daily farm life required these tolerances, and I conditioned myself to accept them without complaint.

I watched Albert working the distant hillsides, his equipment gleaming in the unrelenting sun. The thought of my own fleet of tractors and shiny equipment seemed like a worthwhile dream, and it was easy to visualize myself perched atop one of these powerful machines, a roaring, mobile throne atop my agricultural kingdom. I daydreamed about how wonderful our old barn would look with several new tractors waiting behind the bay doors, an army of machinery ready to plow, plant, and harvest.

Even so, a voice in the back of my mind constantly urged me to look for a career with an actual paycheck. Albert was managing the fields without my help, and in spite of the dry weather, he remained convinced that the diminished harvest would cover our bills. Besides, no one in my family considered farming to be economically viable; we had witnessed too many small farms in our community go out of business to think otherwise. Perhaps Albert was the farmer our land had been waiting for. I bought a copy of the local newspaper and began circling want ads.



Age 20, home from college for the summer.

The weeks passed and, for any array of reasons, I was turned down as a sports reporter for my local newspaper, as a waiter for two different restaurants, as a full-time whitewater raft guide, and finally, as a custodian at the animal shelter, cleaning up dog poop. I honestly didn't know whether to be insulted or grateful.

Worried that autumn would arrive without the nourishing milk of the teat of academia, I signed up at the last possible moment to get my teaching certification. Perhaps, I speculated, I could be a teacher *and* a farmer. It didn't seem like a far-fetched idea.

This last-minute decision was greeted with a sigh of relief from my father. A lifelong government employee who worked in Washington, D.C., my father had spent years devoted to weekend agricultural projects of his own, hoping to discover a modern, profitable direction for the farm. Over the years, our salaried managers had politely tolerated his hastily conceived side projects, offering polite encouragement but rolling their eyes at him behind his back. Time and again, as my father's small enterprises fell by the wayside, he grew entrenched in the belief that farming could never be a "real job." These days, he spoke to me encouragingly of teaching tenure, summer vacations, and guaranteed benefits. To his dismay, by the end of October, I had fully withdrawn from classes.

"You did *what*?" my father boomed. Normally easygoing, he stood before me with his mouth agape, his eyes disbelieving.

"I dropped out. I don't want to be a teacher. I've decided to make a real go at farming."

"Oh, no. No, no, no." He shook his head emphatically back and forth. "Big mistake. This is just a . . . this is just *such* a big mistake." He paused. "Are you sure you're unenrolled? Maybe you can still show up at class tomorrow and they won't mind."

"Dad, I'm telling you, I'm done. I'm done with school. Farming is something that I just have to do. If I don't try, I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life."

He looked at me as though I had just told him I wanted to push helpless old ladies down long flights of stairs.

“Oh, you’ll end up regretting it, I can guarantee that. What a mistake!” At a loss for additional words, he turned on his heel and strode away from me. At nearly six-foot-six, he could cover ground quickly. But he didn’t get far.

Turning back to me, he said, “Farming? Are you *kidding* me? You don’t even know how to grow a turnip!” Rueful with skepticism, he turned away again.

I wanted to call after him, to somehow convince him I was making the right choice, but I couldn’t get the words out. I can *learn* to be a farmer, I wanted to say. I’m strong, and I’ll stick with it. But he was right about one thing: Even though I had grown up on the farm, my agricultural experience was very limited. If I could only cultivate some small success, a minor triumph or two, I felt, he might be persuaded the farm could still work.

My mother had her own doubts about my decision but was vastly more encouraging. It had been, after all, her side of the family through which the farm had passed hands. On my father’s side, steady, predictable jobs had been the norm: shopkeeper, chemist, government contractor. In contrast, on my mother’s side, it had been six straight generations of farmers. If I were somehow able to follow in their footsteps, I would be the seventh farmer in the family to work the land, dating from just after the American Revolution.

Later that evening, the taste of my father’s reprimand still bitter on my tongue, I told her about my dream of working on the family farm.

“If that’s what you really want to do,” my mother began before correcting herself. “If that’s what you *need* to do, then we’ll stand behind you. Your father’s upset, but that’s because he wasn’t raised this way, on a farm. He’s a city person at heart. He’s just trying to protect you in his own way.”

She paused. "It's going to be hard, you know. I've always told you, 'We're land rich and cash poor.' It's as true today as it's ever been."

I knew that better than anyone. For more than fifteen years, since my grandfather had died, my parents had paid nearly all of the farm bills through their off-farm salaries. If they had ever quit their well-paying jobs, the farm would have failed within a matter of months. This fact was a considerable source of family stress, and slowly, insidiously, matters of money had become an emotional flashpoint in our family. My parents did their best to avoid the subject entirely, mechanically waking each morning, getting in their cars, and driving into the city before dawn.

"Your father's discouraged because the farm hasn't turned a profit for years, not since your grandfather ran the place."

"Discouraged's an understatement," I agreed.

"Well, he's got a right to be. He's put years of his own paychecks into this place and never gotten a dollar of it back. That would discourage anybody.

"But I know," she continued, with increasing conviction, "that there's a way we can do this. It might not be the same way your grandfather did it, and letting Albert run the farm might be only a temporary solution. Whatever the answer is, we'll help you the best we can."

My father, who had silently entered the room as we were talking, leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed, equal parts sullen and resigned. I smiled at him, the most beaming, bearded smile I could conjure. He shook his head wordlessly, in disbelief that he was being outvoted.

"And your father will help, too," she added on his behalf, as he continued to shake his head. "Just as soon as he gets over his shock."

In spite of the drought, the fall harvest began. We observed as truck after truck lumbered slowly away, brimming with glittering kernels of corn, cascades of resplendent soybeans. I didn't know what a tractor-trailer load of grain was worth, but imagined it must be more money than I had ever seen in my life. We had done the math and knew we'd need a little more than ten thousand dollars to pay our bills through the winter. Although it would barely keep our heads above water, we took comfort in the idea that we had finally done it—our little farm had made a real profit.

Albert stood on our front porch, a crumpled bouquet of pink and yellow invoices in his hand. The receipts looked as though they had been salvaged from the chaos of his dashboard, smudged and corrugated with a season's worth of hard living.

"Well," he began. "It was *dry*."

Yes, yes, I said to myself, impatient despite my polite upbringing. Everyone was tired of the drought, entirely worn out by it. How did we *do*, I wanted to know.

He paused, as though awaiting confirmation that the only green to be found in the entire county was the paint on the John Deere combine.

"So," my mother was forced to ask, after a few more moments of awkward silence, "how did the numbers turn out?"

Albert nodded at the papers. "Right. That's what those are for. That's the fertilizer bill, spray bill, seed bill. I got my fuel figured up on that other sheet." He pointed to a notation written in pencil. "We broke a chain on the auger sprocket, but that was only five dollars to fix, so that's what that is there."

He fell silent again, giving us time to look over the receipts. Was it just me, or was he stalling? It seemed like a long-winded way to get around to the bottom line.

This time, I prompted him. “Well, once all that’s hashed out, how much did we make? Seemed like a lot of trucks rolled out of here.”

He took off his hat, roughly scrubbing his hair with his worn-down fingers. “Yeah, I’m getting around to that. See, the thing is, even though there was no corn or beans to be had around here, the Midwest’s had themselves the bumper crop of a decade. Turns out the price this year is the worst it’s been in ten years.” He replaced and adjusted his hat. I glanced sidelong at my mother. Her face revealed the concern I was trying to mask.

“Albert,” my mother said firmly. “What kind of numbers are we talking about here?”

“Bottom line?” he asked.

“Bottom line,” she replied.

He exhaled slowly. “Eighteen sixteen.”

I couldn’t believe it. Eighteen hundred dollars? We had been hoping for ten thousand, and were nervous about anything less than eight. How could anyone’s farm expect to survive on less than two thousand dollars?

My mother was the first to find her voice. “My goodness. I . . . I don’t know what to say. Albert, when we talked about it this spring, we all agreed that ten thousand apiece was a reasonable expectation.”

“Yes ma’am, but, like you already know, it was dry as a bone. We were darn lucky to get the crop that we did.” He nodded at the receipts. “And most of them costs is fixed. Of course, the profits jump when the harvest goes up, but if it don’t . . .” he said and shrugged helplessly, “well, the costs came back to bite us.”

Albert genuinely looked as if he’d rather be anywhere else on the planet right now. “I’d be the last person to lead you on, Mrs. Pritchard. I just never expected nothing like this.”

“Yes, but . . .” She shook her head in disbelief. “I mean, Albert, eighteen hundred and sixteen dollars is a *long* way from ten thousand. I just don’t understand how it happened.”

Albert's eyes widened.

"Eighteen hundred?" He shook his head. Without a trace of irony or humor, he corrected her. "Mrs. Pritchard . . . it was eighteen *dollars* and sixteen *cents*."

I was fairly certain that, just for a moment, the earth listed sideways.

She looked at him in disbelief. "Eighteen dollars," she repeated. "How . . . how is that *possible*?"

Albert, red with embarrassment, gestured at the accounts. "It's all right there, ma'am." He searched for words. "Believe me . . . I'm as disappointed as you. Probably more so. I feel mostly to blame, for leading you into it."

"But there were so many trucks! Full trucks, Albert. Isn't *somebody* making money off of this?"

Albert removed his hat, pointlessly crimped the brim several times, and pulled it tightly back onto his head. Shoulders slumped, he had the air of a defeated man.

"Yes ma'am. Somebody probably is. Just not us."

They continued to talk, pouring over the numbers, but I'm certain that's the last I heard, and the last I was able to see, for quite some time.

So this is what society was trying to tell me. This is what my city-born father, and his father before him, was so afraid of, what my entire culture had been trying to tell me for years:

Forget about it, kid. It's a fairy tale. A nursery rhyme. There's no "family farm" anymore, just huge corporations with tractors as big as houses.

Do you see now? Do you get it yet, hayseed? We told you so. Now go get a haircut and a suit, and find a real job before it's too late.

I had dropped out of school, abandoning a steady, reliable career as a teacher. And for what? All those trucks filled with corn and soybeans? At the end of the day, they had made us enough to buy a

bag of corn chips and a glass of soy milk. At least I could afford some tap water to wash the bad taste out of my mouth.

Yes, I replied. Yes, I see how it is. Anger boiled within me, waves of shame and humiliation. If Albert had handed me the eighteen dollars at that moment, I would have torn it into shreds and tossed it into the wind.

Yes, I understood now. Our family farm was broken. I made up my mind that, somehow, we were going to fix it.