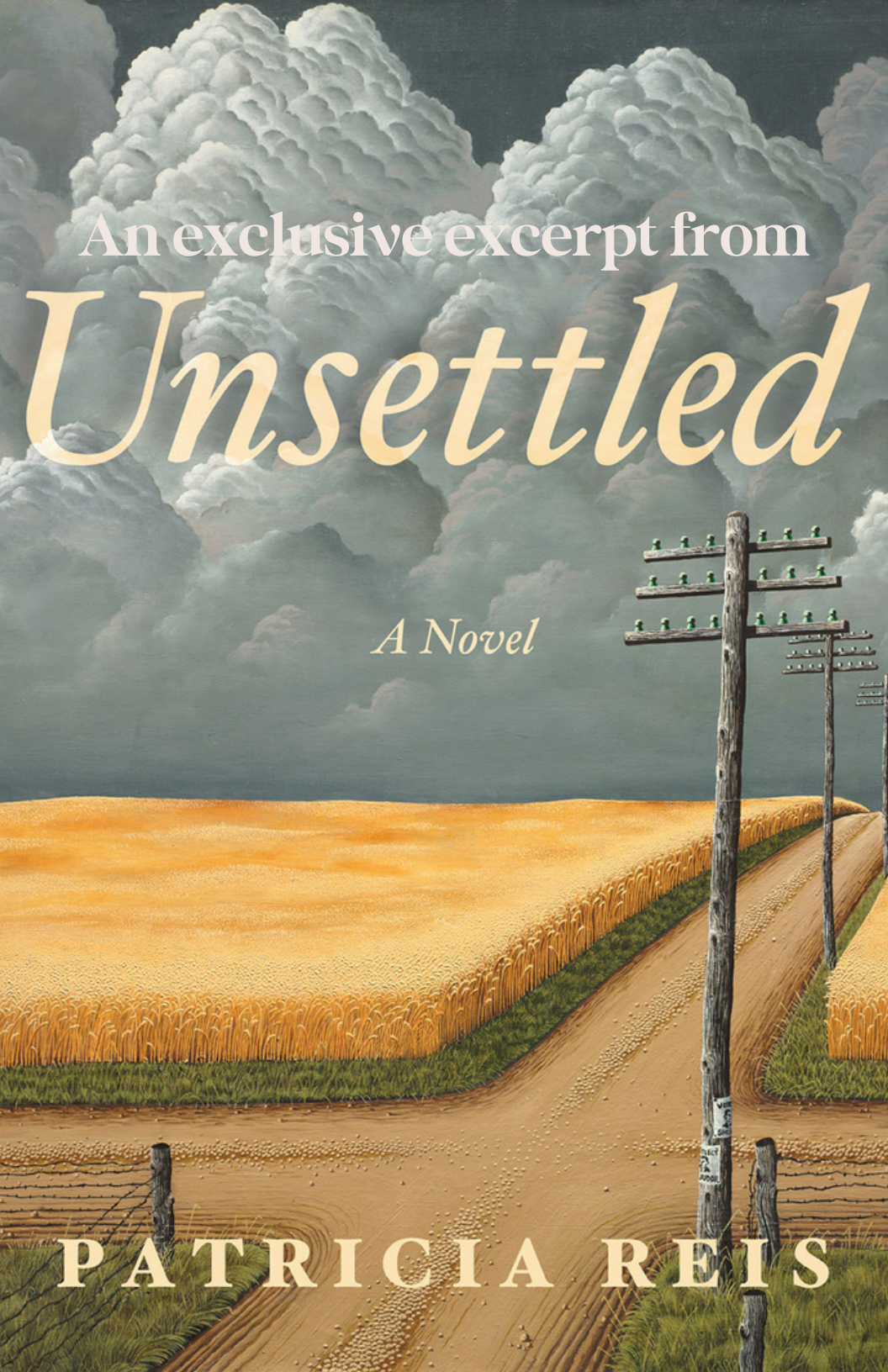




An exclusive excerpt from

# *Unsettled*

*A Novel*

PATRICIA REIS

# SIoux CREEK FARM, IOWA

DECEMBER 31, 1899

CAREFUL NOT TO DISTURB HER SLEEPING HUSBAND, Letty inched noiselessly out of bed, wrapped her shawl around her nightgown, and tiptoed barefoot down the stairs. Her nerves were too jumpy for sleep. In the kitchen, she adjusted the wick in the kerosene lamp to give just enough light for her task. The cook stove still held embers and she tossed in a few dried corncobs for extra warmth. The clock hands were nearing midnight. She was born at this hour—a strange and uncanny moment to enter the world, her mother always said. In the blink of an eye, she would turn forty-four years old, and the world would enter the twentieth century.

On the high cupboard shelf, away from any greedy little fingers, she stored the glass canning jar that contained all her extra egg and creamery butter money. Filled to the top with pennies, nickels, and dimes, she emptied it onto the kitchen table and sorted and stacked the coins. For the umpteenth time, she counted it out—three dollars, a veritable housewife's fortune. Satisfied that her addition was correct, she scooped the coins into a blue velvet coin purse, ready for tomorrow.

Months ago, rumor had reached her that Heinrich von Schimmer, the famous portrait photographer from Des Moines, was going to set up a studio in one of the storefronts in Maple Grove. Town folks and farm wives for miles around were clamoring to get a family portrait made as a souvenir to mark the end of the old century and the beginning of the new. Except for the commonplace one taken of her marriage, her family had no reason or money for photographs charting their past twenty-three years of building up their farm, so she was dead set on making a record of their accomplishment. Letty had given advance notice of the exact time they were to meet at the studio. Sister Kate and Mary lived in Maple Grove. Her oldest girls were reliable women now; their timely presence was guaranteed. Jacob and his family also lived in town, and he had been informed that his presence was expected. Otto had an establishment some miles north in the town of Early, but he had promised he would be there on time. She would have to trust him. The four younger children sleeping upstairs had their finery all set out.

With the coins safely secured, Letty sat at the kitchen table, threaded the needle and put the finishing touches on Adam's new wool vest, lining it with a chestnut-colored silk, the very color of his eyes. Over the years he had let his beard grow long. He was still dark-haired, even though he was fifty-eight years old. Farming had kept him strong, although lately he complained of stiffness in his joints upon arising and her concern for him nagged, along with aching remorse that she had not given him more sons. The silk lining was a great extravagance if not a reward, as was the family portrait that would serve as solid proof that their family had stayed the course and prospered despite the lack of sons.

Beyond that, in the darkened chambers of her private mind where she worked her thoughts, there dwelled other

reasons for making the photograph. She cut the thread with her teeth and hung the vest on Adam's chair where he would find it in the morning. She checked the cobs in the cookstove, making sure there were enough embers for Tante Kate to get the fire going again in a few hours. Still half asleep, she snuffed the lantern wick with the tips of her fingers. *Ouch!* She was so careless, always burning something.

From out the kitchen window a shroud of whiteness covered the corn-stubbed fields and veiled the trees. Adam would have to hitch up Pet and Bucky to the sleigh for their ride into town. The snow glowed as if lit from within. The cold windowpane soothed her burnt fingers. Her eyes caught a darting shadow move in the woods. It was not an animal, but someone on foot. A chill passed through her. She clutched her shawl closer. A creak in the floorboards caused her whole body to jump. Tante Kate stood in the kitchen doorway holding a lit candle. She looked like an ancient wraith with her loose braid and long nightgown.

"Goodness. You gave me a fright. I didn't hear you come down."

"What are you doing in the dark at this hour? And in your bare feet, too." Tante Kate chastised, as if Letty were a child caught in some misbehavior. "It is no good staying up all night. Tomorrow is almost here. There is nothing more for you to do except go back to bed and get some sleep."

Letty's shoulders hunched in deference. "I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep, there's so much to get ready for tomorrow. Now I've ruined your sleep, too." Following Tante Kate upstairs, she reiterated her apologies. "I am very sorry you aren't going with us—to be in the picture. I told you the photographer said it was outside convention to include anyone else—just the husband, wife, and children—"

"*Das ist doch egal.* It does not matter to me," Tante Kate

snorted. “I have almost seventy years of age. Do not even think of it. Certainly, I do not want to spoil your picture, or break the camera, or scare the photographer out of his wits with my homely old visage. I have two pictures. I don’t need any more to know that I exist.”

After all these years Tante Kate still scolded in German. Nothing worked faster to stopper Letty’s mouth.

“Come, let’s get you back to bed, before you catch your death.” Tante Kate led the way up the stairs, holding her candle aloft. Letty shivered, pulled her shawl closer and padded behind her. At the top of the stairs, Tante Kate turned and pressed her forefinger to her lips. “Shush, don’t wake Adam.”

Even under the covers, Letty’s feet were freezing. What a ninny she was. Why hadn’t she pulled on her thick woolen socks? She moved her cold feet closer to Adam’s warmth without disturbing his rhythmic breathing. Even as she closed her eyes in hopes of sleep, her mind raced backward.

Shortly before they had married, Adam informed her that his sister Katharina would be making a permanent home with them. He had shown her the two studio photographs, the same as Tante Kate had just mentioned. They were unforgettable. One showed Kate as a young woman in Germany. She stood next to a table, her hand resting on a book. The powerful frame of her body was tightly cinched at the waist, while a muscular force pushed against the constraining sheath of tucked and darted cloth. Her formidable will was undeniable in the forward set of her chin and jaw, her frontal gaze threatening an assault on the camera. The other portrait included Adam as a young man and was taken some time after their arrival in America, before they had turned up at Letty’s family farm in Illinois. In this photograph, Adam was in his early twenties, full of youthful vigor and promise, while Kate, fifteen years older, sat next to him, doleful as a funeral

goer. Adam never said, and she had never asked, what had transpired for Tante Kate in the years between the two portraits, but it looked like it had been something dreadful. Letty never saw the pictures again.



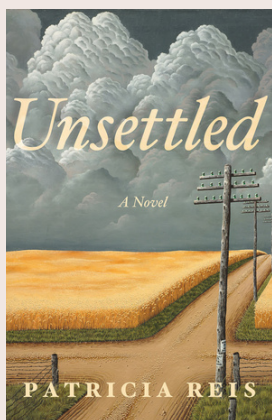
## **Unsettled: A Novel**

**By Patricia Reis**

As Van Reinhardt clears out her father's belongings, she comes across a request penned by her father prior to his death. Examining the family portrait of her German immigrant ancestors that he has left her, Van's curiosity grows about one of the children portrayed there. Meanwhile in the 1870s, Kate is a German immigrant newly arrived in America with only her brother as family. When she and her brother split, she eventually finds her way back to him, but with a secret. Van revisits the town and the farm of her ancestors to discover calamitous events in probate records, farm auction lists, asylum records and lurid obituaries, hinting at a history far more complex and tumultuous than she had expected. But the mystery remains, until she changes upon a small book – sized for a pocket – that holds Tante Kate's secret and provides the missing piece.

### **HISTORICAL FICTION**

**Tradepaper \$19 / 378 pages / ISBN: 978-1-7367954-8-4**



**Available wherever books are sold**

For more information regarding purchases, rights, events, and other exciting opportunities, please visit our website:

[www.sibyllinepress.com](http://www.sibyllinepress.com)

Sibylline Press is distributed to the trade in the U.S. and Canada, and throughout the world through Publishers Group West/Ingram.