

where the blue sky begins

a novel

Katie Powner

"KATIE POWNER'S ENGAGING STORY WILL PULL YOU IN AND LEAVE YOU IN WONDER
AT THAT DEEP, BLUE SKY."—Chris Fabry, bestselling and award-winning author



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To my mom,
the strongest woman I know

Eric Larson had never seen such a sorry excuse for a town. He rubbed his eyes, weary from the ten-hour drive from Seattle, and blinked. This was it? This was the place Uncle Jack couldn't wait for him to see?

A sun-bleached *Welcome to Tukston* sign and five steel wheels the size of small houses greeted him and his brand-new Jeep. As he entered the dusty Montana hamlet, the street names on his navigation screen disappeared, and the car avatar stopped and turned sideways as if to say, "Your guess is as good as mine."

Eric laughed to himself. "*This navigation system is top of the line,*" the salesman had said. "*It will get you anywhere you need to go.*"

Yeah. Anywhere except his home for the summer.

Tukston stretched languidly in front of him as he slowed down, and he couldn't help but frown. Was it really necessary for Uncle Jack to send him hundreds of miles away? Couldn't he have found him an office to run somewhere else? The outdated buildings, the absence of traffic lights, and the spectacular number of pickup trucks and cowboy hats reminded Eric of the Old West. His hydro-blue Jeep stood out like a polished sapphire in a gravel pit.

He pulled into a parking space in front of a diner to try his luck using Google Maps on his phone. His thumbs flew across the screen, searching for answers. How did he get to the rental

his uncle had secured for him? He'd never thought to ask if the place had running water and electricity, but now that he was here, he couldn't help but wonder.

The June sun quickly heated the interior of the Jeep. When Eric lowered the window for a breath of fresh air, something caught his eye. *Hello*. What did we have here? A long-legged blonde in short denim cutoffs walked by on the sidewalk and glanced his way. She seemed a little perky for his taste, and her hair was kind of frizzy, but he lifted his sunglasses to give her a wink, making sure to flex the muscles in his bent arm. She brushed her hair over her shoulder and shot him a smile as she passed.

Tukston might be the redneckest town he'd ever seen, but at least the scenery wasn't half bad.

Eric watched the girl walk away before turning back to his phone. Typing in the address of his rental house produced a red arrow on Google maps, but the address was only partially the same as the one he'd typed in. Was that the place? The address his uncle had texted him said *West*. The one on Google said *East*. When he typed it in again, the arrow moved across town.

Great.

The phone rang as he stared at it. Uncle Jack. Perfect timing.

When he answered, his uncle didn't waste any time. "Hey, you get settled in yet?"

Eric kneaded his forehead. "It's like Tombstone over here. And the navigation system doesn't work."

Uncle Jack laughed. "You do realize people figured out how to find their way around long before cellular phones were invented, right?"

Eric had to smile. "You do realize people call them *cell*phones, right?"

"What people?"

"Everyone. Every single person in the country except you."

"That's hooley."

“You sound like you belong here, not me.”

“No, no.” Uncle Jack huffed the words as if he were out of breath. “You’re the right man for the job.”

“Are you climbing the stairs again? There’s a perfectly good elevator in your building.”

“And there’s a perfectly good brain in your head that I expect you to use while you’re in Tukston. I see big things on your horizon, my boy.”

Eric’s nose wrinkled. Big things? This town was too small for big things. But if he could make an impression at the office here, there would be no limit to his horizon once he got back to the big city.

“Where are you now?” Uncle Jack asked.

Eric sighed and read the sign above the diner. “The Good Food Diner.”

“That’s my favorite place to eat. You should try their Cowboy Deluxe burger, if you think you can handle it.”

Eric bristled. He could handle a lot more than his uncle gave him credit for. “Right. Sure. Now, where’s the house from here?”

“Don’t know. Guess you’ll have to ask for directions.”

Eric rolled his eyes. His uncle had spent two years in Tukston setting up a local branch of Larson Financial back in the day. He knew exactly where the house was. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Uncle Jack chuckled. “Get off your phone and go talk to a real live person. They’ll point you in the right direction. And try to be nice, please. My company’s reputation is on the line.”

It wasn’t like any of this had been Eric’s idea. When Uncle Jack had told him that he thought Eric was ready for the next step in his career, Eric had assumed he was being promoted. Not being sent to Hicktown, USA. But he hadn’t been able to tell his uncle no. Despite never having kids of his own, the man had

been more of a father to him than his own dad for years now. Eric would do whatever it took to prove himself to his uncle.

Except use an outhouse or wear cowboy boots.

“Fine.” He opened the car door and stepped into the sunshine. “Talk to you later.”

He was going to conquer this summer. He would find his rental house. He would charm the socks off all the clients at Larson Financial. He would make his uncle proud and rub it in his father’s face. And then he’d get that tenth-floor office he’d been promised.



A bell above the door jangled as Eric entered Good Food. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he took in the dingy interior of the restaurant. Only three customers were here at four in the afternoon on a Saturday, and all three turned in their seats to gape at him. Two were older men who looked like they’d just returned from a week in the woods—make that two weeks. The third was a kid no more than ten who was nursing a strawberry milk shake.

Under the scrutiny of the locals, Eric wavered and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. None of these people seemed like the type to be impressed by his forty-dollar T-shirt.

The middle-aged waitress approached him with a wide smile and heavily hair-sprayed bangs. “Howdy there. You can sit wherever you’d like.”

They even said *howdy* here. It figured. Eric returned her smile, calculating the probability as high that this woman would know where his rental was. “Thanks, but I’m just looking for some help. Can you tell me how to get to Prairie Dog Road?”

She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “You know someone over there?”

“Uh, no.”

She looked him up and down, her eyes flicking toward his

Jeep parked outside after studying his Italian loafers. “I’m Dee. What’d you say your name was?”

And this was why he would rather rely on his phone for information. Phones did not ask questions. “I’m Eric.” He held out his hand. “Eric Larson. The new senior advisor for Larson Financial.”

Her eyes widened, and her broad smile returned. “You’re Jack’s nephew? I heard you were coming, but I didn’t expect you to be so—” her eyes scanned his shoulders and biceps again, then studied his bare left hand—“young. And neat.”

Eric shifted on his feet. He couldn’t be the only man in Tukston who took good care of his appearance. He glanced at the other men in the diner. Well, maybe he could.

He gave Dee his best lopsided grin. “Perhaps you could draw me a map?”

“Sure, sure.” She hurried to pull a small notebook and pen from her apron pocket. “I suppose you’re renting the Gustafson place. We’ll have you on your way in no time.”

His calculations had been correct. As usual.

She quickly sketched a map on the paper with one X marking where the diner was and another X for the house. She explained the route to him and tore the page from her book. “There’s a big propane tank painted like a pink pig in the yard near the end of Prairie Dog Road.” She held out the page. “If you see that, you know you’ve gone too far.”

“Thank you.” He took hold of the paper. “I appreciate your help.”

She didn’t let go of the map until he looked up and met her eyes. Her expression was earnest. “You’ll have to meet my niece sometime. She’s about your age, and real pretty, too.”

Eric swallowed before nodding. “Thank you, again.”

She finally let go, and he quickly tucked the paper in his pocket before she could get any ideas about writing her niece’s phone number on it. He liked to look, sure, but he wasn’t

looking for a relationship. He was only in town for the summer. Besides, he had Tiffani.

Sort of.

He hurried out the door and back to his vehicle. According to the hand-drawn map, Prairie Dog Road was southeast of the diner. His phone rang again as he glanced behind him to back onto the street. He perked up. It was Chase.

“Hey, bro.” Eric would never talk on his phone while driving in Seattle without the hands-free feature on, but there weren’t any other cars on the road here. “How was Burger King today?”

“Terrible. I messed up three orders and got yelled at twice.”

Eric tried to keep the smile out of his voice. If handing someone the wrong size box of fries was his little brother’s biggest problem, he was doing pretty well. “It’s only your first week. Cut yourself some slack.”

He had hoped Chase would aim a bit higher when he’d encouraged him to get a summer job before leaving for college, but at least he was working *somewhere*. With how shy Chase was, Eric was just glad he got a job after graduation at all.

“Did you make it to Tukston yet? What’s it like?”

Eric took a right turn, guided by the waitress’s map, and shook his head. “It’s small. Quiet.”

Dirty. Podunk.

Terrifying.

“It’s weird to have you so far away. I don’t like it.”

“I moved out twelve years ago, Chase.”

“Only to the other side of Seattle. Now you’re a thousand miles away.”

He’d only had six years at home with his younger half brother, since Chase wasn’t born until two years after his parents’ divorce. After his mom remarried. He still remembered how annoyed he’d been as a fourteen-year-old about having a baby brother, about his only-child status being disrupted, but

that hadn't lasted long. Chase's chubby cheeks and the innocent way he'd gripped Eric's finger had won him over. Then as soon as Chase could walk, he'd started following Eric around everywhere he went, and they'd been close ever since.

Eric tapped the steering wheel. "It's only seven hundred and thirteen miles. And I'll be back in time to help you move into the dorms at U-Dub."

Chase had earned a scholarship to the University of Washington, and Eric couldn't be prouder, although it had taken some convincing on Eric's part to get his brother to agree to go. Chase was nervous about leaving home and being around a bunch of new people, yet Eric knew his brother would find his place on campus if he only gave it a chance.

"You promise?" Chase asked.

"Of course." Eric noticed a woman in a purple trench coat driving a clunky Honda scooter ahead of him on the road and slowed down. "I wouldn't miss it."

"My dad says you won't last two weeks in Montana. He says you're too soft for rural living."

Eric wrinkled his nose. His stepdad, Steve, was a decent guy. He'd stepped in and done his best after Eric's dad split. But they'd never really connected.

"I think I can handle Montana for one summer."

"That's what I told him. You can handle anything."

The pride in Chase's voice gave Eric pause. He wasn't sure he deserved Chase's admiration.

The phone beeped in his ear, and he glanced at the screen. Another text from Tiffani. The fifth since he'd left Seattle this morning.

"I gotta go, okay?" He switched the phone to his other hand. "We'll talk again soon."

What was that woman on the scooter doing? She wobbled back and forth on the road. As Eric closed the distance between them, he noticed that despite being closer to fifty, she

was wearing a glittery silver helmet with purple stars that matched her coat as if she were twelve.

“Okay,” Chase said. “But don’t forget you promised.”

“I won’t forget.”

If there was one person in the world to whom he was sure to keep a promise, it was Chase. He said goodbye and tossed his phone on the passenger seat, knocking the waitress’s map onto the floor.

“Oh, come on.” He reached over to pick it up, pulling his eyes off the road for a second. The map was just beyond his fingertips.

He stretched his hand a little farther. He felt the paper and swiped at it. “Yes.” When he straightened up, he was drifting into the other lane and a giant truck was barreling down on him. The driver laid on his horn, and Eric jerked on his steering wheel to correct course, almost clipping the crazy lady on the scooter as he passed her.

His pulse pounded. “Shoot.”

That was close. He looked in his rearview mirror. The woman’s scooter wobbled some more, then veered into the ditch and tipped over. Eric winced. What was she thinking driving that thing on this road? It was rough and uneven, and there was no shoulder. Maybe he’d gotten a little close to her, but it was hardly his fault she put herself in such a precarious position.

Should he stop to make sure she was okay? He looked in the rearview again and saw her stand up, dust herself off, and push the scooter back onto the road.

She was fine. He, on the other hand, was hungry and exhausted from driving all day and just wanted to find his new place and unload all the Trader Joe’s food from his Jeep. He took another right and checked the map. House number 600. Just up ahead.

A small horse trailer was parked along the road in front of the house next door to his rental, and he cast a wary eye at the

Beware of Dog sign staked in the middle of the yard among an assortment of gaudy lawn ornaments. Great. He hated dogs. And where did his neighbor keep a horse?

He swung around the trailer and pulled into his driveway. The place wasn't much to look at. The siding hadn't been updated since the nineties from what he could tell, and if the front yard had any grass in it, it was well hidden by all the weeds. But he hopped out of the Jeep with a fistful of determination. It was only temporary. And he'd have lots of good stories to tell his buddies when he returned to Seattle.

Wait a minute.

What was that thing on his porch?