

HATTIE BIG SKY



THE FIRST CHAPTER
OF
A NEW NOVEL



BY
KIRBY LARSON



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From the desk of Michelle Poploff



Executive Editor, Delacorte Press



PHOTO BY KIRBY LARSON

Several years ago at a writer's conference on beautiful Whidbey Island, Kirby Larson told me about a book she was working on. It was based on a snippet of a story about her great grandmother who homesteaded all by herself in eastern Montana during World War I. So dedicated to uncovering what her great grandmother's life on the prairie might have been like, Kirby spent

three years writing and researching, ultimately creating the story of an orphan who plucks up her courage to leave Iowa to prove up on her late uncle's claim near Vida, Montana.

I'm a great admirer of historical fiction and Kirby's descriptions of the sights, sounds and scents of homesteading life sounded wonderful. I couldn't wait to read the manuscript. She sent it to me several months later and I happily acquired it for our publishing list. The manuscript needed some reworking but its heart and bones were sturdy. The core was there.

I'm delighted to tell you that *Hattie Big Sky* is a book that delivers big time. This story of hardships and triumphs is as vast as the Montana sky. Not only is it a tale of guts and gumption, it celebrates women and the true spirit of independence. I hope readers everywhere will enjoy the emotionally rich story Kirby has lovingly stitched together.

CHAPTER ONE

*December 19, 1917
Arlington, Iowa*

Dear Charlie,

Miss Simpson starts every day with a reminder to pray for you— and all the other boys who enlisted. Well, I say we should pray for the Kaiser—he's going to need those prayers once he meets you!

I ran into your mother today at Uncle Holt's store. She said word is you are heading for England soon; France after that. I won't hardly be able to look at the map behind Miss Simpson's desk now; it will only remind me of how far you are from Arlington.

Mr. Whiskers says to tell you he's doing fine. It's been so cold, I've been letting him sleep in my bedroom. If Aunt Ivy knew, she'd pitch a fit. Thank goodness she finally decided I was too big to switch or my legs would be striped for certain.

You should see Aunt Ivy. She's made herself a cunning white envelope of a hat with a bright red cross stitched on the edge. She

wears it to all the Red Cross meetings. Guess she wants to make sure everybody knows she's a paid-up member. She's been acting odd lately; even asked me this morning how was I feeling. First time in years she's inquired about my health. Peculiar. Maybe this Red Cross work has softened her heart.

Mildred Powell's knitting her fifth pair of socks; they're not all for you, so don't get swell-headed. She's knitting them for the Red Cross. All the girls at school are. But I suspect the nicest pair she knits will be for you.

You must cut quite the figure in your uniform. A figure eight! (ha, ha). Seriously, I am certain you are going to make us all proud.

Aunt Ivy's home from her meeting and calling for me. I'll sign off now but will write again soon.

Your school friend,

Hattie Inez Brooks

I blotted the letter and slipped it in an envelope. Aunt Ivy wouldn't think twice about reading anything she found lying around, even if it was in my own room, on my own desk.

"Hattie," Aunt Ivy called again. "Come down here!"

To be on the safe side, I slipped the envelope under my pillow, still damp from my good cry last night. Not that I was like Mildred Powell who hadn't stopped boo-hoing since Charlie left. Only Mr. Whiskers and my pillow knew about my tears in the dark over Charlie. I did fret over his safety but it was pure and sinful selfishness that wet my eyes at night.

In all my sixteen years, Charlie Hawley was one of the nicest

things to happen to me. It was him who'd stuck up for me when I first came to live with Aunt Ivy and Uncle Holt, so shy I couldn't get my own name out. He walked me to school that very first day and every day after. Charlie was the one who'd brought me Mr. Whiskers, a sorry-looking tomcat who purred his way into my heart. The one who'd taught me how to pitch, and me a southpaw. So maybe I did spend a night now and then dreaming silly girl dreams about him, even though everyone knew he was sweet on Mildred. My bounce-around life had taught me that dreams were dangerous things—they look solid in your mind, but you just try to reach for them. It's like gathering clouds.

The class had voted to see Charlie off at the station. Mildred clung to his arm. His father clapped him on the back so often, I was certain he'd end up bruised. Miss Simpson made a dull speech as she presented Charlie with a gift from the school: a wool stocking cap and some stationery.

"Time to get aboard, son," the conductor called. Something shifted in my heart as Charlie swung his foot up on the train steps. I had told myself to hang back—didn't want to be lumped in with someone like Mildred—but I found myself running up to him and slipping something in his hand. "For luck!" I said. He glanced at the object and smiled. With a final wave, he boarded the train.

"Oh, Charlie!" Mildred leaned on Mrs. Hawley and sobbed.

"There, there." Charlie's mother patted Mildred's back.

Mr. Hawley took a bandanna from his pocket and made a big show of wiping his forehead. I pretended not to notice that he dabbed at his eyes, too.

The others made their way slowly down the platform, back to their cars. I stood watching the train a bit longer, picturing Charlie patting the pocket where he'd placed the wishing stone I'd given him. He was the one who'd taught me about those, too. "Look for the black ones," he'd told me. "With the white ring around the middle. If you throw them over your left shoulder and make a wish, it's sure to come true." He threw his wishing rocks with abandon and laughed at me for not tossing even one. My wish wasn't the kind that could be granted by wishing rocks.

And now two months had passed since Charlie stepped on that train. With him gone, life was like a batch of biscuits without the baking powder: flat, flat, flat.

"Hattie!" Aunt Ivy's voice was a warning.

"Yes, ma'am!" I scurried down the stairs.

She was holding court in her brown leather chair. Uncle Holt was settled into the hickory rocker, a stack of newspapers on his lap.

I slipped into the parlor and picked up my project, a pathetic pair of socks I'd started back in October when Charlie enlisted. If the war lasted five more years, they might actually get finished. I held them up, peering through a filigree of dropped stitches. Not even a good chum like Charlie could be expected to wear these.

“I had a lovely visit with Iantha Wells today.” Aunt Ivy unpinned her Red Cross hat. “You remember Iantha, don’t you, Holt?”

“Hmm.” Uncle Holt shook the newspaper into shape.

“I told her what a fine help you were around here, Hattie.” I dropped another stitch. To hear her tell it most days, there was no end to my flaws in the domesticity department.

“I myself never finished high school. Not any sense in it for some girls.”

Uncle Holt lowered one corner of the paper. I dropped another stitch. Something was up.

“No sense at all. Not when there’s folks like Iantha Wells needing help at her boarding house.”

There. It was out. Now I knew why she had been so kind to me lately. She’d found a way to get rid of me.

She smoothed her skirt again. “God moves in mysterious ways. We should not question this bounty from Iantha.” Though her comments directly affected me, I knew better than to say anything. Yet.

Uncle Holt tamped the Prince Albert tobacco down in his pipe. “There are only a few months left of the school year.” He lit it and took a puff before continuing. “Seems to me it makes more sense for Hattie to finish.” This wasn’t the first time Uncle Holt had taken my side; I resolved to polish his shoes for him that very night in thanks for it.

Aunt Ivy glided on, as if Uncle Holt hadn’t spoken. “It was agreed that Hattie would go where she was needed. And she is

needed at Iantha's."

And not *wanted* here, I added. To myself, of course.

Uncle Holt squinted at me through curlicues of cherry-scented smoke. "Do you want to finish school?"

I set my knitting on my lap and considered my answer. For all I loved books, school was a chore. Especially without the diversions Charlie provided. But compared to working for Iantha Wells. . .

"She knows too much already," snapped Aunt Ivy. "Or thinks she does!" This with a glower in my direction. "It's Hattie's soul we must think of. Helping Iantha would foster a spirit of charity in the child, charity and—" Here Aunt Ivy stumbled, as if even she couldn't imagine what working in a boarding house could possibly teach someone like me. "—and other womanly skills. It's quite the opportunity for a hard-working girl."

Two bright red spots glowed on her cheeks. Not much doubt that she was peeved. And not much doubt as to why. It galled her that Uncle Holt would ask my opinion about anything, let alone my own future. I was simply Hattie Here-and-There, with no right to an opinion.

I'd been orphaned before I'd lost my baby teeth. Pa's story was a familiar one to any miner's family; the coal dust ate up his lungs. I was just two or three when he passed. Aunt Seah took me in when I was five, after Mama died. The doctor said it was pneumonia that took her, but Aunt Seah claimed it was a broken heart. The kindest of my many stops along the way, she gave me the gift of certainty that my parents had loved one

another. After Aunt Seah got too old to keep me, I was shuffled from one relative to another—some of them pretty far down on the shirt-tail. I'd stay to help out with this sick person or that until I'd run out of folks who needed help and didn't mind an extra mouth to feed to get it.

I was thirteen when Aunt Ivy took me in. She's really no aunt at all; Uncle Holt's a distant cousin. She couldn't resist the opportunity to do her Christian duty. Nor could she resist the opportunity to remind me every single day that I had nothing and no one. I should count my blessings, she lectured. Well, I did count them. The first blessing I counted every day was that she and I weren't related by blood.

The room grew so quiet I could hear Uncle Holt's pipe click against his teeth. He blew out a puff of sweet smoke and then spoke. "I suggest we all sleep on it."

Aunt Ivy wouldn't cross Uncle Holt, not in front of me. She flounced in her chair. "Whatever you say, Holt."

He fussed with his pipe and then with the papers on the pipe stand next to his chair. "Where did I put that?"

"Put what, Holt *dear*?" Aunt Ivy's voice could shatter glass.

"Letter. Came for Hattie today." A pile of newspapers cascaded to the floor. For a general-store clerk, Uncle Holt read more than any human being I knew. I was crazy about reading, myself, but my taste ran to novels. Uncle Holt favored newspapers. He was the one who'd first warned about war in Europe. Said any fool could see it coming if he paid attention. Me, I hadn't paid attention until Charlie up and enlisted. Guess

I know what category that puts me in.

“A letter!” I said. Maybe from Charlie!

“For Hattie?” asked Aunt Ivy.

Uncle Holt ignored her outstretched hand and delivered the envelope directly to me.

“Whoever is it from?” Aunt Ivy demanded.

“Someone in Montana.” Uncle Holt disappeared behind the *Arlington News*, his signal that he was done with conversation for the evening.

I opened the envelope. There were two letters inside. The first was dated November 11, 1917.

Your uncle axed that I get the enclosed to you when he passed. It's the least I could do to repay him for his many kindnesses. If you decide yes, me and my husband Karl will help all we can.

Most sincerely yours,

Perilee Johnson Mueller

Decide yes about what? I unfolded the second letter.

My dear Hattie,

You will no doubt have forgotten me. I am your mother's only brother. Had I married and led a proper life, I would have sent for you long ago. I will not sugarcoat things: I have been a scoundrel. But here in Montana, I've made a new life. Wouldn't you know that as soon as I got a claim staked and a place built, the doc here would tell me this cough was going to kill me.

You and I have something in common, besides the Wright blood. Neither one of us had a proper home of our own growing up — you orphaned and me leaving home after sixth grade. You will think I have never thought of the niece in Iowa. But this letter will show you I have. If you come out here to Vida, you will find my claim. I trust you’ve enough of your mother’s backbone to meet the remaining requirements. If you do — and you have one year to do it — 320 Montana acres are yours.

“Oh!” I grabbed the arm of the settee.

“What is it? Bad news?” Aunt Ivy was at my side, eagerly peering over my shoulder. With a slight stutter, I read aloud the last paragraph of the letter:

Being of sound mind, I do hereby leave to Hattie Inez Brooks my claim and the house and its contents, as well as one steadfast horse named Plug and a contemptible cow known as Violet.

Signed, Chester Hubert Wright,

Uncle to Hattie Inez Brooks

Post Script: H—Bring warm clothes and a cat.

Aunt Ivy snatched the letters from my hand. I was too stunned to react. Three hundred twenty acres! A home of my own! Montana!

“It’s ridiculous,” she pronounced. “Besides, I’ve promised Iantha you will work for her.”

“Seems like quite an opportunity for a hardworking young

girl.” There was a whisper of a wink in Uncle Holt’s voice.

“It’s insanity!” sputtered Aunt Ivy. “Holt, not another word. Hattie—,”

“As you say, Aunt Ivy, God moves in mysterious ways.” I took the letters back from her, folded them and put them in the pocket of my skirt. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a letter to write.”

Perilee’s letter was answered with one line: I will come. Telling Charlie took a mite longer. I didn’t want him worrying about me while he was over there in France. I believe I struck the right tone in my postscript, after only a dozen tries. *Think of how much more interesting my letters to you will be!* I wrote.

I posted both letters, the one to Charlie and the one to Perilee Mueller. Perilee’s return letter arrived promptly and with the promise to meet me at the train depot in Wolf Point and take me the rest of the way to Uncle Chester’s claim. Almost as if she could read my mind, she added to Uncle Chester’s brief list of instructions:

As far as what to bring with you, your uncle has most everything needed for running a house. A sturdy hat to keep the sun and rain off and maybe some bed linens as Chester’s are none too choice.

Your new neighbor,

Perilee Mueller

A smarter girl than me might have wobbled a bit at the thought of heading west to prove up a claim. I had lived on a farm with

some cousins for six months and I helped Uncle Holt with his vegetable garden every year, but that was the extent of my agricultural expertise. I pushed all doubts and worries away the moment they crept into my thoughts. All I could see was the chance to leave Aunt Ivy and that feeling of being the one odd sock behind.

Resolute in my decision, I did what any good homesteader must do: I took the four hundred dollars my parents had left me out of the bank, bought warm clothes and a twelve dollar ticket on the Great Northern Railway. Packing didn't take long. Uncle Holt gave me his old work boots, and Miss Simpson presented me with a copy of Campbell's *1907 Soil Culture Manual*. Her brother had gone out to Montana himself and assured her this was the text any homesteader must have for farming in eastern prairie country. And, along with a warm embrace, Charlie's mother gave me a sturdy pair of canvas gloves. My last purchase was a wicker travel case for Mr. Whiskers.

Aunt Ivy was still fuming about the whole thing and refused to come to the station. Uncle Holt drove me there in his new Ford Town Car.

"I know you can do the work, Hattie." Uncle Holt unloaded my trunk, then handed me Mr. Whiskers in his case. "But there will be new ways to learn. Don't be too proud to ask for help." He pulled his pipe out of his pocket. "You know what Ivy says. Pride goeth—,"

"Before a fall," I finished. My pridefulness was a constant source of sorrow and agitation for Aunt Ivy. She'd worn out

many a switch trying to cure me of it.

Uncle Holt busied himself with filling his pipe and tamping down the tobacco. As he lit it, I thought I saw a dampness in his eye.

“Thank you, Uncle Holt.” Three years of small kindnesses flashed through my mind. “I-I—” Our gazes caught and I felt he understood my feelings, even if I couldn’t say the words. “I promise to write.”

“No piecrust promises, now.” He patted my shoulder awkwardly. “But it would be good to hear from you. Now and again.”

“All aboard!” called the porter.

Mr. Whiskers and I boarded the train. Uncle Holt stood at the station and waved. I waved back. Then I settled myself in and faced west.



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