



Hearts
UNBROKEN



NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
CYNTHIA LEITCH SMITH

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Hesci. Herein, a few words and sentences are written in Mvskoke, the language of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation of Okmulgee, Oklahoma. A glossary is included on page 295.

Neither the Indigenous nor foreign languages are italicized or translated in the main body of the text, except to indicate emphasis.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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For Christopher

Falling Hard

Half past nine a.m. in the residual haze of my junior prom, I ducked into a powder room off the kitchen at the swanky lake house where the after-party took place.

It reeked of vanilla oil and was decorated with dead starfish.

Then I tapped my phone to update my newish best friend, Shelby Keller. We had texted off and on the night before, but this morning's conversation mandated face-to-face communication. She answered with "Good morning, Louise. Please tell me you didn't waste your maiden voyage into sexy fun time on that narcissistic player you call a boyfriend."

"Not even," I whispered to Shelby. "You know how Cam has to eat an entire cow or something every three hours? After the dance, we detoured to IHOP for a snack. On the way out, he threw up a whole bottle of

champagne and a double-blueberry short stack in the parking lot. Then he passed out in the limo.”

Her snort-laugh burst through the tiny speaker.

I replied, “Yeah, well, I may never eat pancakes again.” After all, unbuttoning your semiconscious boyfriend’s vomit-splattered shirt isn’t any girl’s prom-night fantasy.

“Sounds like I didn’t miss much,” Shelby said. With her part-time waitressing gig, she didn’t have much time to socialize. And her earnings went to necessities, not party dresses.

“Definitely not,” I said out of loyalty, though the actual dance had exceeded all expectations. “Cam and I are supposed to be at brunch in a half hour, and he’s still out cold.”

“Drooling?” Shelby asked.

“Snoring,” I admitted.

Her laugh was less affectionate than mine.

The lake house decor was high-dollar rustic. The quarterback, Blake Klein, is one of Cam’s closest pals, and it’s Blake’s family’s second house. Not a trailer or hunting cabin—we’re talking steam room, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, and a motorboat in the detached garage. (It’s not so much on the lake as near the lake.)

I didn’t doubt that they had a maid service, too, but Mama raised me to be a considerate guest. Besides, having ventured into the family room, I was mindful of how whatever was left lying around might affect (for better) the boys’ reps and (for worse) the girls’.

While I was talking to Shelby, the other post-prom stragglers had already vacated the premises, including the unidentified human-shaped lump under a chenille throw on the sofa.

So I tossed the scattered beer cans and red plastic cups. I retrieved and repositioned the couch pillows, wiped down the immense black granite counters, and used salad tongs to remove the condom wrappers littering the rugs. Then, after clearing more plastic cups and a few stray Doritos from the deck, I finished the job by hauling out the trash.

Finally I returned upstairs to Cam. The night before, I'd crashed on the faux-distressed leather chaise longue in front of the bay window. He was still sprawled diagonally and bare chested on the king-size bed. Not his finest moment, but it didn't matter. I was smitten.

On our first date, back in January, I'd mentioned that I'd only just recently moved to northeast Kansas from central Texas. I'd been convinced that Cam was all but ignoring me in favor of the basketball game on the sports bar TVs. Then, come Valentine's Day, he'd given me a sterling silver souvenir charm in the shape of a longhorn.

He'd been *listening* to me, *even though there had been a game on.*

"Wake up." I jostled his foot. "We're going to be late."

Cam's parents, the Ryans, were cohosts of the annual post-prom brunch (by which I mean annual for East Hannesburg High School students whose families

belong to the country club, along with their preferred teammates and their respective dates).

“Check your messages,” I said. “I bet your mother has already texted you.”

Cam squinted at the rotating ceiling fan and reached out his hands. “Lou, save me.”

“Are you hungover or still drunk?” I asked.

“Drunk with your beauty, drunk with your booty.”

“You can’t reach my booty from there.” I clapped loudly four times. “Up and at ’em, cowboy. Take heart: there will be food.”

“I can’t get up,” Cam whined. “Help me, Loulou.”

I hated when he called me that. But the night before, we’d dined on bacon-wrapped filet mignon at Pennington’s Steakhouse and swayed to classic Rihanna on the dance floor. By the magical light of the mirror ball, Cam had declared his love.

It was heady, intoxicating, being in love. So far as I was concerned, we could’ve stayed at the lake house all day, except for his parents.

“Shower! Now!” I risked taking his hands, and Cam, laughing, yanked me down on top of him. He tickled my sides. I curled up, trying to protect myself, but I was laughing, too.

Cam’s mother greeted us in the posh country-club lobby. “Louise, dear! Don’t you look pretty this morning? How was the dance?”

Before I could reply, she added, “You’ll have to excuse Cam so we can have a brief word. Family business, you

understand.” She gestured with her Bloody Mary toward the reserved private dining room. “Don’t miss the crepes station.”

Crepes! I crossed the mosaic tile floor to the free-standing sign: EHHS PROM BRUNCH.

From the arched double doorway, I wandered in, marveling over the colorful art-glass chandelier, the crisp white table linens, the carved ice bowl of peel-and-eat shrimp, and the party of fifty or so, chatting, toasting, and taking photos. In addition to the crepes, I weighed the merits of an omelet station, a prime rib station, a silver platter of lox shaped like blooming roses, and a mirrored, five-tiered pyramid display of succulent-looking fruit.

I’d never been to a wedding with such a fancy, expensive spread—let alone a Sunday brunch. Don’t get me wrong. My family isn’t poor. I guess you’d say we’re *middle* middle class.

We’d moved to East Hannesburg, Kansas, immediately after the previous Christmas, between my junior-year semesters. It didn’t feel like home yet, not the way Cedar Park, Texas, had.

Definitely not the way Indian Country, Oklahoma, does.

I’d plucked three chilled shrimp from the sculpted ice bowl and served myself some smoked salmon and sliced cantaloupe when Cam’s hand cradled the small of my back.

He steered me toward the prime rib station. “I’m starving,” he said.

“What was all that about?” I asked, deciding to save crepes for dessert.

Cam leaned in. “My brother got engaged. Mom wants me to talk him out of it.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “She doesn’t like Andrew’s fiancée?”

“My mom barely knows her,” Cam said. “But the girl’s not exactly my mother’s idea of future daughter-in-law material.”

He lowered his voice. “Get this. She’s only twenty, and she already has a one-year-old kid. Can you imagine the bride’s baby daddy showing up at a Ryan family wedding?”

This from the seventeen-year-old guy who I’d planned to have sex with the night before. The one who’d left it to me to bring the condoms—not that we’d ended up needing them.

“Your mom will get over it,” I said. “As long as Andrew’s happy—”

“I don’t think so. The girl is a Kickapoo Indian, so you know. She works at a coffee shop on Massachusetts Street in Lawrence.”

We got in line for the carving station. “So . . . I know she’s a barista?”

“Let’s be real,” Cam replied. “She probably took one look at Andrew and saw dollar signs. Why else would she be working at a place like that, if not to hit on college guys?”

I maintained a conversational tone. “Why would she be working at a coffee shop? Off the top of my

head, I'd say it's convenient to where she lives or she enjoys interacting with the public or she believes in the power of caffeine. Maybe she's putting *herself* through college."

"Mom says *Kickapoo* sounds like a dog. Like *cockapoo* or *peekapoo*. Get it?"

I got it. The three senior couples ahead of us in line for beef were chatting sororities, fraternities, rush, and legacies. Cam joined in their Greek alphabet soup of conversation.

Meanwhile, *my* Native identity appeared to be nowhere on his radar.

Cam mentioned that his grandfather, father, and older brother were Sigma Nus at the University of Kansas. "It'll piss off Dad if I end up pledging another frat," he said with a calculated glance at his parents' table. "But I'm going to keep an open mind."

It was a discussion we'd had before, mostly, I suspected, so that when Cam finally accepted the bid from Sigma Nu, he could at least pretend he was his own man.

Once the other couples had moved on, I reminded him, "I'm Native." I pointed at myself. "One Muscogee (Creek) Nation citizen, live and in person, right here."

Cam offered me a gold-trimmed white plate from the tall stack, and I shook my head.

"You know how my mom is," he said. "She's obsessing over what people will—"

"What if it was me?" At his perplexed look, I clarified, "What if she was freaking out because you got engaged to me?"

“Are you proposing, Loulou?” Cam chuckled. “Shouldn’t you be down on one knee?”

It was like he was determined not to take me seriously.

“Uh, sir?” A slender guy in his early twenties stood poised at the carving station. Jake, according to his name tag. “Sir, if you want your beef served on that plate, you’ll need to give it to me. What I do is take one of these plates here”—he gestured to the stack—“place a cut of meat on it, and then present it to the guest.”

Which made more sense and was clear from the station configuration. We simply hadn’t been paying attention.

Cam never loved being told he was wrong, and now two people were correcting him at the same time. “God!” Ignoring Jake, he held on to his plate. “Girls are so sensitive.”

My WASPy boyfriend drew himself up, emphasizing the height and girth difference between us. “Look, Louise, I’m sorry if you have a problem with . . . whatever. But I’m a good guy. And, like I’ve told you, I’m part Cherokee on my mom’s side. Don’t get all—”

“Sanctimonious?” Fact: he’s not a citizen of any of the Cherokee nations. He can’t name a single Cherokee ancestor who was. I profoundly doubt he’s even a distant descendant.

Cam’s entire basis for conveniently claiming Cherokee heritage is a combo of uninvestigated family mythology and the fact that his occasionally insufferable mother is proud of her bone structure. He’d never identify as Indian when it could cost him something.

“Whatever,” Cam said again. “Do you really want to fight at prom?”

No, and in fairness, Cam had been mostly parroting his mom’s talking points.

“Excuse me, sir. Beef?” Jake asked again.

Two junior couples had come up behind us since he’d spoken last.

At the interruption, Cam did a double take but handed over the plate. “Unclench,” he said to me. “It’s not like you’re *Indian* Indian. You live in East Hannesburg. Your dad is a dentist.”

“What does any of that have to do with it?” Not me talking. The guy with the knife.

“None of your fucking business,” my boyfriend said, reaching to seize the plate of newly sliced, bloody meat.

Ninety-eight percent of the time, Cam radiates charm. He’s the all-American golden boy, six foot five, with a promising football future. But that other two percent . . .

“Cam?” I turned away, defusing the situation. “Let’s say hi to your dad. He’s probably wondering why we haven’t gone over there yet.”

I appreciated Jake’s solidarity. It was all I could do not to flash him an apologetic smile. But Cam seldom backed down, the slightest gesture could trigger his jealousy, and I didn’t want anyone getting fired on my account.

Across the room, the Ryans reigned over a half dozen other parents at a large round table. The women were talking landscape architects. The men were talking golf.

It never failed to amaze me how fast my boyfriend could slip on his public face.

Cam gave me his plate to hold so he could shake hands with the dads, flirt with the moms, and bask in glowing forecasts about his senior-year game.

We'd bickered before. Usually about the way he puffed himself up or talked about other girls or cut off whatever I was trying to say. The burden fell on me to soothe him, to keep the peace. I knew Cam considered the matter closed, and he'd act incredibly put out if I raised it again. But I was tired of his ego and his attitude.

I still loved Cam, but I didn't like him very much. I'd defer only for the moment, for the sake of the occasion and the hefty parental presence.

Mrs. Ryan glanced over at my plate. "Is that all you're having, Louise?"

I could hear the admiration her voice. (The woman lived almost exclusively on vodka, raw veggies, and low-cal protein bars.) I wondered if Andrew's Kickapoo fiancée would ever find herself on the receiving end of such an approving tone.

I spoke up. "Yes, ma'am. I've had enough."

Spirit Rising

“Damn it, Lou!” Two hours later, Cam pounded the steering wheel of his SUV, which was parked in my driveway. “Stop being so dramatic. I can’t second-guess every fucking word that flies out of my fucking mouth. If you pick, pick, *pick* at every goddamn little thing and ignore what I’m really trying to say, *you’re* the one who’s not respecting *me* enough to listen.”

I opened the passenger-side door. “I’m not going to let you turn this around on me.”

“I can’t believe you,” he shot back. “And after all the money I spent on prom!”

I jumped out and ran into my house, into Mama’s waiting arms.

That evening, I could tell from Cam’s barrage of texts and voice mails that he had written off what had happened

as just another spat. He made some half-hearted apologetic noises, blaming PMS for my moodiness. He piled on the flattery, claimed our relationship had been “moving in the right direction,” and declared that he wanted to get “back on track,” which was his way of saying he still wanted sex. But after talking to Mama and Shelby, my decision was confirmed.

The New Girl who Cam Ryan had put on the social map was going to dump him.

I was dreading it. I didn't want to hear him explain how manipulative I was or how dramatic I was or how I wasn't that hot anyway or how he'd been so patient with me and I was so ungrateful and a nobody without him. I didn't want to hear him whine about all the girls he could've been with when we were together, how he'd sacrificed by staying loyal.

Should I send a text? No, too casual. He might think I was kidding.

A letter? No, his mom might screen his snail mail.

She *would* screen his snail mail.

E-mail, I decided. Never mind that the only people I e-mail regularly are my grandparents and a couple of my great-aunties. Football may be Cam's signature sport, but he's also on the baseball team, just for kicks. The head coach routinely e-mails the team, so Cam checks his account daily.

I hauled myself out my bed and logged on to my laptop.

I thanked Cam for the good times. I wished him the best of luck this season.

As gently as possible, I said we were over for good.
At a quarter till ten, I pushed Send.

Monday morning, before the bell, I returned to the sign-up sheet for Cheer tryouts on the door of the girls' locker room. I grew up with the cheerleaders in central Texas, and I missed being one of them. I'd been looking forward to joining the East Hannesburg squad.

(That might sound presumptuous, but EHHS Cheer is nowhere as competitive as Cedar Park Cheer.)

The appeal? Gymnastics, dance—I've taken jazz and ballet since I could walk. I enjoy the sense of belonging that comes with participating in a team sport. Plus a cheerleading uniform doubles as social armor and eliminates the pressure of figuring out, day-to-day, what to wear. All you have to do in exchange is kick, punch, chant, blend.

On the other hand, making the squad would also ensure that Cam and I went to the same parties, had the same friends. The kind of friends I'd always had.

My move to Kansas had been a new beginning. Life without Cam was another one.

I scratched my name off the tryouts list.

To hear Cam tell it, *he'd* ended our relationship because I'd butted into his personal family business. His friends agreed that I'd been out of line. Clingy. Controlling.

I didn't blame them. It's always easier, letting Cam have the final word.

But not everyone was a fan.

Shelby and I had clicked because she's no-nonsense. She takes the world as it comes, not as if it belongs to her. She's different from Cam's crowd that way.

After school, Shelby posted a printout of his profile pic on the dartboard at the local pub where she waitresses. "Embrace the catharsis." She handed me a fistful of ammunition. "You're a woman scorned."

"I don't feel scorned," I assured her, aiming a dart at the target. "And I have lousy hand-eye coordination. I could kill someone."

Gesturing large, one of the Grub Pub regulars accidentally whacked over his beer pitcher, soaking the loudly feuding middle-aged couple at the next table.

"Don't sweat it." Shelby jogged to do damage control. "We could stand to lose a few!"

Estvmin Like Cet Towa?

In June, my family road-tripped to Oklahoma for the annual Mvskoke Fest in Okmulgee. We're talking parade, stomp dance, softball, rodeo, walk/run, games and sports tournaments (traditional and not), scholarship pageant, music, food, and pony rides for the little kids.

I'm an urban—make that *suburban*—Indian. Unlike my parents, I've never lived full-time in my own tribal community. But it's home.

“I should get in shape for bronco riding,” Daddy joked, then took another bite of Indian taco.

Mama tucked in a smile and patted his tummy. Quite the diplomat, my mother.

In fairness, Daddy still carries a lot of muscle on his broad frame. After more than two decades in the army, he was just beginning to enjoy the more relaxed pace of civilian life.

My brother, Hughie, was less than a month out of middle school. He used a paper napkin to wipe sweat from his brow. “Lekothe tos.”

“Warm?” I blew out a long breath. “More like sweltering. Try: Oren hiye tos.”

After my parents finished eating, they left to pick up Great-Aunt Sis from the doctor. Once they were out of hearing range, Hughie asked, “Do you ever wish we’d moved here?”

“Sometimes,” I said, savoring my honey-sweetened fry bread. “But we have cousins back in Kansas, too, and we visit Oklahoma as often as we can.” We already had plans to come back in mid-July. “Do you miss Texas?”

“I miss the Tex-Mex, especially the migas. And my friends. The bullies, not so much.”

“You were bullied?” I’d had no idea, and I could’ve sworn Hughie told me everything.

He began tying his clear plastic straw in a knot. “A couple of years ago, the guy sitting behind me in Texas History was making ‘war whoops’ whenever the teacher mentioned the Comanche, so I told him to shut up.

“After that, he and his friends started whooping whenever they saw me. They thought it was funny. Then they thought it was funny to start roughing me up on the walk home from school.”

He was my kid brother. My responsibility. “I could’ve come to get you,” I said. “I—”

“It’s over now,” Hughie reminded me. “I’ll never see those jerks again.”

• • •

We stayed an extra week and visited Checotah, Eufaula, and Tulsa. Mama and Daddy also took us to pay our respects at the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum.

We spent quality time with our grandparents, our great-grandfather, and our great-aunties and uncles. Which is another way of saying that we spent a lot of time listening.

Along the way, Hughie and I logged a few hours with the Mvskoke language app. My brother had already decided that next summer he'd apply to Mvskoke Language Camp.

Cokv kerretv heret os.

One steamy afternoon outside Tulsa, my step-cousin Gracie Halfmoon took me to Sonic Drive-In, and we sucked down blue coconut slushes at an outdoor table. I asked, "Who's that?"

Gracie's a Cherokee-Seminole and a total social butterfly. She knows everybody and has lived two blocks from there her entire life.

But before she could reply, the handsome new arrival was offering me a business card. "Thomas Dale Brown, at your service."

The card read *TDB III Productions—*independent films.**

He joked, "Baby, I can make you a star."

He had an athletic build, but there was obviously more to this boy than football and fantasizing about future frat parties. I was feeling starry already.

“Sorry, Tommy,” Gracie said, squelching the sparks between us. “She’s driving back to Kansas tomorrow.”

Was he already in a relationship? Was he not into romance? Or was it something else? Gracie didn’t seem to like the idea of Tommy and me together, and I trusted her.

As we climbed into Gracie’s pickup truck, I felt a little buzzed from the sugary drink and banter. I’d been home long enough for the rhythm in my speech to down-shift. I held myself looser, joked more freely, and shook off the stress that sometimes boiled up in my suburban good-girl mode. There, I could speak my mind and be understood. “How’re Tommy’s movies?”

“Moody. Thought provoking. He’s won a few awards.”

Gracie lowered the truck windows and cranked the air conditioner. “Listen, I like the guy. Everybody does. He’s one good-looking, smooth-talking Choctaw boy. Talented, hardworking, funny as hell.”

We passed a billboard for Creek Nation Casino in nearby Muskogee. “And the catch is?”

“Tommy Dale lives to flirt, and he’s good at it. But, for serious, he only dates white girls. Blondes and red-heads, for the most part.”

Gracie turned up an old Rita Coolidge song on the radio. “Likes ’em movie-star beautiful, I suppose.”

A Higher Power

Towering sunflowers strained against barbed wire. Distant thunder rumbled, and on a cloudy, gray afternoon in early August, I ran out of gas on a two-lane Kansas highway. I'd seen the warning light on the dash but forgotten about it, singing along to Beyoncé on satellite radio.

It was only a twenty-minute walk to the nearest station.

I took off on foot, glancing at the splotchy brown cows on one side of the road, the gold-crested green cornfield on the other.

An approaching sedan slowed, and a semifamiliar face leaned out the window. His blond hair blowing in the wind, the driver called, "Louise! Louise Wolfe! Need a ride?"

It was Peter Ney from Immanuel Baptist, the pastor's teenage son. He was going into his junior year at EHHS and was on the Wrestling team.

My family's on-again, off-again search for a new church home had been temporarily derailed by summer travel and my daddy's conviction that anyone who works Saturdays should be forgiven for sleeping in on Sunday mornings. (Never mind that most churches offer a weekly evening service.)

Immanuel Baptist wasn't a contender, though. We'd given it a try, but my family longed for a closer-knit congregation. The idea that we could come and go without seeing anyone we knew seemed to miss the point, and as Mama had pointed out, my brother and I already went to high school with almost two thousand students. We didn't need a thirty-five-hundred-member church, too.

"Out of gas," I admitted, gesturing with a thumb back toward the Honda. "But the nearest station is only—" A flash of lightning caught my eye.

"Get in," Peter said. "I'll give you a ride."

Opening the car door, I felt the first raindrops.

"I have a confession," he added moments later, flicking on his windshield wipers. "I asked around about you, after your family visited Immanuel."

"You did?" I gave Peter a second look. So what if he was a year younger? He had made a positive impression from the start. He'd complimented Mama's King Ranch casserole at the "Welcome Summer" potluck on the church lawn, and over the past few months, he'd sent me

a few personal e-mails about upcoming youth activities.

Just because his church wasn't a fit for my family didn't mean he couldn't be a fit for me.

"Hey, I know *you're* a Cam Ryan fan," Peter said. He began chatting nonstop about my ex-boyfriend's football skills and stats.

No doubt Peter had seen Cam and me together last spring and assumed we were still a couple. I probably should've cleared that up then, but I didn't feel like getting into it.

Besides, his being a die-hard fan of Cam Ryan was a major turnoff.

At the Phillips 66, I could barely make out the digital instructions on the narrow, rain-splattered screen displays. But the signage read PLEASE PAY BEFORE PUMPING.

Peter offered to fill the gas can from his trunk while I ran inside.

Overhead fluorescent lights flickered in the station food mart. Hot dogs rotated under a heat lamp. The displays behind the counter hawked lottery tickets, chewing tobacco, and cigarettes. I was signing off on the charge when Peter, dripping, wrenched open the heavy glass door. "Ready?"

"I heard about you and Cam Ryan," the cashier cut in, and on second glance, I recognized him from school. Dylan Something-or-Other. A senior in Debate and wannabe A-lister who routinely traded gossip for social leverage. "Is this your new boyfriend?"

"We're church friends," I replied. A safe enough answer. Downright wholesome.

On the return drive, Peter and I listened to the wipers. Traffic was light. The rain had quieted to a mist. I decided to just say it. “Cam and I broke up.”

“I’m not one of the popular people,” Peter said, evidently mortified. “I didn’t realize . . . You’re seniors. I’m only a junior.” He raked wet hair off his forehead. “I mean, I’m not a loser. I’m an athlete. I wrestle.” That last bit had radiated insecurity.

He added, “I should’ve asked you before going on and on—”

“No, no,” I assured him as a tractor rumbled by. “I should’ve said something earlier. Cam and I broke up after prom, not long before school let out for summer. It’s such a busy time, end of the year and all. I’m sure a lot of people missed it.”

Not any of the “popular people,” though. They lived for that sort of thing.

But, thinking it over, didn’t Peter’s cluelessness make him more appealing? Especially given my resolve, socially speaking, to make a fresh start? He was cute and apparently tenderhearted.

“Mind if I ask what went wrong?” Peter nudged. “You two were always hanging all over each other. I was looking forward to bragging that I’d rescued the future homecoming queen.”

Just like that, my patience ran out. “Kind of a personal question, don’t you think?”

Sunflowers bowed in the wind. Cattle huddled beneath an elm tree for shelter.

The rain had intensified again. The thunder had become more demanding.

Peter made a U-turn and parked alongside the country highway behind my mama's Honda Fit. He opened his car door. "I'm already drenched. Let me fuel up—"

"One condition," I said, forcing a smile. "I'll treat you to lunch afterward."

By midafternoon, the crowd at the Grub Pub was sparse and probably wouldn't pick up until happy hour. Nobody was playing pool or darts. I waved at Shelby and chose a leather booth with a view of Sunflower Tea Shop and Antiques. After I introduced her to Peter, she announced, "Some woman just tipped me twelve percent and a button." She showed it to us. "A button?"

I didn't mention that was probably the customer's snide way of commenting on Shelby's low neckline. My mama's old-fashioned enough that she wouldn't let me out of the house looking like that. Shelby's mama had run off with a trucker a couple of years back, and they'd started a new family outside of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Peter blinked at Shelby's cleavage and excused himself to dry off in the restroom.

"What's with Prince Valiant?" she asked once he was gone.

"Out of gas. Weather. Knight in shining sedan." I'd begun to wonder if Peter had asked around about me because he'd been romantically interested but then had backed off after he heard I had a boyfriend. An

intimidating, possessive boyfriend. “So far, he’s not without potential.”

I thought he might be too churchy, though. (I hail from the judge-not school of Protestantism.) Or maybe he was one of those infamously rebellious preacher’s kids, and that day’s rescue mission had been less about doing unto others and more about doing me.

Shelby extracted a pen from the thick twist of her auburn hair, and I requested two plates of dry-rub wings. As she left to put in the order, I kicked off my soggy sandals and decided to proceed with caution. If I made any more epic mistakes when it came to boys, I wanted them to be of the sparkling new variety. If Peter had issues with Native people, for example, I wanted to know well before I fell for him. As in before our first date.

After he returned to the table, we made small talk about the planned Immanuel Baptist expansion. They were building new classrooms and offices. The project would cost tens of millions, and Peter was feeling weary of heading up one teen-group fund-raiser after another.

“Sorry I snapped at you for asking about me and Cam.” Not that I owed Peter an explanation, but I could’ve been more gracious. “We had a difference of opinion about his older brother’s engagement. Cam’s future sister-in-law is a Kickapoo woman.”

Peter dunked a plump wing into ranch dressing. “You mean, she’s a *Native American*? Isn’t that the PC thing to say?”

I’d meant “Kickapoo.” Maybe it was Peter’s way of trying, though. “Cam’s mother, she has a problem

with the whole mixed-marriage thing. I'm a romantic, and, well, let's just say I could've kept my thoughts to myself." Technically the truth, though I'd left a *lot* out.

Peter pushed away his plate of decimated chicken bones. "That sucks."

He began cleaning his fingers with a Wet-Nap. "Too bad they don't go to Immanuel. My dad does a lot of family counseling, and he always says officiating weddings is his favorite part of the job."

That had sounded like a winning answer until Peter concluded, "And we host weekly AA meetings in the church conference rooms, too."

Toward the end of her waitressing shift, Shelby asked the manager if I could help clear off a ten-top so we could cut out sooner. Rinsing dirty plates in the cramped, messy kitchen, she asked, "You're sure that Peter wasn't talking about Mrs. Ryan?"

I was starting to wish I hadn't mentioned it. "Pretty sure."

"Because Peter did you a solid today and he was all goo-goo eyes and, let's face it, Cam's mother? Known to tip a few. Plus, Louise, you know how much I love you. But you overthink everything in that giant brain of yours, and you can be sensitive. It's what makes you such a great friend, but sometimes . . ."

The air was hot, stuffy, and greasy. I loved the pub, but it was a wonder the health inspector hadn't shut the place down. I loaded glassware into the dishwasher. "Sometimes what?"

The cook, Karl, was a friendly, scruffy white guy with a prominent belly. He lowered a metal basket of waffle fries into the bubbling oil. “Give the guy a break—he was just being honest. A lot of Indians are alcoholics.” He raised his voice. “Hell, a lot of *people* are alcoholics. I’m proudly two years sober, little girl—doesn’t make me a horrible human being.”

A Star Is Born

Outside the men's dressing room, my little brother modeled a pair of dark-wash Levi's.

"Better," I said. "We should pick up a couple of belts. A brown one and a black one."

This was the week before high school started. Twice Mama had taken Hughie clothes shopping and come home empty-handed because, at the last minute, they'd caught a summer blockbuster flick instead.

Basically, Mama felt guilty about the time she had to devote to earning her JD and MA in Indigenous Studies. And Hughie liked watching superhero movies better than trying stuff on.

I'd decided to make it my business. That fall, Hughie and I would be on the same campus for the first time since elementary, but it's not like we'd see each other most of the day.

From what I could tell, he hadn't made any close friends at middle school last semester. Over the summer, he'd bonded with the kids at the nearby American Indian Youth Summer Camp (focused on science and technology), but they all lived in the next town east of us.

Ensuring Hughie's clothes weren't bully bait was one way for me to look out for him.

He gave himself the once-over in the full-length three-panel mirror. "Shoes?"

My brother, who is not especially athletic, has an irrational love of athletic footwear.

"Shoes," I promised.

Hughie changed back into his cargo shorts, and we waited in line to check out behind a couple of accounting students shopping for suits and talking about their job search.

I tried to imagine Hughie as an accountant. It seemed like a career well suited to a quiet, reserved person, and Hughie's best subject is math.

"I signed up for the school newspaper," I reminded him. "That's a class, but it's kind of social, too." Trying not to sound too much like Mama, I added, "Have you thought about getting involved in any school activities?"

"You worry too much." Hughie shook his head. "I never should've told you about those jerks in Cedar Park. You can relax now, Lou. I've got it all figured it out."

Stepping to the sales counter, I reached into my bead-accented purse for my debit card.

As the clerk rang up our purchases, I said, "Okay,

fill me in. What's the Hughie Wolfe personal strategy for high-school success?" I looked up—yes, *up*—at my baby brother under the fluorescent lights. When had he grown taller than me? "What?"

Hughie quickly raised and lowered his eyebrows, relishing the suspense.

We exited the department store into the bustling outdoor mall, and he paused at a kiosk of Kansas-themed gifts. As in Kansas Jayhawks, Kansas State Wildcats, sunflowers, and *The Wizard of Oz* movie merchandise, the latter manifesting in snow globes, magnets, key chains, wineglasses, music boxes, and utterly darling ruby-slipper earrings.

My shy, left-brained brother held up a holiday ornament of the Tin Man's head like it was a trophy. "I'm auditioning for the fall musical," Hughie announced. "*The Wizard of Oz.*"

Dejá Who?

Hughie and I bounded off the school bus on the sunny first day of our respective freshman and senior years. New and returning students jostled, gossiped, hugged, and moseyed on inside. I overheard cooing over new outfits and snippets about family travel. A voice exclaimed, “I missed you!” Another: “What’s up, bro?” Another: “Oh, my God, she’s such a slut!”

As we passed the eight-foot-tall Honeybee statue, Hughie warned, “Cam, two o’clock.”

All 135 pounds of my brother bristled at the sight of my alpha-jock ex-boyfriend, who was artfully slouching against the brick wall like he was posing for a men’s fashion catalog.

“No worries,” I told my brother. “He’s just waiting for someone.”

Turned out that someone was me. “Lou, over here!”

I'd already decided to make a point of saying howdy to him. The way I had it figured, my day-to-day life would require a lot less effort if Cam and I were on friendlier terms.

Besides, I'd done the rejecting, which arguably made him the injured party. And he was making an effort. Publicly.

"Are you getting back together with him?" Hughie asked.

"Lou, please!" Cam called again.

Please? "Not the plan," I assured my brother. "Have a great day!"

I watched Hughie disappear through the formidable front doors and smoothed my wavy hair, which—given the humidity—was already a lost cause.

Didn't matter. I may not be movie-star beautiful, but I'm solidly girl-next-door cute. Hourglassy with muscular legs and the gleaming smile of a dentist's daughter.

That said, Cam and I still had a history. I didn't want to think about how many girls he'd hooked up with over the summer. It wasn't that I wanted him back or wanted him to eat his heart out, but I had my pride. I didn't want him to take one look at me and wonder what he'd ever been thinking, either.

We hadn't run into each other all summer. We hadn't spoken since he'd read my breakup e-mail and told me to "fuck off" last spring in the junior hall.

I strolled over like it was no big deal.

"I missed you," Cam said, pulling me into his arms.

“Loulou, no one knows me like you. There’s nobody I can talk to the same way.”

The hug, no, the vulnerability in his voice, caught me off guard. I opened my mouth to say I wasn’t sure what, and Cam kissed me like we’d never broken up. His tongue claimed mine. His hands slid to grip my behind. We’d had our share of PDAs, but nothing like that.

I shoved him away. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What now?” Cam countered. “Fuck, Louise. I can’t do anything right, can I?”

I left him there with his back against the brick wall.

At lunch, Shelby ambushed me entering the chaotic cafeteria. “I knew I should’ve driven you and Hughie to school,” she said. “Clearly, you can’t be trusted anywhere near Cam Ryan without a personal bodyguard who’s immune to his bullshit.”

“I didn’t kiss him,” I clarified, making my way to the food-service line. “He kissed me. There’s a difference. And he had no business kissing me.”

She gestured to the loud, unruly jocks’ table. “You’re not sitting with them now?”

Hadn’t I made myself clear?

“No,” I assured her. “I’m sitting with you.”

Hello and Good Bylines

I don't remember noticing Joey that first day in AP Government. I was preoccupied, contemplating Hughie's latest text that EHHS was "the best school ever."

It was during my second class with Joey—Journalism, the last hour on my schedule—that he tossed his canvas shoulder bag to the far side, slid into the desk next to mine, and introduced himself: "Joseph A. Kairouz. Nice to meet you."

"Ambitious use of the power initial," I replied.

"I go by Joey," he added. Clear blue eyes. Sandy brown hair. A cleft in his angular chin.

He carried himself like he was busy, even though he wasn't doing a damn thing.

I didn't realize right off that he was a new student. It's a big school. There were a lot of people I didn't know. "I've never met a Kairouz before."

“It’s from the Lebanese side of the family,” he said. “My dad’s side. Mom’s white bread by way of Scotland.”

I was more intrigued by the slightly arrogant way he held his lips. “I’m Louise M. Wolfe.” I liked the sound of it—mature, accomplished. It would serve as my byline. “Lou.”

I could’ve said something then about being a Creek girl. It would’ve flowed from the conversation. Would’ve saved me a lot of heartache and drama, but I was too busy flirting.

Joey’s full lips twitched. “M?”

“Melba,” I replied. “Like the toast.”

“Never heard of it.”

It’s a family name, like Louise. My great-grandma Melba grew up at Seneca Indian School. She went on to become a nurse during World War II.

“Your loss,” I said. “It’s crunchy, delicious toast.”

The bell rang, and our perky, thirty-something teacher launched into her welcome speech.

“We’re the engine of communication here at East Hannesburg High,” Ms. Wilson began. “Face-to-face and digital.” She mentioned writing, shooting, editing, and deadlines. She waxed poetic about problem solving, ethics, and managing stress. She emphasized that each of us would be required to contribute at least one editorial—aka opinion piece—by the end of the semester.

“We specialize in story—story is what defines us, what brings people together. This class will introduce you to hundreds of people and their stories, and give you the opportunity to share those stories. It will grow

your humanity and prepare you to be the heroes of your own lives.”

Shades of *Dead Poets Society*, *The Great Debaters*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, and *To Sir, with Love*. I wasn’t the only one who’d seen too many of those inspiring-teacher movies.

Still, I liked Ms. Wilson. Her hot-pink cat’s-eye glasses and her short gold curls and how she talked so fast, with her voice and hands both.

The *Hive*’s staff would be made up of four writers (Joey, me, Emily, Alexis) and a copy editor (Nick), who also drew editorial cartoons and designed infographics.

I recognized Nick. It wasn’t just that he’s one of two students who uses a wheelchair. He’s the campus DJ, too. And we had French class together.

Our intrepid leaders were a managing editor, Daniel, and an editor in chief, Karishma.

Daniel’s a top wrestler, best known for tooling around in his dad’s classic red Porsche convertible. (The family owns a car dealership.)

Karishma had run for Stu-Co president and lost, but I’d voted for her. We were in many of the same AP classes. Unlike a lot of girls, Karishma spoke her mind without apologizing first.

“Over the course of the semester, you’ll become a team,” Ms. Wilson continued. “Hopefully even a family—”

“What about video reporting, shooting, editing?” Joey had raised his hand but spoke without being called on. “That’s what I did at my old school. That and

still photos. I'm good at both." And apparently had no qualms about saying so. "I can write, too," he added. "Sort of."

"Big deal." Daniel held up his phone. "Everybody's a photographer. Videographer. Whatever."

"Check last year's results at state," Joey shot back.

Our school is so sports saturated, it took me a moment to realize he was talking about high-school *journalism* contests.

Ms. Wilson pushed up to sit on the front of her desk. "You'd need to coordinate with the other reporters and cover your own stories, too."

"I can handle it," Joey said. After a beat or two, he seemed to realize that he'd jumped in before the teacher was done talking. "Uh, that's all I wanted to say." He paused. "Go ahead."

Ms. Wilson tilted her head, waiting him out.

"Not that you need me to tell you to go ahead," Joey clarified. "I'm just really interested to hear what you have to say." He cleared his throat. "Thanks, ma'am."

"You're quite welcome," she replied.

My mama was an English teacher for twenty years back in Texas. I could read Teacher Brain. Ms. Wilson liked Joey. She thought he'd be a handful but in a good way.

Karishma passed around a sign-up sheet. "If two people want the same beat, Daniel and I will conduct interviews tomorrow."

By the time it got to me, every beat I was interested in—News, Arts/Entertainment, and Features—had

been claimed. That left Sports, which I knew would be largely devoted to Cam. I chose Features instead.

I'd have to interview against Joey to get it.

After the final bell, lockers clanged over the billowing chatter. Hughie had texted to say he wouldn't be riding the late bus. He was going to a new friend's house after the info meeting for the musical. Hughie had already made a friend.

"My little brother is a freshman," I muttered to myself in the hall. "This is his first day of high school, and he's already cooler than me."

Over my shoulder, Joey chimed in. "It's my first day here, and I'm cooler, too."

"That's up for debate," I said, glancing at him. Not as tall as Cam, but still hovering around six feet. Broad shoulders. Wide chest. "And where did you come from?"

"Overland Park." It's a mega middle-class KC suburb on the Kansas side of the Kansas-Missouri state line. A lot like Cedar Park or East Hannesburg.

Strolling alongside me, Joey answered the obvious question. "My parents split up. Mom got a job at Hallmark's production center in Lawrence, and I moved with her to East Hannesburg. Dad works for Southwest Airlines, but we're only an hour from KCI Airport."

Heading up the stairs, I chose the safer topic. "Your dad's a pilot? Was he air force?"

"Yes and yes."

"Mine was army. A dentist." We passed the long row of orange lockers lining the senior hall on one side, the

windows looking out at the interior courtyard on the other.

I noticed a couple of Dance girls noticing that Joey and I had noticed each other.

“Any brothers or sisters?” I wanted to know.

“Older sister.” Joey adjusted the strap of his canvas bag. “You ask a lot of questions. You’ll make a good reporter.” He paused for dramatic effect. “But Features will be mine.”

“Aren’t you the optimist?” I replied.

He laughed and gestured at a locker. “This is my stop.”

It was my cue to say good-bye and keep walking. I lingered instead.

Joey reached inside his locker for a biography of Ansel Adams from the school library.

He’d stuck a party pic on the inside of the metal door. While Joey was distracted, I studied the image of him in a navy suit, standing behind a slender white girl in a short, lacy violet dress. The magnetic frame had been decorated with puffy neon-purple ink.

A gift, I realized, from his date. His girlfriend?

“You’re in my AP Government class,” I said, spotting the textbook.

“That’s right,” Joey said. “I sit two rows to your right, one seat up.”

“How specific,” I replied. “You know, coming from someone so much cooler.”

That scored me a grin. Once he’d packed up, we moved on, side by side, to the intersection of the lobby

and the walkway bridge linking one wing of the school to the other. The administrative and nurse's offices, library, and the majority of the classrooms to the east, the multipurpose room, gyms, locker rooms, auditorium, indoor pool, and whatnot to the west.

Joey paused alongside the immense sports-trophy case. "Uh, Lou, do you want to—?"

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, tempted to get to know him better but erring on the side of caution. Yes, I was already infatuated with Joey. He'd made an intriguing first impression.

But Peter Ney, the last intriguing boy I'd met, had automatically equated all Native people with alcoholics. And Tommy Dale Brown, the next-to-last intriguing boy I'd met, dated only white girls. (The prevailing theory was that Hollywood had warped his mind.)

Besides, I'd chosen the *Hive* as my new place to belong. On staff, Joey was the competition, and it's not like I needed a boyfriend.