



SHADOW'S EDGE

Maureen Lipinski

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One

Don't be nervous. My friends don't bite," Alex said as he pulled out of the driveway. The morning sun made his blond curls look even more perfect, and his leftover summer tan was just starting to fade into the most delicious caramel brown.

"I'm not nervous," I said as I smoothed my palms down the front of my yellow sundress. I knew a social judgment would be handed down from the other students within minutes and I hoped my ability to accessorize would grant me some leniency.

At least I had enough sense not to wear the *Hello, My Name is Leah* nametag that the principal suggested. Despite this being my first real foray into normal high school, I knew a nametag would equal social suicide.

"Good. Don't be. Nothing to worry about. Westerville High is pretty cool." His eyes crinkled at the corners. I noticed a triangular pattern of freckles on his nose. He flashed me a smile, revealing a mouthful of perfect white teeth that glinted in the sunlight.

"Thanks for giving me a ride," I said quietly, twisting my hands in my lap.

"No problem. My dad said I'd be a good escort for the first day of school. I can show you the ropes and all that." Alex tapped at the radio. He stopped and turned toward me, his beautiful eyes locked on mine. "It's not exactly torture." He winked at me.

My stomach dropped a little. "Well, thanks," was all I managed to say.

"You're going to love Westerville," Alex said. He leaned toward me a bit so

that his right arm and my left elbow nearly grazed one another.

“I hope so,” I said, more confidently than I felt. Truth was, just being near Alex soothed my New Girl in School nerves a bit. Even though I barely knew him, his sincerity, magnetism, and simplicity tranquilized me in the most wonderful way. And after the ... *events* of the last year, simplicity sounded marvelous. It helped that he was nice to look at, too.

As we drove to school, I glanced around, still half-expecting to see one of Them appear next to a garbage can or stop sign.

“So, did I tell you they broke ground on the new football stadium?” Alex asked. “My dad’s company is the developer for the project. It’s going to be done by next season. I can’t wait to play in it. I’ll take you over to the construction site sometime. You’re going to love it.”

His words drew me in, like I was already a member of a special club just by being in his car, in his presence. Even though I’d only met him recently (our fathers were old high school pals), I clung to his energy. I was so thankful I wouldn’t spend my first day wandering around school without a guide. And Alex wasn’t just any guide—he was the quarterback of the Westerville High football team. I knew that arriving with him would give me the best possible entrée into high school. Through him, I was safe.

This is my chance, I repeated silently as Alex turned the car down a side street with a canopy of trees overhead. I reached up and brushed my fingers against the carvings on the pewter amulet around my neck. I centered the black onyx stone and held it in silent prayer, hoping it would keep me blind to Them.

My chance to be free from the Créatúir.

Yet as we approached a stop sign on the winding road, I saw a shadow move across the red octagon. I watched in horror as the letters melted away, white stripes running down the red sign. Four new letters appeared, burning into the metal.

L ... E ... A ... H

My skin pricked and I blinked hard, but the letters glowed more brightly. My head snapped to Alex, but he was looking at the radio as he tapped at the preset channels. I closed my eyes and grabbed my necklace tightly.

Go away. Leave me alone. I don’t care what you want. Just let me have a

regular day in a normal school.

I opened my eyes slowly and saw that the stop sign had morphed back. I settled back into my seat and exhaled.

They were gone.

For now.



Two

When I spotted the high school on the next block, I flipped down the car's sun visor to check my lip-gloss. As I brought the wand to my lips, another flash caught the corner of my eye.

I froze, lip-gloss wand in the air, and prayed it wasn't another attempt at contact. I cautiously peered around the sun visor and saw a massive amount of people walking toward the school, like a swarm of bees heading into a hive.

"Here we are!" Alex said.

I remained silent. There were so many people. Of course, I'd seen enough movies and read enough books to sort-of know what public high school was like. But nothing had prepared me for the sight of three thousand people loitering outside the building, like a swarm of Dark Créatúir heading into the Forest of Macabre to make a ritual sacrifice.

Alex pulled his car into a free parking space and pointed to a sticker on the windshield. "*That* is what you get when you're on the football team," he said proudly.

"Oh." I nodded. I gripped my hands tightly in my lap and wondered if I could just hide out in his car for the day.

He sighed. "It's kind of a big deal, okay? C'mon, I'll introduce you to my friends." He walked around the back of the car, opened my door, and grabbed my hand. His touch surprised me at first; his smooth palm radiated heat up my arm, as though his energy singed my skin. I allowed him to pull me toward the chaotic building, clutching his hand like a security blanket.

I can do this. High school is nothing. I can fit in.

As we walked toward the front door, I saw heads beginning to turn in our direction, no doubt curious about King Alex and The Weird Girl He's Touching.

"Everyone's pretty excited about the first game, huh?" I said in a low tone as I took in the *Go Wildcats* banner swooping across the front door.

Alex stopped and laughed as he dropped my hand. "Yeah, Leah, everyone's excited. You're funny." He chuckled again and waved toward the school. "Let's go."

I nodded, relieved that he seemed charmed by my cluelessness rather than rightfully offended. *Still, I scolded myself, what a nice question. You just asked the star quarterback of the Westerville football team if people care about the games. Westerville High School. As in, the high school that makes West Texas high school football mania look like mild interest. Try not to embarrass your new friend as he's trying to help you fit in at school, okay? Stop asking questions. Just nod and take notes.*

I followed Alex across the parking lot, past people whispering and pointing at something on an iPod, past a girl screaming and crying as her boyfriend rolled his eyes and feigned boredom, past students with black fingernail polish, long sleeves despite the eighty-degree weather, and dark hair.

Despite the female attention I was attracting, the guys didn't even seem to notice me. I walked two paces behind Alex and watched as nearly every student waved to him and shouted things like, "Good summer, man?" and "Ready to throw about a million yards this season?" before their expressions turned to curiosity and confusion over the girl hovering behind him like his human shadow.

We were about ten feet from the front door when I saw them. Not "them" as in the mystical Them, but the human "them." The beautiful people. People who seemed to sparkle and glitter. Kind of like the Light Créatúir gorgons, with their hair made of wings plucked from monarch butterflies.

Alex's friends. Beautiful just like him.

And hopefully, their hair wouldn't morph into snakes at the slightest unpleasantness, like a gorgon's.

I felt two pairs of eyes, one belonging to a brunette, one to a blonde, burning

straight through me as I tagged along behind Alex like a stray puppy. I pretended not to notice and pasted a fakey smile on my face that I hoped said, *Like me! I'm just like you! Let's be BFF! I'm friends with Alex and you should be my friend, too! I was never a Créatúir Shaman! In fact, Créatúir? What is that, I daresay?*

In fact, it probably looked more like *I'm a deranged person who Alex is kindly assisting into the building in the same manner in which he'd help an elderly woman! I am weird! Look at me with great disdain and confusion!*

"That's Brooke and Caroline," Alex said over his shoulder. "They're pretty cool. C'mon, I'll introduce you."

I nodded, my eyes darting around, painfully aware of all the female eyes now focused on me. It felt like last year, when I first visited the Other Realm and all the Créatúir crowded around me, except this felt way less paparazzi-ish and way more hostile.

"Hey!" Alex waved to the girls with the hostile eyes as we stopped in front of them. I leaned in toward him, hoping his confidence would absorb into my aura.

The blonde and the brunette appeared even more sparkly up close, and I put my sunglasses on to hide my eyes. The blonde had long, flowing hair that crested in perfect waves around her shoulders and a nose so straight I could swear her makeup should slide right off it. She shifted her enormous purse to her left arm and nudged her brunette friend. The brunette sized me up and down, her purple eye shadow glistening, and leaned over and whispered something into her friend's ear. They both dissolved into giggles.

"Hey everyone, this is Leah," Alex said. The girls stared at me. The guys didn't look up.

"Yo," Alex said, hitting one of the huge meathead guys on the arm. "Leah," he repeated, and pointed to me.

"What's up? I'm Troy," the meathead said in my direction before continuing to watch something on his iPod. A few of the other guys grunted and then quickly dismissed me.

"Hey, I need to go inside and turn in my emergency contact card at the office. Wanna come, or are you okay out here?" Alex asked.

Not wanting to seem like a toddler in need of babysitting, I waved my hand dismissively. "I'm fine! Go ahead!" Yet I really wanted to screech, *Don't leave*

me! These sparkly people are going to eat me alive!

“Great. I think we have the same lunch. I’ll see you then,” Alex said, squinting his eyes in the morning sunlight.

I nodded and Alex turned and walked into the school building. Halfway there, he turned back and shouted, “Brooke, Caroline! Be nice to her!” before jogging inside.

I turned awkwardly toward the two girls standing to my right.

“Hey!” I tried to say brightly, hoping feigned effervescence would cover my nerves. Of course, instead of saying hello in a bubbly manner and then becoming best buddies with the beautiful girls, my throat caught in the middle of the word, so all that came out was “He!”

The blonde and the brunette flinched and narrowed their eyes at me. The blonde shrugged and gave me a small wave. “Hi,” she said tersely.

“I’m Leah,” I said, just in case they’d forgotten my name already, and hooked my thumb into my purse. I once read that confident people take up space, so I widened my stance a little, but I think I just wound up looking like I was attempting to do the middle splits immediately after a hip replacement.

“I’m Caroline Matteson and she’s Brooke Nelson,” the brunette said.

“Hey,” I said again. “I like your shoes.” I pointed at Brooke’s patent leather Mary Jane heels. I thought if I started off with a compliment, they’d go easy on me.

“Thanks.” Brooke shrugged. Still unsmiling. Her voice flat.

We stood, silently, for a few of the most painful seconds of my life. Finally Brooke said, “So, where are you from?” She gave me a little head jerk and her lips curled into a small smile.

Practically Mars.

“You mean, where did I go to school before?”

“Yeah. You just moved here, right?” Caroline said.

Remember your rehearsed answer, Leah. The same answer that you practiced with Mom and Dad. The same answer that you give Alex whenever he asks about your old life.

“Well, I went to a sort of small school an hour away, in my old town, Central

Springs.” I adjusted the gold cuff bracelet on my left wrist.

Small school? More like a school with classes like *Meditating on the Third Chakra: An Intermediate Study*. Oracle Prep wasn’t exactly an average high school. Our lunch hour consisted of picking vegetables in an organic garden.

“Do they have a football team?” Brooke asked.

I shook my head.

Shock and awe appeared on their faces.

“Yeah, this is a whole different experience,” I said, glancing around nervously.

I noticed I’d now become the star attraction. Kind of like everyone watching a caught fish while it dies on the boat floor before they filet it and eat it.

But this was what I’d come here for. A different experience.

I was born with the ability to be a Créatúir Shaman—a mortal witness to the beings who lurk in the Other Realm, hidden from our world by a thin curtain. I’d loved and accepted my role until ... last year. Last year, when I was careless with the oldest canon for Shamans: *never go to the Other Realm unprepared*. Shamans are not supposed to linger if they visit the Other Realm, but I thought I would be safe even without some way of tracking the time ... that my gift would protect me, that I wouldn’t be affected by how differently time passes there. I thought that Fiona would remind me go to home before too many days had passed.

I also thought that I’d only been gone a week when I returned.

A full year, that’s how long I was gone. I missed everything—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Halloween, my sixteenth birthday. A year of my life whisked away in the winds of the Other Realm, unexplainable to anyone who didn’t know my secret.

“So, how did you and Alex meet?” Brooke asked with narrowed eyes as she flipped her hair over her shoulder.

“Um ... I met him at football practice.” They stared at me. I fidgeted nervously and shifted my weight. “You know, football practice?”

I looked at them, searching for signs of life.

“Yeah, we know what football practice is. We’re cheerleaders,” Caroline said with a laugh.

“Oh, right! Anyway, my dad used to play football here like a million years ago, and he dragged me to one of the practices after we moved here. And I guess he used to play with Alex’s dad, so they introduced us a few weeks ago. I’ve only met him a few times, but he seems really nice.” I shrugged as I looked down and kicked at the pavement. “We hung out last week after one of the practices.” I shrugged again and looked up. Neither Caroline nor Brooke looked impressed. “He gave me a ride home later, after we grabbed some ice cream. And then he offered to drive me to school today.”

Stop talking. You sound possessed. Although, according to Morgana, real possession usually involves a lot more writhing on the floor and speaking in tongues. Not to mention the—

“Introduced by your dads, that’s kinda funny.” Caroline’s words forced a time-out in my mental wrestling match.

“Yeah, my dad’s the one who really encouraged me to start school here,” I said.

After last year, my dad had insisted I attend Westerville High. To go to his alma mater, his old high school, and experience football games, cheerleaders, and prom like a normal teenager. He was convinced that going to a public high school would keep me safe and “on earth,” as he put it.

“Huh,” Brooke said, yet I could read the scroll of *that is so weird and so is this girl* running across her eyes. “So you’re not his girlfriend or anything, right?”

“No, we’re just friends,” I said quickly. “He was nice enough to give me a ride to school today, that’s all.”

Brooke and Caroline let out sighs of relief, and I shifted uncomfortably again.

“So, Leah,” Brooke said, suddenly friendly. “Are you an only child or something?”

I shook my head. “I have three sisters. One older, two younger.” I noticed a kid to my left freaking out because he’d left his wallet at home. I wondered if the Créatúir were silently cackling.

“Are they coming to Westerville too?” Caroline adjusted her sparkly silver earring.

Despite all of my rehearsal and preparation, this was one question I wasn’t ready for.

“Uh, I, er, um,” I stammered, trying to will my brain to spit out an acceptable answer.

They're in prison! They've joined the Navy! They're allergic to sunlight!

So I decided just to tell the truth. “They’re being homeschooled,” I finally panted.

They stared at me.

“What?” I said, unaware of whatever misstep I’d taken. I fidgeted as I felt my face begin to grow pink.

Brooke and Caroline exchanged a look.

“Like Amish people?” Caroline began to laugh uncontrollably.

“Caroline!” Brooke said. “Sorry, she’s totally rude.”

“What?” Caroline said as Brooke elbowed her. She looked at me, her eyes sparkling. “I mean, you don’t look Amish or anything. You ride in cars and stuff, right?”

I smiled. “No, we’re not Amish. We have electricity, my dad doesn’t have a long beard, and we don’t make our own clothes or anything.”

Brooke and Caroline laughed and I relaxed a little. “She’s funny, right?” Brooke said to Caroline, who nodded.

I wasn’t sure if they thought I was joking about my sisters being homeschooled, but it was true. After my dad moved us to Westerville last month, my mom decided to homeschool my sisters until she could find an acceptable “alternative”—really meaning New Age and progressive—school for them. Which was something of a challenge, considering that the most progressive thing in Westerville we’d seen so far was the herbal tea section at the local grocery store.

But “homeschooled” was all Alex or anyone else needed to know. I guess it could’ve been worse. I could’ve said something completely socially moronic like, “Do you guys think *NSYNC is going to get back together soon?”

I walked into the school building, clutching my class schedule. I glanced down at it several times, each time hoping it would provide a clue—some concrete road map that would illuminate at least the next ten steps of my uncharted path. I rubbed it like a magic lamp, praying some genie would pop out and give me really pretty, shiny hair and some semblance of a clue about how to act and what

to say.

It didn't tell me anything except that my first class was English and I had Ms. Faber.



Three

The rest of the day, I nervously glanced behind me each time I sat down in class or opened my locker, positive I'd see a moving shadow or wisp of mist from some Créatúir smoke signal. I couldn't imagine why they'd be trying to contact me, but Melissa would just have to figure it out. She was a former classmate who'd taken over my Shaman duties when I gave up the title last spring.

"Ready?" Brooke asked. We were in the locker room before gym class.

"Almost." I patted my gym shirt, making sure my amulet was still underneath it, around my neck. I followed Brooke into the gym, feeling a million pairs of eyes turning in our direction as I walked behind her. But I was more concerned about this next class than the people in it.

Gym class.

Which, according to nearly every movie, book, and television show, was the class where people got humiliated in front of their peers via forced physical activities.

Not to mention we didn't *have* gym class at my old school. We had something called "free period," where we could do whatever we wanted. My older sister, Morgana, would practice her energy healings; my youngest sister, Gia, would perform Muse exercises; and my middle sister, Rhea, would ... well, gossip and sneak off to make out with guys.

"Over here," Brooke said as we walked toward the west corner of the gym. "This is where the class meets." I sat down on the gym floor and took a quick glance around. One wall appeared to be a shrine to the football team, and a huge

banner across another wall read *Go Wildcats!* with footballs painted all over it.

“Did the cheerleaders paint that banner?” I asked, pointing across the room.

Brooke nodded and proceeded to explain to me, in minute detail, what exact paints and supplies to use when making various cheerleading paraphernalia such as signs and banners. I didn’t remember asking about that, but I nodded enthusiastically like she was revealing a love spell for Chase Crawford. (Which wouldn’t work anyway—Rhea already tried it.)

“ ... You can’t use the everyday paints. You have to use the one labeled as non-drip. You know?” she said.

I sighed and nodded.

“Sorry, this is probably totally boring to you. I mean, did your last school even have cheerleaders?” Brooke furrowed her forehead as if she was afraid of my answer.

I shook my head, and she inhaled sharply.

“Wow, okay. So, I’ll make it simple. We haven’t lost a football game in thirty games, and that’s including the state championships. The football players, cheerleaders, boosters, all of us. We’re kind of a family, you know?” She tucked her long legs underneath her.

I nodded, not sure if I was in the family or not.

Brooke leaned forward and patted me on the arm. “You’re friends with Alex, so you’re definitely okay. He’s kind of a big deal, you know that, right?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure if Alex could even be called my friend yet, but I smiled at her. Apparently I was one of them.

I was seeing firsthand how in high school there are two groups of people: those who have and those who want. It was kind of like the Light Other Realm beings versus the Dark, except that the dividing line seemed to be athletics, rather than ancestral blood and a preference for the beautiful and light versus the twisted and dark.

And thankfully, like a Light Créatúir, I was a have.

“That’s why we’re all so pumped for the new stadium next year,” Brooke continued. “And why we were so worried when there were construction problems last month. Luckily, those issues went away and everything is back on track. This stadium will really take our athletic program to the next level and be

a symbol of how Westerville High football is the best in the state, maybe even in the whole country. To be able to cheerlead, and lead the crowd, in that kind of an environment will be such an honor.” She said this so earnestly, I honestly expected to hear the National Anthem swelling behind her words.

“All right, ladies. Line up!” said a person clad in a baggy T-shirt and gym shorts. I say “person” because I honestly had no idea if it was a man or woman.

Obediently I stood up, shooting a questioning look at Brooke. But she was too busy imagining cheerleading in the new football stadium.

“Welcome to gym class. I’m Jo. Your teacher.” Jo narrowed his/her eyes and looked at the lot of us. “You!” Jo said and pointed at me. “Who are you?”

Startled, I felt my face begin to grow bright red. I mentally started to berate myself: *Stop blushing! You’re making a fool out of yourself already! What? Can’t even speak your name now without looking like you just realized that not every family has afternoon meditation hour?*

“Leah Spencer,” I managed to squeak out. The voice that came from my mouth did not sound like mine.

“Somethin’ wrong with you?” Jo said and crossed his/her arms over his/her chest. I shook my head and attempted to laugh, but once again my voice sounded like someone who’d ingested helium. I was still so startled and confused over this person’s gender that I didn’t know how to react.

“Honey, you supposed to be in special ed?” Jo asked me sympathetically.

Brooke burst out laughing and shook her head.

“No, no. I’m supposed to be here,” I said as I wished a portal would rip open on the gym floor and whisk me away to an alternate universe. One where people didn’t think I was mentally handicapped.

Glaring at me, Jo announced we all needed to warm up and run ten times around the gym. I took a few jogging steps forward when I realized Brooke was standing still. “What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Duh, I have a note,” she said, her voice slightly exasperated. “I can’t risk an injury when we have an important game on Friday night.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Spencer, GET MOVING!” Jo barked across the gym. His/her voice bounced off the walls like a rubber four-square ball. I caught up with the pack of students

and jogged behind them, still trying to figure out my gym teacher's gender.

"New Girl, you gonna make it?" a voice next to me asked. I turned my head and saw a very cute boy with shaggy, shoulder-length brown hair jogging alongside me.

"I think so," I said.

He smiled at me. "You and Ms. Mann really hit it off, huh?" he said, breathing heavily.

"WHAT ARE YOU, EIGHTY YEARS OLD? KEEP UP, JOHNSON!" the scary gym teacher said to one of the students lagging behind.

The pack of students turned the corner and we started on our next lap.

"So, our teacher's a woman?" I asked, reaching up and tightening my ponytail. Cute Guy sputtered and laughed so hard he had to stop running.

"What?" I stopped and stood next to him. He finished laughing and our eyes locked for a moment. He brushed his hair back from his forehead and I noticed that his eyes were a mixture of bright green and blue, like a patch of new grass mixed with ocean water. But unlike Alex, something behind his eyes was hard, like the splintery edges of a wooden board before it's been smoothed by sandpaper.

"SPENCER, WESTON, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? PUT ON YOUR BIG KID PANTIES AND KEEP RUNNING!" Ms. Mann screamed across the gym.

We obediently started running again. "I seriously didn't know she was a woman," I muttered to Cute Guy.

"I don't know about anatomically, but she's apparently female," he said.

I laughed and I huffed up and down. Gym class certainly wasn't for the weak-hearted.

"Man, New Girl, you're slow. Are you gonna have a heart attack or something?" Cute Guy said as my face grew red and my hair plastered itself to the sides of my face.

I looked at him effortlessly jogging next to me. Before I could respond, he sped up and sprinted away, leaving me to struggle on alone.

After we finished our warm-up, those of us who didn't have a note from our parents on account of cheerleading gathered outside to play a game of softball. I kept my eyes off of Cute Guy, not wanting to endure further humiliation after he

saw me nearly barf up my lung during warm-ups.

As I stood at the plate, I repeated over and over, *Just hit the ball with the stick. It can't be that hard. Just hit it.* And I made contact. At least, my arm did.

“OW!” I shrieked as the enormously huge softball plunked me right on the wrist.

“SHAKE IT OFF! SHAKE IT OFF! TAKE FIRST BASE,” Ms. Mann screamed from two feet away as the entire class busted out laughing. I whimpered, cradling my arm against my chest, but obligingly trotted to first base.

“Hey,” I said casually to Cute Guy.

“Hi,” he said, looking down at his baseball glove. He studied the stitching before looking up at me, his deep-set eyes squinting a bit in the sun.

“So, I’m Leah. I—”

I stopped when I saw a dark figure standing next to a tree in the far outfield. I squinted in the hot morning sun and used my good hand to shield my eyes.

“I, what?” Cute Guy said, staring at me. He brushed his hair back again and let it fall in a sheet on either side of his face.

I saw the shadow move across the tree and creep across the field, invisible footsteps bending blades of grass toward me until I felt hot breath on my neck. At the same time, a perfect white snowflake fell on my arm in the eighty-degree heat.

A message from the Light Créatúir. Single, perfect, glittering snowflakes were their equivalent of a tap on the shoulder.

I looked down at the snowflake before brushing it quickly off my arm. “Just leave me alone,” I muttered. “I don’t know what you want, but I can’t help you.”

“Wow. You started talking to me, remember? What’s wrong with you?” Cute Guy said. He took a step away and looked me up and down quickly.

“No, I—”

“INNING OVER. GAME OVER. CLASS OVER,” Ms. Mann shouted as one of the students caught a pop fly. Cute Guy jogged off before I had a chance to explain.

I made it through a few more classes unscathed and without incident and soon it was time for lunch. After the bell rang, I followed the moving crowd down the stairs to the cafeteria. Alex's crowd was sitting at a large table in front of the windows overlooking the courtyard. A table packed with huge, muscular guys in Westerville football T-shirts, peppered with a few tiny, tanned, and perfectly coiffed girls picking at salads and carrot sticks. Brooke caught my attention and gestured for me to join them. I waved back but pointed to the vending machines.

As I stood in front of a vending machine, distractedly jingling the change in my hand and trying to decide if a lunch consisting solely of potato chips would be okay, I heard a voice behind me.

"It's lunch, not rocket science, New Girl."

I whirled around, expecting to see the bored face of some jock. I wasn't prepared to see a disarmingly mysterious, shaggy-haired boy looking down at me. A white T-shirt and jeans hung loosely on his lanky frame, hinting at taught muscles underneath.

Cute Guy from gym class.

"Oh, sorry," I stammered. "I'm just trying to decide. And my name is Leah Spencer, remember?" I gave him a half-hearted, nervous smile. "Listen, I wasn't trying to be rude in gym—"

He cut me off. "Better hurry up. Don't want to keep your crowd waiting." He crossed his arms over his chest and raised his eyebrows. I remained staring at him. "Lunch is only a half hour," he added, pointing to the vending machine. "Unless you can't read." He shrugged.

My cheeks burning at his jerky comment, I turned back to the vending machine. "Uh, yeah, okay. I can read," I muttered under my breath as I dropped the coins into the slot.

"I'll give you a hint about Westerville, New Girl," he said behind me, leaning forward to whisper into my ear. I held my breath as I felt him step closer. "Football isn't everything." I felt his hot breath against my neck. He moved back, wryly smiling at me.

"Thanks for the tip," I said as I pressed my selection. A bead of sweat started to trickle down my back.

"I bet you've already figured that out. You seem smart enough." I could

practically hear him smirking at my back.

“Er, thanks.” I bent down to pick up my chips.

“I’m Ben, by the way,” he said as I stepped past him.

“Nice to meet you, Ben.” I paused, my eyes fixed on the floor in front of me.

“So Spencer, you enjoying it here yet? I’m sure Alex and Brooke are just *awesome* guides,” he said, putting his money in the machine. The way he called me “Spencer” sent an electrical current down my rib cage. “Did they tell you yet how having a football team sticker is ‘kind of a big deal?’” He picked up a bag of pretzels and leaned against the machine.

I laughed, but quickly frowned. “It is kind of a big ... ” I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence with a straight face.

“C’mon, Ben! Get out of the way! I need my Skittles,” whined a guy with a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt and white jeans.

Ben stepped aside and clapped Hideous Sweatshirt Boy on the shoulder. “Anything for you, Michael.”

I took that as my dismissal. “See you around,” I said over my shoulder and walked toward Alex’s lunch table.

As I sat down next to Alex, he said, “Do you know that guy? Ben?” His voice was even but his eyes shifted quickly.

Alternately bewildered and somewhat flattered, I answered, “Not really. I just have gym with him.” I noticed Brooke leaning forward.

“Sure,” Alex said and shrugged. He took a bite of the greasy cheeseburger in front of him, inhaling half of it immediately.

“He seemed nice,” I said, trying for casual. “He said football isn’t everything,” I added with an offhand laugh.

No one else seemed to find it funny.

In fact, about twenty heads snapped in Ben’s direction, the fire of a thousand burning suns beating down upon the poor guy as he smiled and laughed at Hideous Sweatshirt Boy’s jokes.

Alex leaned toward me a bit. “How’s your first day going?”

“Awesome.” I smiled. Sitting next to Alex, Westerville suddenly felt very small and manageable. I completely forgot about Cute Guy—Ben—as I stared at Alex’s broad chest underneath his T-shirt.

“Good. Glad you like it.” He leaned back and locked eyes with me. He held my gaze for a crackling, electric moment before Troy interrupted.

“That’s good you’re liking Westerville, Lee,” Troy said as he inhaled a slice of pizza.

“Leah,” Alex corrected him, his voice hard.

“Sor-ry. *Le-ah*.” Troy pronounced my name carefully. “Stick with us and you’ll be cool. This high school can be tough, like a doggie dog world.” He smiled at me, his teeth too small for his giant mouth.

“What?” Brooke leaned toward Troy. “What did you say?”

“Doggie dog world,” Troy repeated. “You know, like it’s tough out there.” He looked totally confused, like his brain was breaking in half.

“It’s *dog eat dog* world, Troy.” Brooke rolled her eyes.

“Whatever,” Troy muttered as I tried to keep from laughing out loud.

Alex caught my eye and we exchanged a quick smile.

Could he be ... really? Does he actually like me?

I didn’t have much time to mentally dissect Alex’s actions since I heard “Yo, Alex! Catch!” from across the lunchroom. A guy about twenty feet away launched a football toward our table.

“Duck!” Caroline screamed, as Brooke tucked her head down.

Troy turned around in slow motion and put a hand in the air to catch the ball. Except he tipped the ball, and it changed directions. Instead of heading straight into Alex’s capable hands, it now appeared to be on a collision course with my head.

I held my hands up in front of my face, certain I was about to break my nose, when the ball stuck to my fingers. I caught it with a loud SMACK!

“Ow!” I said as I set the ball on the table and flexed my fingers. I shook my hands a little and noticed the entire table staring bug-eyed. “What?” I said quickly. Alex’s face cracked into a huge smile.

“Are you okay? You could’ve hurt yourself!” Brooke said.

Alex nudged me a little. “Way to go!” He leaned forward and picked the ball up, then held my gaze for a second. “Nice job, Brett Favre.”

My heart began to beat rapidly as I grinned back at him. “No problem. I didn’t want to see you get hurt or anything.”

“Maybe she should try out for the team, Alex,” Troy said. He shoved most of a giant burrito into his mouth at once.

“Wouldn’t want her to take your spot, Troy.” Alex flashed another smile at me as he stood up. “Pizza. Be back.”

As I watched him walk back toward the food line, someone else distracted me. Ben, looking at me with a bemused smile on his face. Brooke followed my gaze and turned back to me. “Leah, little FYI about your friend Ben. He might’ve *said* football isn’t everything, but ... ” She rolled her eyes. “He’s just saying that because he can’t play anymore. *He* was the starting quarterback freshman year until he just randomly quit the team. Didn’t play after that. Now he hangs out with the freaks.”

I looked over at the vending machine, but Ben and his friend were gone. I shrugged and nodded, confused as to why I cared when my head was still buzzing from being next to Alex.

“Not to mention, Benny Boy has a girlfriend who goes to another school. So hands off the Football Dropout.” Caroline laughed and Brooke shot her a sharp look.

“What?” Caroline said, laughing harder.

“Right,” I sighed.

“Whatever. Just trying to help,” Brooke said. She shook her head.

Caroline, sensing it was time for a change of subject, spoke up. “Anyway, so tell me more about you, Leah. Like, what’s your favorite movie and stuff? Or your favorite movie star?”

“Oh! Um ... ” I said brightly. I pursed my lips and thought for a moment.

“Someone who’s single, not married or anything,” Brooke added.

Oh.

I silently made a mental note to study the celebrity news that I’d missed last year. “Justin Timberlake?” I said as a question, hoping he hadn’t been married in the wedding of the century while I was, um, unavailable.

Caroline and Brooke looked at each other and shrugged. “I guess he counts, even though he’s not single,” Caroline said.

First test passed. Although my skin still pricked as I thought of who ... or what ... was trying so hard to contact me.

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