

A woman with long dark hair is sitting on a staircase in a dark room. She is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved top and dark pants. She is looking upwards and to the right, with her hand near her face. The room is dimly lit, with light streaming through horizontal slats on the right side, creating a dramatic, high-contrast effect. The title 'DUSTY DEEP' is written in large, colorful, textured letters across the top of the image. The letters are arranged in three rows: 'I N' in the top row, 'T O O' in the middle row, and 'D E E P' in the bottom row. The colors of the letters are: 'I' (pink), 'N' (purple), 'T' (yellow), 'O' (orange), 'O' (red), 'D' (teal), 'E' (green), 'E' (yellow), and 'P' (orange).

I N  
T O O  
D E E P

*amanda grace*

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First e-book edition © 2012

E-book ISBN: 9780738730073

Book design by Bob Gaul

Cover design by Ellen Lawson

Cover image © Ron Nickel/Design Pics Inc./Photolibrary Group Inc.

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Flux  
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.  
2143 Wooddale Drive  
Woodbury, MN 55125  
[www.fluxnow.com](http://www.fluxnow.com)

Manufactured in the United States of America

# One

C lose your eyes.”

“What? Why?” Nick Davis, my best friend, gives me a freaked-out look that makes me laugh. He really is too easy to shock.

I lean back into the buttery-leather bucket seat of Nick’s Mustang. “Just do it.”

He lets out a big exasperated sigh and closes his eyes, leaning his head back against the headrest. I grab my backpack out of the back seat and unbutton my pants, glancing out into the darkened night. A group of girls pass by, their feet crunching the gravel not far from Nick’s car, their giggles breaking the silence. They’re heading toward the glowing house in the distance. There’s no way anyone can see me, but it still makes me nervous.

When he hears the zipper of my jeans, his eyes pop open.

I scramble to cover up my new lace-trimmed underwear. “No peeking! Geez!”

He squeezes his eyes shut as butterflies swarm my stomach. I can’t believe I’m going to change in front of him. If his eyes pop open while my pants are off, I’ll never forgive him.

“What are you doing?”

“Changing.” I struggle to pull my jeans off in the cramped front. This seemed easier in my head. Thank God for the darker-than-dark tint on his windows, because I’m still struggling to untangle the jeans from my ankles, panic welling up.

“Why?” His voice sounds weird, kind of breathy. My heart flutters before I force it back under control.

“It’s not like I could walk out of the house in what I wanted to wear.” I pull the skirt out of my backpack and slip my bare feet into it, then shimmy it up over my hips. When the zipper on the side slides up, Nick peeks again, one eye at first, then both flare so wide it’s like one of those cartoons where the wolf’s eyes pop out of his head.

My heart goes *kerthunk* this time. Maybe I should have thought of dressing like this sooner, dressing more like Reyna, his on-again, off-again girlfriend.

Right now, I’m pretty sure they’re on again. To my utter, heart-crushing disappointment.

He looks outraged. “What the hell is that?”

I roll my eyes and try to pretend it’s no big deal. “It’s called a skirt.”

“That is *not* a skirt. That is a Band-Aid.”

I snort. “You know as well as I do that Carter won’t take a second look at me if I’m dressed the same as always.”

I think he flinches when I say “Carter.” I also think I’ve imagined it. This is the game in my head every time I’m around Nick these days. The “does he, doesn’t he” game. I hate it. And tonight it ends.

I realized I loved Nick the first time I saw him with Reyna, watched the way his lips curled upward when he looked at her, saw his eyes sparkle in a way they never did when it was just us two. And as she trailed her fingers down his arm, laughing flirtatiously, I realized I didn’t want to be “just friends” with him anymore, but by then it was too late.

Now all I ever do is watch them break up and get back together and break up and get back together and I can never seem to tell him how I feel. So I’ve enacted Plan B. I’ll make him think something’s going on with Carter Wellesley, the world’s biggest flirt, and once I see Nick’s reaction, I’ll finally know if he could ever see me like he sees Reyna. If maybe he could be more than just my best friend, my next-door neighbor.

He pulls the key from the ignition, the bulky key ring jingling in his hand. The throaty rumble of his five-year-old Mustang cuts off, plunging us into silence. “Are you *sure* you want to do this?”

I fight the urge to smile and instead slide deeper into the smooth bucket seat, trying not to fidget. I smooth out my sequined teal miniskirt and peer into the

darkness, trying to make out some of the shadowy figures approaching Carter's house.

Carter Wellesley is Mossy Rock High School's golden boy, the one with the flawless smile and wicked fastball. He's captain of the football, basketball, and baseball teams. I guess that's not a huge accomplishment, considering that anyone with the slightest athletic ability is practically drafted onto the team, but he makes it look effortless. He's not brilliant, but he's funny, and people are drawn to him like a moth to flame. And aside from dating Tracey for a record-breaking two months, he's not into attachment, at least as far as I can tell.

In the twelve years we've gone to school together, I've watched him flirt with every girl—including me, once, although he might have been joking with the girl next to me. Most guys do ignore me, after all. But he's still a flirt, which is why he's the perfect one for tonight.

It's barely nine, but the bash is quickly reaching full steam. Even from our curbside vantage point, I can tell that most of the school is already here. Not that it means much—our senior class has forty-seven students. Forty-five, if you nix the stoner twins who have hardly shown up at all this month.

"Yes, I'm sure," I say with fake confidence, the cheap sequins digging into my palms. I force myself to let go of the skirt before I ruin it. "We graduate in a week. If I don't do it now, Carter will never even know my name."

"He knows your name. You've known him since kindergarten. It's impossible to *not* know your name."

I shoot Nick a glare. "Sometimes he calls me Pam."

"He probably does that on purpose. Besides, at least it *rhymes* with Sam."

I narrow my eyes further. "Don't be stupid, Nick."

"*Don't be stupid, Nick,*" he parrots back at me, in an annoying, nasally voice. There's no way I sound like that. He's pissed off, and I let myself hope that means something. Why else would he get riled up about me going after Carter? God let me be right.

Nick blows out a long, slow breath and leans his head against the headrest again, which will probably make his bed-head look even more attractive to the girls at the party. The messier his thick brown hair gets, the more they cling to him like Reynolds Wrap. I bet if he used his graphing calculator, he could show

the exact moment that he would get the maximum effect.

Must be nice. I spent forty-five minutes tonight trying to tame my dark blond curls into something resembling Taylor Swift, but I look more like a Lady Gaga-inspired disaster. Nothing new, though. No matter what I do, average is the best I can hope for. That's all I want. Average. Cute if I'm lucky. I'll probably always fall short of downright pretty.

I'm struck again by the dull pain of thinking that maybe if my mom were still around, she could help me. Could show me how to dress better, how to use the right makeup to obscure my too-big nose, fix my too-small eyes.

I stare Nick down, but now he won't look at me. I think I have a heart arrhythmia now—it's spasming, all thud *thud* thud *thud*.

He's mad I'm interested in Carter. He's upset I'm dressed in a miniskirt. He won't meet my eyes. Please let this mean what I think it means.

"Your dad would kill both of us if he saw you in that," he says, resignation in his voice.

"Which is why he'll never know."

"You know this is a bad idea," he adds, staring out the windshield.

"No, it is *not* a bad idea. Carter broke up with Tracey two weeks ago. The timing is perfect." Why is Nick so intent on talking me out of it? Is it because he thinks I'm not pretty enough for Carter, or because he actually likes me?

I grip the door handle. "Seriously," I say, "stop trying to psych me out. I'm doing it."

"Whatever," he says gruffly. "Let's just go in."

I nod, try not to visibly gulp. I climb out of the car and slam the door extra hard, ignoring the wince Nick gives me. I grip my purse in one hand and use the other to adjust the miniskirt that seems to have ridden up so high I might be showing off my thong.

Thong. I can't believe I bought one of those ridiculous things. But I've watched Carter for four years, and he doesn't go for my usual look: T-shirts and Levis. Carter is high school perfection—a man's man who actually has manners, a guy who can fix a car but also knows to open doors and buy flowers for his girlfriend. Well, before they broke up.

I chose him because it's the obvious choice. He's single, and he's flirty, and that's all I need.

I take in a long breath and blow it out through my mouth as I stride across a lawn so well-manicured it would make a golf course proud, Nick trailing behind. My shiny-new stilettos sort of sink into the grass, so I move over to the walkway.

There are three guys sitting on a brick planter to my right, and I can feel their eyes boring right into me. The confidence I faked in the car disappears completely and I try to walk as if I don't notice them watching me.

I totter my way to the front door, following a lanky redhead in a spaghetti-strap tank top and jeans so tight they look painted on. When the leaded-glass and oak door swings open, a bass beat rumbles out. It sounds like Flo Rida. Figures Carter would listen to this stuff. What's wrong with a little country?

The crowd inside is thick. I have to turn sideways to squeeze in far enough to let Nick enter behind me. Even with its cavernous, twenty-foot ceilings, the house feels a little cramped.

I get caught in a stream of people—jammed in the mix, shoulder-to-shoulder—and it forces me to migrate away from Nick, toward the kitchen. I don't know where Carter even found this many people. Maybe there are juniors here, too.

I know I'm too smashed-in for people to notice me or what I'm wearing, but I feel like every eye in the room is on me. It's warm, and it feels as if every inch of my skin is already glistening with sweat. This was a bad idea. What had sounded brilliant in the safe cocoon of my bedroom now seems ridiculous.

But if I stick with it, I know it'll work. Nick will see me flirt, and he'll feel that same twinge I did the first time I saw him with Reyna—a dull ache that takes up residence in your chest.

A long plastic trough filled with ice and bottles of alcohol is all the invitation I need. I grab the first thing I see—hard lemonade—and twist off the cap. I take a long, relentless drink, downing at least half of it in one swoop. I'm not a drinker, not normally. My dad's a cop—the chief of police, in fact—and he'd kill me if he knew I went out partying like this. As it is, he thinks I'm at a mock U.N. meeting. I don't even think we have those at our school, but he doesn't actually know anything about me or who I am, so he didn't think much of it.

I've only been drunk once, sophomore year, when Nick and I were sneaking alcohol out of the cooler during a particularly busy Fourth of July barbecue at his house. But right now the butterflies are multiplying too fast. I just need this one drink. Maybe two. Then I can reassess the plan. Possibly ditch it all together.

The effect of the alcohol is almost instant. It's like warm fingers unfurling inside my stomach. I guzzle the rest of the bottle, then toss it and pick up a beer, relishing the quieting of the butterflies.

I sip the beer, finally turning away from the granite counter and looking back into the great room. Finals are mostly over and it seems like the entire senior class is here to celebrate. I guess that's nothing crazy, in a town this small. This stifling. What else is there to do?

Scanning the crowd, I look for Carter's perfect, shaggy blond hair and intense blue eyes. It's too warm in here for his trademark letterman jacket—the one positively filled with patches representing every sport he's mastered.

Instead, my eyes land on Nick. He's still stuck near the door, and already people are gravitating toward him, high-fiving him and slapping his back, trading jokes and barbs. You'd think he just won an Oscar for Best Motion Picture or something, the way everyone carries on. He's the class president, not a celebrity.

He meets my eyes, nodding, and I tip my chin up back at him. And then the moment scatters, as a tall brunette with exotic dark eyes flings her arms around him.

It's Reyna, the ex-girlfriend. No—wait—girlfriend, without the ex attached. I think. She looks a little drunk, what with the awkward sloppiness of the hug.

Oh God, we're wearing the same obnoxious sequined miniskirt. But she was smart enough to wear it with low gladiator sandals instead of sky-high stilettos. She looks beach chic; I look like a go-go dancer. I knew I went overboard.

I tear my eyes away from them, feeling my cheeks flame, and guzzle the beer in my hand until it's empty. The heat I now feel is not due to embarrassment.

The energy in the room seems to hum and change, and I realize that Carter has walked in. Maybe "walk" is the wrong word. He seems to glide, floating into the room as if he's above everyone else, as if he doesn't need to touch the ground



like us mere mortals. And people part like the Red Sea for him, smiling, waving, staring. I'm surprised they don't drop to their knees and bow.

He's walking toward me. *Straight* toward me. I try to breathe in slowly, keep the pressure from squeezing my lungs too tightly. I need this to work. I need him to notice me, flirt with me, laugh with me. Nick is just across the room. If he saw Carter sling an arm around me, saw him tuck a tendril of hair behind my ear, maybe, finally, Nick would do something. Swoop in and admit he has feelings for me. Because no matter how hard I try, I can't make the first move. Can't just *ask* him.

It's stupid and I know that, but if I ask him and don't like what he says, it'll kill me. And it'll kill our friendship. I just can't take it if his answer isn't yes.

When Carter meets my eyes, gives me that glowing smile of his, I'm like butter in a hot pan. I think I might melt right into my terribly uncomfortable shoes. He's dazzling—it's no wonder all the girls are after him.

"Hey," he says, stopping so near me that our toes seem to touch. His presence is more intense than ever. I want to shrink back and lean forward at the same time. I never realized how tall he is—almost as tall as Nick. He must be six foot. And I'm five three on a good day.

"Hi," I say in my perkier voice, smiling so widely he can probably tell I've had my wisdom teeth pulled.

*Way to look crazy.* I probably should have stuck with that flippant, bored look that his ex, Tracey, has mastered. Does he like it if girls come on strong? It's not like I'm going to sleep with him, of course. I'd never go that far. I just need to flirt with him, maybe get him to give me a playful pinch, tug on one of my curls, *something*.

We share a long, silent moment. I smile demurely in his direction. I think. I'm not entirely sure what smiling demurely feels like. I try to find something intelligent to say. Something to break the ice, get us talking. Something flirty that will let him know I'm interested.

Then he clears his throat and raises his eyebrows. My smile falters. I can't read his look.

"Um, you're blocking the beer," he says. His voice is booming. *So loud.*

I think I hear someone snicker.

“What?” Every move I make is weird, jerky, mechanical. I have lost all ability to control myself. My heart lands somewhere in my feet. I’m making a fool of myself. This will never work.

I twist around and realize I’ve been standing in front of the beer trough. And since there are so many people gathered around, Carter can’t get to it.

“Uh ... oh.”

I step back, knocking right into someone else, and Carter reaches forward. He grabs two bottles by the neck and then steps away from me.

“Thanks,” he says, and for one millisecond he meets my eyes and I feel the glow of his look, realize what it would feel like if he cared who I was, if I was one of the pretty girls. I truly get why other girls are enamored of him, why they’d do anything to catch his eye.

But I can’t say “you’re welcome” before he’s already gone, vanished into the crowd. This isn’t how I imagined it. It’s not how it would work in one of my books.

I pop the top off a beer and take another long, lonely drink.

I’ve lost Nick. He vanished at least an hour ago. And he’s my ride home.

I picture him flirting with Reyna, and it stings. And that’s why I haven’t moved, haven’t gone to look for him. Because I don’t need to see it, don’t need to confirm it. The crowd has thinned out some and we’re quickly approaching midnight. If I don’t get home soon, my dad will know the model U.N. excuse was a complete fabrication. There aren’t any schools we would compete against that are more than an hour and a half away.

I’m thoroughly drunk. Not “I’m going to puke right on my own high heels” drunk, but “dancing on a couch sounds like a really good idea” drunk.

Ever since the epic fail with Carter, I’ve been sitting on a stool in the kitchen, sipping beer. Even though I’ve known all these people my entire life, no one really seems to care if they know me. Sure, they know who I am. We all know each other. I share at least two classes with every one of them. But picking me out of a lineup and knowing who I *really* am? Two different things. A year from now, when they’re all in college in some far-flung state, if someone asked them my name, they’d probably squint, tip their head, and vaguely remember me as

that blonde who sat behind them in math. Who they were paired with in gym.

I wish I'd worn my jeans, because the stool is sticking to my thighs and I can't stop tugging at my too-short hemline. People keep glancing my way, as if shocked I'm wearing something other than jeans, and I want to snap at them to take a picture because it would last longer. But I don't.

There are four bottles sitting next to me. Four *empty* bottles. Everything is so warm and fuzzy, I can barely muster annoyance at Carter any more.

I guess I knew this wouldn't work. That I didn't have a chance at getting Carter's attention. I just thought if I dressed the part, he'd notice me, react to me enough to catch Nick's attention.

But Nick probably knew all along that Carter would blow me off.

I sigh and take another sip of the now-empty bottle. Maybe I didn't come on strong enough. Maybe I should give it another shot. Go find him, flirt with him, make sure Nick sees us. That's all I need. Maybe there's a way to do it where Carter's participation is limited. I can just laugh like he said something outrageously funny. Touch his knee or slug him in the arm or something.

I get up, wobbling more than ever on the tall heels, and make my way down the hall. I'm pretty sure there's a game room somewhere down here, as I've heard people talking about a pool table. The hall seems like it's tilting just a little bit as I cross the space. It's like walking across the deck of a boat.

Just as I round a corner, I see Carter. Tall, muscular, perfect, in that long-sleeved cotton tee that barely stretches across the muscles he's built during four years of nonstop sports. Normally, guys like Carter stay here in town after graduation, waste away forever. Have two kids, find work at the lumber mill in Morton. Buy a house when they turn twenty and stay put forever.

I wonder what his plans are.

He slips into a bedroom, and my heart thumps even harder. I wonder if it's his. But I need him to go back to the party, where Nick and everyone else is.

My feet seem to propel me forward of their own accord, following Carter as if magnetized. Somewhere along the way the hallway wall looms closer, and I have to put my hand out to keep from knocking right into it. Maybe I'm a little more drunk than I thought. I take in a deep breath to steady myself, then continue on.

I stop briefly at the door, which he's left open a few inches. My hand shakes as

I reach out and rest my palm flat against the painted, six-panel slab. I nudge it open. It's nearly dark inside; a small lamp on the desk in one corner illuminates the space enough that I can see shadows. Carter's broad back is to me, and he's rifling through a drawer in his dresser.

I step further into the room and look around. It looks exactly as I'd expected it to: masculine, filled with dark woods and rumpled, navy blue sheets, sports memorabilia adorning the beige walls. A big Seahawks pennant hangs over his bed. I close my eyes and breathe deeply just to see how it smells. Fresh. Like laundry or Pine-Sol, but something spicy, too, like aftershave. Carter has a smooth, clean-cut jaw. Does he have to shave every morning?

My heels sink in the thick carpeting, and my eyes pop open as I wobble, putting a hand out to save myself. It lands on the door and slams it shut.

Carter whirls around, spooked.

"Oh, sorry," I say. I clear my throat. My heart is galloping so hard in my chest it might break free and leave the room entirely. "I, uh, lost my balance."

"What are you doing?" His words are so loud they seem to fill the room up.

I take in a long, slow breath. "I wanted to talk to you."

"So talk," he says. His voice isn't harsh, but it's not all that inviting either. In the darkness of the room, shadows fill his face and it's hard to make out his expression.

I run a hand through my hair, and it tangles in my curls. "I just ... " I step forward, the heels still sinking terribly in the plush carpet. The space between us diminishes until I'm so close I could touch him.

I take the last step, but my heel lands on something uneven, something I hadn't seen in the dark. My ankle turns and my arms fly upward, and Carter reaches forward, but his dresser is closer. I hit my cheek on the edge of it and my body twists, and one of the knobs on the middle drawer catches the delicate lace strap on my tank top.

It rips as I hit the floor. My face could burst into flames at any moment. I probably should not have had that fourth beer. Or was it the fifth? There was that hard lemonade ...

I feel myself being pulled upward, feel Carter's strong hands under my arms. I teeter in front of him, staring upward at his intense, dark eyes. "Thank you," I

say.

He hasn't let go of me. My cheek pulses as his hands slide off of me, and I sway for a half a second until I regain my balance.

"What are you doing in here?"

"What?" my voice sounds ridiculous, high-pitched and squeaky. Why am I so nervous? It's not like I actually want to throw myself at him. "Uh, I don't know. I just thought ... " My voice trails off. I hadn't actually planned in advance *how* to get him back out to the party. "I just thought ... "

"Thought what? You thought *I'd* want *you*?"

I blink, my eyes finally adjusting to the darkness enough that I can see him. See his sneer and the cold, disgusted look in his slightly glazed eyes. He's drunk, like me, and his look of pure disgust isn't even a little guarded.

Carter has never looked so ugly.

"Are you kidding me?" he asks.

My jaw drops. It's like my tongue is swollen, blocking me from talking. I swallow two, three times, the pain growing. Of course he doesn't want me. "No. Not at all.

I just—"

"Look, your body isn't bad," he says, scanning me, pausing at the place where my skirt barely covers six inches of my thighs. "Nice legs, and all. But you're like ... a two-bagger. Get real."

A tear runs down my cheek before I even feel my eyes moisten, my heart twisting in a vice as new heat blooms on my cheeks. Even drunk, I know what he's saying. Once, at a football game, I heard two guys talk about how a girl was so ugly, if they wanted to sleep with her they'd have to put a bag over her head, and one over theirs, too, just in case her bag fell off.

She was a *two-bagger*.

I swallow a gag.

The room spins harder. I reach up to slap him but he's faster, and grabs my wrist. He shakes his head, slowly, staring me straight in the eyes with a mocking look. It's like he loves that I tried to hit him. My murky brain can't seem to process that.

Then he steps back, away from me, and heads for the door.

I follow him. I want to scream, leap on his back, rip out his hair. I want to tell him what I was doing, make him understand that I don't even want him like he thinks I do, but that would make me seem insane.

I want to do something ... anything ... to make him understand he just shattered me, spoke the very things I always hear in my head, the things I *know* Nick thinks about me. The reason I'm stuck firmly in friend territory. But I can't get my legs to move any faster, and he's leaving the room before I've figured it out.

I'm only a few steps behind him, and I'm out in the hall before I realize I've made a mistake. I should have composed myself first. My eyes are filled with tears, shimmering, making everything dance. I rush to fix my top, but there's nothing I can do. The strap just kind of hangs there, exposing the edge of my bra.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

I look up to realize I'm standing directly in front of Michelle Pattison. We did a project together once. I can't remember what it was. Her jaw is hanging loose, like it's completely unhinged.

I blink rapidly, trying to clear my eyes. My cheek is pounding now, and I wince when Michelle reaches out like she's going to touch it. I step back.

"Carter Wellesley is a complete, total asshole," I say. My voice is wobbly and gargled. My lip starts to tremble as the hurt prevails over my attempt at composure. "I can't *believe* him. He ... he ... "

A dark look passes over Michelle's refined ivory features. Her eyes sweep over me and then she looks over her shoulder, in the direction Carter went. "Did he ... I mean, did he just ... "

I nod my head, though I'm not really listening to her. Her words just float around me, land somewhere at my feet. I think she's still talking. More tears slide loose and I nod again and then stumble past her, shoving her out of my way as I stagger down the hall.

I have to get out of here before I totally fall apart.

I knock into a couple making out and trip over their feet, which sends me careening into a closed door. I hit it so hard the sound seems to echo everywhere,

even over the loud music.

Everyone is staring.

I rush toward the foyer, yank open the door, and walk out into the night.

I don't care if I have to walk all three miles home.

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