



Secrets run deep in . . .

SHALLOW POND

Alissa Grosso

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First e-book edition © 2013

E-book ISBN: 9780738732800

Book design by Bob Gaul

Cover design by Adrienne Zimiga

Cover images: Woman © JPagetRMphotos/Alamy

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Flux
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125
www.fluxnow.com

ONE

Zach Faraday and Cameron Schaeffer showed up in Shallow Pond on the same day. In terms of excitement, it was sort of like Christmas, the Fourth of July, and the annual winter carnival all rolled into one. Yeah, not a lot usually happened in Shallow Pond. That's why my exit strategy was already planned out.

I didn't know, when I got that text message from Jenelle after fourth period, that my exit strategy was already in jeopardy, but I guess I should have seen it coming. History has a tendency to repeat itself, and the Buntings had already shown themselves pretty much incapable of getting out of Shallow Pond. I don't know why I thought I should be any different.

As I headed down the hallway toward my locker, I read Jenelle's message: *Just met your date for winter carn. He is hawt!* I made an attempt to text back that "hawt" was not actually a word, but texting and walking was not yet something I was skilled at. The phone was a recently won concession, a Christmas gift from my older sisters after years of begging and pleading.

I had only just gotten my locker opened when Jenelle and Shawna showed up, breathless from sprinting down the hallway. Like I said, not a lot happened in Shallow Pond. A new guy in town was certainly worth a full-out hallway sprint. I glanced down at Shawna's not entirely practical choice of footwear.

"In kitten heels, no less," I said. "I'm impressed."

Shawna winced. "I think I twisted an ankle," she said.

After that followed a frenzied string of oh-my-gods and he-is-so-hawts. Somehow in there I was able to gather that his name was Zach Faraday, that he had for reasons no one understood moved to Shallow Pond from someplace far more cosmopolitan, and, oh yes, he was the top contender to be my date for the winter carnival.

"I thought I made it clear that I don't need a date for the carnival," I said.

“But it would be perfect,” Jenelle said. “Shawna and I are going with our men. It would be great if you had someone too.”

I refrained from pointing out that calling Dave and Frank “men” might have been something of an exaggeration. My two best friends had both paired off in the fall. Somewhere along the way they’d stopped thinking of Dave and Franky as the dorky boys we’d known our whole lives and suddenly saw them as attractive members of the opposite sex. It all boggled my mind. It also left me playing the role of fifth wheel, and as a result Jenelle and Shawna were determined to find me a suitable guy. They’d gotten it in their heads that the winter carnival was going to be the event for which they found me a partner.

“I’ve been going to the winter carnival my whole life,” I said. “I never needed a date before.”

“But Zach’s not going to have a date,” Shawna said. “He just moved to town. You don’t want him to have to go by himself.”

“He probably isn’t going at all,” I said.

“Which is why you need to go with him,” Jenelle said.

“Just give it a rest,” I said.

“He’s perfect for you, Bunting,” Jenelle said. “He’s an orphan, like you.”

“Seriously,” I said, meaning she had gone too far with that one, but she took it as more of an oh-my-god-no-way sort of “seriously.”

“It’s like you guys were made for each other,” Jenelle gushed.

“That’s enough,” I said through gritted teeth. I slammed my locker shut. “I don’t care if this guy is the best-looking guy to ever set food in Shallow Pond. I’m not interested.”

I thought the silent reaction from Jenelle and Shawna meant that they were finally listening to me. They weren’t. They were ignoring me completely. There was something else far more interesting at the other end of the hallway. Make that *someone*. I turned to see what was going on, and realized that Zach Faraday was in fact the best-looking guy to ever set foot in Shallow Pond.

I didn’t know where exactly Zach Faraday had come from, but it looked like he’d stepped straight out of a magazine, and not *Sportsman’s Quarterly* like the rest of the Shallow Pond population, but *Gentleman’s Quarterly*. His clothes made even Shawna in her kitten heels look underdressed. His hair was golden-brown and seemed to glow, as if it was actual molten gold, beneath the

fluorescent lighting. His eyes were an intense icy blue, and his smile had the ability to melt knees in a single flash. And you could tell just by the way he walked, by the look in his eyes, that he knew how good he looked. So, naturally, I was determined to have nothing to do with him.

“Still opposed to taking a date to the winter carnival?” Shawna asked.

“Yes,” I said. I stormed down the hallway, careful to not even glance in Zach’s direction as I passed him.

In a town as bland and drab as Shallow Pond, it didn’t take much to stand out. Despite living there my whole life, I’d never really felt like I belonged. Perhaps part of it was the fact that, unlike most of the people in town, I wanted to get the hell away as soon as I possibly could. I knew that my oldest sister, Annie, had once felt the same way; hell, maybe even Gracie had wanted to cut and run at some point. All I knew was that both of them were still there, and I was determined not to suffer the same fate. My hopes were riding on the half-a-dozen college applications I’d mailed out two-and-a-half months earlier, right after Halloween.

I was glad Zach Faraday was around. It meant there was actually someone who would do an even worse job of fitting in than I did. I hoped that his freakishness wouldn’t wear off, but I had a feeling that come next week, he’d be sporting the same crappy relaxed-fit jeans and Penn State sweatshirts as the rest of my male classmates. Probably he would crop that thick golden hair of his to a length and style that would blend in nicely with the rest of the men in town.

I didn’t care what sort of clothes Zach Faraday wore. I didn’t care what he did with his hair. No matter what, I wasn’t going to pay him the slightest bit of attention. I had a plan for getting out of this place, and I wasn’t going to let some boy come along and ruin all that.

“Wait up!” I heard Shawna shout as she shuffled after me, favoring her twisted ankle. I didn’t wait.

“Babie!” Jenelle yelled. She might have been about to say something else, but I spun around and glared at her.

“Don’t call me that,” I said.

“You need to chill out,” Jenelle said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m hungry,” I said, and I resumed my brisk walk into the cafeteria. But I wasn’t hungry. Not really.

The problem with Jenelle and Shawna was that they thought this stuff really mattered. They thought the winter carnival was a big deal. They thought some new guy in town was earth-shattering news. I think they actually sort of liked living in Shallow Pond.

I bought myself a sandwich and an iced tea and headed toward our table in the far back corner. The cafeteria was filled with the kids I'd known my whole life. Dave and Frank were already at our table, their trays overloaded with food.

"You see the new guy?" Dave asked as soon as I sat down, and that pretty much set the tone for the whole lunch period. In between fawning over their boyfriends, Jenelle and Shawna repeated the same bits of gossip about Zach over and over again. Pretty much the same conversation was going on at every other table in the cafeteria. I almost felt bad for Zach. Then I noticed him at the other end of the cafeteria, at a table mobbed with people—the most popular guy in the school, at least for the day.

"I wonder what he makes of all this?" I said.

"He's going to like it here," Shawna said. "People are probably a lot nicer here than where he's from."

"You don't even know where he's from," I pointed out.

"But people are nice here in Shallow Pond," Shawna said. I wondered if that's what my parents were thinking when they'd picked this unlikely town to settle down in.

"We think Barbara should go with Zach to the winter carnival," Jenelle told the boys.

"Yeah, that would be cool," Dave said.

"Maybe you guys should talk to him," Jenelle said. "You know, get him to ask Barbara to the carnival."

"We don't even know him," Frank said. Shawna nudged him hard in the ribs.

"Just talk to him," she said.

"No, don't," I said. "I don't want a date for the carnival."

"No, we can ask him. It's all right," Dave said.

"I don't even know if I feel like going this year," I said. That's when the four of them looked at me as if I'd just said I was planning on jumping off the Empire State Building or something equally outrageous, but then I noticed them all turning to look at something else.

I was afraid to look. I did so, slowly, and I saw Zach and his confident-cool-guy walk headed right toward our table. Crap.

I grabbed up all my stuff and my half-eaten lunch and started heading for the door.

“I just remembered I have to go to the library to look up that thing for class,” I called over my shoulder.

“Babie,” Jenelle said. I didn’t even bother turning to glare at her. I bolted from the cafeteria.

For the record, I’m not afraid of guys. I even technically had a boyfriend once, if you count the three-and-a-half weeks that me and Rob O’Dell were “going out” sophomore year. What I was afraid of was becoming my oldest sister. It’s a well-known fact in my family that when she was in high school, Annie was head-over-heels in love with one of her classmates, Cameron Schaeffer.

Annie had been accepted at a decent college and had the opportunity to leave Shallow Pond forever, but she didn’t go. She never really explained why, but I always assumed it was because of Cameron. Yes, it’s true that he went away to school, but it seemed she figured that if she stayed in Shallow Pond, she could at least see him when he came home on breaks or whatever. Only that never really happened, because it wasn’t long after he went off to college that Cameron ditched her. She became mopey and unhappy for an impossibly long time. I doubted that she’d ever really gotten over Cameron.

I never really thought I was in danger of following in Annie’s footsteps. I knew every single guy in Shallow Pond, and there wasn’t one of them I was in any danger of falling head-over-heels in love with. At least there never used to be—but then I got a good look at Zach Faraday, enough of a look to know that if I wanted to follow through on my plan to bid farewell to Shallow Pond, it would be best to avoid those cold blue eyes, that completely captivating smile, at all costs.

I went into the nearest girls’ room and locked myself in one of the stalls until the first bell rang, and then I waited until the hallways were nearly deserted before racing to English class. I stepped through the door just as the bell was ringing.

I hadn’t even sat down yet when I heard a voice behind me say, “Sorry I’m late. I got lost on the way here.”

I didn't have to turn around to know who it was. How completely unfair was it that a guy who had it all in the looks department also had a smooth, velvety voice? I took my seat and refused to even glance in Zach's direction.

"You must be Zach," said Mrs. Grimes, who was approximately two hundred years old. "Let's see, there's a seat over there next to Gracie Bunting."

"Barbara," I corrected automatically.

"Hmm, yes, I'm sorry," Mrs. Grimes said. "You do look just like your sister."

Zach sat down beside me, and I could hear all around me a twitter of gossiping going on.

"So, you're Barbara," Zach said. I didn't look at him. "I've heard about you."

"It's a small town," I said, still without so much as glancing in his direction. "My guess is that within a week you'll know the complete biography of every resident in this backwater burg."

"Even that of the mysterious Buntings?" Zach asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, but unfortunately Mrs. Grimes was suddenly looking right in my direction.

"Gracie, since you feel like talking, why don't you read the passage on page fifty-two for us," she said. I didn't even bother correcting her.

Two

Jenelle's text messages had reached such a furious intensity, I had no choice but to turn my phone off completely before last period. I ran to my locker after class, pausing only long enough to grab my coat and run. I figured that if I ignored them, then there'd be no way they would be able to arrange for Zach Faraday to be my date for the winter carnival. I suppose I was something of an optimist.

The Bunting residence, a two-story house with peeling-paint siding, had a shabby, dilapidated look to it. Or, to put it another way, it looked like just about every other house in Shallow Pond. Our small side yard was coated with a thin layer of dirty brown snow, what remained from the pre-Christmas storm we'd gotten. It didn't really add very much to the ambiance of the place. I climbed up the four steps to the front door, fumbled for the key in my pocket, unlocked the door, and stepped into the living room—startling Annie, who had apparently dozed off on the couch.

"You're home early," she said. She sat up, sending the afghan and a book she must have been reading crashing to the floor. "What time is it?"

"Almost three," I said. "You must have fallen asleep."

She glanced at her watch to confirm this fact, then shook her head.

"Unbelievable," she said. "I don't know where the day went. I'm still exhausted from that cold."

Annie got sick right before Christmas, but it seemed to be taking her forever to recover. I don't think it helped that she didn't really do anything besides read and take care of the house.

"Maybe you should go to a real doctor," I said. She laughed at my suggestion. She'd seen Dr. Warrell, Shallow Pond's one and only physician. Let's just say he made my ancient English teacher look young. His initial prescription was bed rest and plenty of fluids. Annie had always balked at the idea of leaving Shallow

Pond to see another doctor, but in my opinion she could have benefited from seeing someone whose medical license was obtained sometime *after* the close of the second World War.

“How was school?” she asked.

“Changing the subject?” I watched as Annie got up to fold the afghan and pick up her book. Her movements were stiff and slow, like she was an old lady and not someone in her twenties.

“All the parenting books say that you should have a healthy dialogue with your teenager. It’s called a conversation. It works like this: I ask a question and you answer it. Care to try it?”

“You’re not my parent,” I pointed out. I couldn’t help but glance at the mantel where all the pictures were, dated school pictures of the three of us. We looked so much alike—same strawberry-blond hair, same crooked smiles—that it was only the style of clothes that gave us away. On the end of the mantel was my parents’ wedding portrait. I used to spend hours just gazing at my mother when I was a kid; I even remember having imaginary conversations with her, as if she could hear me in heaven or wherever I imagined her to be. She was beautiful in her flowing white gown, her strawberry-blond hair in perfect round curls. The man beside her was sharp and good-looking, but it wasn’t hard to see who the three of us took after.

“I am, however, your legal guardian,” Annie was saying, “and it’s my job to make sure you don’t run away to Mexico or get a hideously ugly tattoo or get brainwashed by some cult who worships umbrellas and is in secret conversation with space-faring aliens.”

“Would a cool-looking tattoo be okay?” I asked. “School was fine.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Annie sat back down on the couch, as if the effort of folding the afghan and picking up the book had taken all of her energy.

“There’s a new guy in school,” I said. I’m not sure why I told her. She would have found out sooner or later anyway, I suppose.

“Oh, what’s he like?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, which wasn’t a lie. I wasn’t really sure what Zach Faraday was like. The only thing I knew about him was that he was incredibly attractive, but I didn’t really know anything about who he was. Well, there was one thing. “I heard he’s an orphan too.”

“Huh,” Annie said. “Well, that’s unusual.”

“I guess maybe his parents died and he came here to live with some relative or something.”

My mother died when I was born. Annie says it wasn’t due to complications from childbirth, that it wasn’t my fault my mother was dead. She said it was something else that killed her, a disease, but I had to figure that if she was sick, having a child couldn’t have been good for her. It probably weakened her, wore her out. The fact that she died right after I was born made it pretty clear to me that I probably *did* have something to do with her dying. Even if the disease would have killed her anyway, my arrival probably killed her quicker. Annie was always saying this wasn’t true, but I knew that it was only to make me feel better. Annie’s like that. She’s always thinking about everyone else’s feelings.

Gracie was only three-and-a-half when I was born, so she doesn’t remember my mother either. Annie’s the only one who remembers her, and the whole time we were growing up she always told us happy stories about how Mom was so sweet and loving, and how she probably still watches over us and takes care of us.

My father almost never talked about my mother. Annie said it was because he loved her so much that it hurt him to talk about her. Maybe this was true, or maybe this was just another one of those things that Annie said to make us feel better. Growing up, I was always scared of my father. He seemed like he was a million miles away; he spent most of his time in his office with the door closed. He would get mad easily and yell at us for things like talking too loud or giggling or other little things that we couldn’t really help. I liked to imagine that he was a different person before my mother died, that he was happy and sweet, but then when she died he became so upset that he turned into this nasty man.

He died when I was twelve, a heart attack. I don’t know if the heart attack was brought on by him always being angry or because he’d gotten so fat and out of shape. By the time he died he didn’t look anything like the slim, sharp-dressed man in that wedding photo. It’s weird, but even though I knew my father and never knew my mother, I missed my mother more. Anyway, when Dad died, Annie was twenty years old and old enough to be our legal guardian, so it wasn’t as if all that much changed, except now we didn’t feel like we had to tiptoe around the house and speak in whispers. Now it was okay to laugh once in a

while. It was actually sort of a relief when my father died, which I know sounds awful, but it's true.

Annie must have gathered up enough strength to make dinner, because when I came downstairs a couple of hours later I could smell potatoes and pot roast cooking in the kitchen. My stomach remembered that I'd deprived it of half its lunch and growled angrily.

"Need help with anything?" I asked as I stepped into the kitchen.

"Do you want to set the table?" Annie said. "Gracie should be home any minute."

As if she'd been waiting to be announced, Gracie stepped in the back door, shaking a few snow flurries from her hair. The phone began to ring and Gracie pounced on it. She didn't say much on her end besides "Hello," and a few "yeahs" and "I knows" and such. I assumed she was talking to one of her friends until about five minutes later, when she held the phone out to me and said, "Babie, it's for you."

I sighed loudly through my teeth and snatched the phone from her hands. We'd talked about this before. Gracie had been expressly forbidden from pretending to be me on the phone.

"What?" Gracie said. "She didn't even give me a chance to say who it was—she just started talking."

"Sorry about that," Jenelle said. "I thought it was you. Hey, what's wrong with your phone? I tried calling you."

"I turned it off. What did you tell her?"

"Nothing, really, only that Dave talked to Zach about you and the carnival and Zach thinks you are like totally cute, but he thinks maybe you don't really like him or something. What's that about? What did you say to him?"

"Nothing really, but I already told you I don't want to go to the carnival with him."

"Why not? It would be so much fun! Dave says Zach really wants to go with you."

I could feel both of my sisters watching me. It probably would have been more convenient to just have left my phone on and talked to Jenelle privately, not in the middle of our kitchen.

"I've got to go. We're about to eat dinner," I said, and hung up.

“So, who’s this new guy?” Gracie asked. “Jenelle says he’s got the hots for you.”

“Jenelle is prone to exaggeration,” I said. “He’s just some guy.”

“An orphan,” Annie added, not especially helpfully. “Sit down, let’s start with some salad.”

I thought maybe the spotlight would be off me once Gracie’s mouth was full of salad, but I’d underestimated my sister.

“Is he cute?” she asked around a mouthful of lettuce.

“He’s all right,” I said.

“Let me explain something about the opposite sex,” Gracie said. “You have to practically beat them over the head to get them to notice you. So, it wouldn’t hurt to show a little interest.”

“Let her be,” Annie said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’m just saying,” Gracie said, “it’s about time this one got herself a boyfriend.”

“Enough,” Annie said, and amazingly Gracie actually listened. We got through the rest of our salad in silence. As it turned out, she was just biding her time before dropping her bomb.

I had only stuck the first forkful of pot roast into my mouth when Gracie said, “Guess who I ran into today at Mr. K’s?” Mr. K’s was Shallow Pond’s one and only grocery store. Like the town itself, it was small and pathetic. It was also where Gracie worked as one of the cashiers.

She had an eager look on her face, like she actually expected Annie and me to make guesses. We didn’t. Then she couldn’t hold it in any longer: “Cameron Schaeffer!”

I looked over at Annie. I thought she was going to choke on her food, but she swallowed it down and chased it with half a glass of water. It had been seven years since Cameron Schaeffer was a subject of conversation in our house. After he dumped Annie, we’d pretty much stopped speaking about him, as if he’d ceased to exist.

“How’s he doing?” Annie said. I could tell she was trying very hard to make her voice sound light and casual.

“Oh, all right, I suppose,” Gracie said.

“Home visiting his mother for a bit, I guess,” Annie said.

“Actually, he’s moved back in with her,” Gracie said.

“What?” Annie and I asked the question in unison. It seemed unthinkable to me that anyone who had successfully moved out of Shallow Pond would move back.

“Is his mother sick or something?” I asked, thinking that maybe Cameron had come back to take care of her.

“I don’t think so,” Gracie said. “Yeah, it was so funny. I was out on the floor, helping Wanda with a bakery display, and this guy who I didn’t even recognize came over to me and goes ‘Annie?’ and I go, ‘No, I’m Gracie.’ And then I realized it was Cameron Schaeffer. I mean it’s been so long since I’ve seen him, and he looked a little different and everything.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Annie had gone quiet. She was still eating, but she was chewing as if she couldn’t taste the food, staring off at something in the distance. I tried to get Gracie’s attention, to indicate that she should shut the hell up, but she was worse than Jenelle sometimes.

“Yeah, so he and I started talking about things and stuff, and of course he was asking how you were doing, Annie, and you too, Babie, and I told him Dad had died. He said he’d heard something about that, and that he was sorry, but I don’t think he really was sorry, you know, because of how Dad was to him and all, and, well, I said since he was back living here, he really should come over and visit with us one day.”

Annie reached for her glass of water but managed to knock it over instead. As she scrambled to grab it up, it slipped off the table and shattered into a thousand pieces on the floor.

“Oh,” she said.

“I’ll get it,” I said, jumping up from the table to grab the broom and dustpan. I began sweeping up the broken glass before Annie could protest. I tried making eye contact with Gracie while I did so, but she was oblivious.

“Anyway, he said he would love to come by,” Gracie said. “He’s going to stop by this week some time.”

“I’ll be right back,” Annie said. She nearly ran out of the room, and I heard her feet pounding up the stairs. The bathroom was directly above the kitchen, and the sounds of Annie throwing up in the toilet were unmistakable.

“Well, that’s completely unappetizing,” Gracie said as she put her fork down.

“What’s wrong with you?” I said.

“What are you talking about?” Gracie asked.

“This guy completely broke her heart seven years ago, and now you’re talking about him la-la-la and inviting him over to our house like nothing ever happened. Did it ever occur to you that she may not want to see him?”

“Don’t you see, this is the perfect opportunity for a second chance. We throw them together and it’ll be like nothing ever happened. They can start all over again.”

“Why would she want to do that?”

“She’s been mooning over this guy for the past seven years. Believe me, I’m doing us all a favor.”

“He broke up with her,” I pointed out. “What if he doesn’t want to get back together with her? What if he’s not interested in her? How do you think that’s going to make her feel?”

I heard the toilet flush upstairs and wondered if I should go up and see if Annie was okay, or if she would prefer to be left alone.

“You’re so negative, Babie. Maybe if you actually gave something a chance, you wouldn’t be so miserable. You should go to the carnival with Zach what’s-his-name.”

I dumped the cleaned-up glass in the trash, and stormed out of the kitchen.

THREE

When I woke up there was a coating of snow on the ground. It wasn't much, just enough to make things look pretty and wintry. I was hoping for a two-hour delay but no such luck. I didn't feel up to trudging to school in the slush, so I called Jenelle.

"Hey, can I get a ride with you?" I asked.

"That depends," she said. "Are you sure you're okay being in the same car with me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't take my calls, you never called me back last night, I'm not sure if you're still interested in being my friend."

"Oh, relax. We're still friends. Anyway, things got kind of tense here last night. I'll explain in the car."

Jenelle's parents had given her an old Honda for her sixteenth birthday. It was small, belched blue smoke, the speedometer was broken, and one of the doors was the wrong color, but it ran and it was hers. All I had was occasional use of the family minivan. When the Honda pulled up to get me, Shawna was in the front seat with her shoes up on the dashboard. She'd ditched the kitten heels and had on a pair of pretty but completely impractical-looking canvas boots.

"I'm trying to dry them on the defroster," she said when she saw me looking at them. "They got wet in the snow."

"That's sort of the idea behind boots," I said.

"So, you've decided you're not mad at me anymore, or you just want a ride?" Jenelle asked.

"I'm not mad at you," I said. "But did you really have to say all that stuff to Gracie?"

“Oh, come on, I can’t tell you two apart on the phone, and she was totally going along with it like she was you, so how was I supposed to know?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said. “Gracie’s a bitch.”

“Wow, I so did not say that at all,” Jenelle said.

“No, she is,” I insisted. There was enough snow on the road to make things slippery and the little car slid about some, but Jenelle was keeping things under control. “She ran into Annie’s old flame at Mr. K’s and told him to stop by the house sometime.”

“Wait,” Shawna said. “By Annie’s old flame, do you mean *the* guy? The guy who like broke her heart and made her into this depressed, lovesick, jilted spinster chick?”

“Um, I think spinster is kind of a dated term,” I said. “And besides, she’s only twenty-six. She’s not exactly an old maid. But, yeah, him.”

“So, wait, what was the fight about?” Jenelle said.

“She invited this guy—who dumped Annie and pretty much completely ruined her life—over to our house.”

“I think it’s sort of romantic,” Jenelle said. If I didn’t look so much like Gracie, I would think Jenelle and Gracie were sisters.

“It’s not,” I said.

“Speaking of romance,” Shawna said, “what’s going on with Zach? Is he going to ask you to the carnival?”

“I told you I don’t want to go with him.”

“But do you really not want to go with him?” Shawna asked, “or are you just saying that so you don’t seem over-eager if he doesn’t ask you? Because, I mean, I can understand not wanting to look too eager and all, but I can’t understand why you don’t want to go with Zach to the carnival.”

Jenelle must have noticed the look of annoyance rapidly turning to rage on my face because she suddenly said, “So, today’s the volunteer assembly. Have you guys figured out what you’re doing for your project?”

One of our graduation requirements was that we had to do a service project of some sort. Which basically boiled down to logging twenty hours of community service. Technically we had four years to get this work done, but just about everyone waited until sometime in senior year to get their hours in, and to that

end we had a special assembly where we could pick out a volunteer project to do.

“I’m just going to use my assistant Sunday school teaching hours,” Shawna said.

“I thought you just did that to get out of having to sit through church service,” Jenelle said.

“Yeah,” Shawna agreed, “but it still counts as volunteering.”

“I was thinking of maybe doing the animal shelter,” I said. “That way I don’t have to deal with people.”

“I was thinking that too, but my neighbor told me she did that her senior year and it was basically just cleaning up shit. So, I don’t know, maybe I could do the candy striper thing at the hospital.”

The nearest hospital was fifteen miles away, which meant the hospital was out for me. Annie would never agree to drive me there; I couldn’t even get her to go there when she was actually sick. Unless I got the same schedule as Jenelle and we could commute together, I wouldn’t be able to do it.

“How do you know that’s not emptying out bed pans?” Shawna asked.

“No, they just, like, deliver the meals and stuff,” Jenelle said.

“But what if someone coughs on you or something and you catch some nasty disease?” Shawna asked.

“Look, just because you got your volunteer hours in doing your stupid Sunday School thing doesn’t mean you need to rub it in my face,” Jenelle said.

I was kind of glad the two of them were arguing. It took the pressure off of me.

Jenelle’s car did a little fishtail as she pulled into the school parking lot, and she had to swerve to avoid hitting a black shiny car driving a little too fast through the lot. We couldn’t help it; we all turned to look.

“Who was that?” Shawna asked.

Closer inspection revealed that the car was a Mustang, an old one, though it was so sleek-looking it had either been recently restored or was very well maintained. The vibration from the engine actually made the Honda’s windows rattle. We watched as the car pulled into a spot and the engine’s roar was silenced. The driver’s side door opened, and out stepped, who else, Zach Faraday.

“Wow,” Jenelle said.

I spent the day doing my best to avoid Zach Faraday. I skipped lunch, making up some excuse about having to get extra help in Physics. In English class I pretended to be so engrossed in the free-writing exercise we were assigned that I didn't even notice him next to me. When we got to the volunteer assembly, I was prepared to go straight to the animal shelter booth and sign up, then beat a hasty retreat to the girls' room, but as I marched across the room, I noticed a familiar figure milling about in the vicinity of the animal shelter booth. I could probably have just run over, signed up, and run off again before he even noticed me, but what if he signed up for the shelter? I could wind up doing my volunteer time right alongside Zach Faraday.

I looked around at the bright-colored banners displayed in the media center. I was hoping to find something so unappealing that Zach wouldn't even consider signing up for it, but I noticed something else, a little sign taped to the front of one of the tables that read, *Sorry, boys, this opportunity is for girls only*. I made a beeline straight toward it.

“Hi,” said the cheery woman behind the counter. “Are you interested in signing up to volunteer for the women's support hotline?” She was ready to launch into a spiel about the hotline and how I would be able to help others by generously volunteering my time, but I cut her off.

“Yes,” I said, “I am.”

I wrote my name and contact information down on her clipboard, thanked her for the magnet she handed me, and all but ran out of the room. I was still moving at a pretty fast clip down the hallway when I rounded a corner and plowed straight into Zach Faraday. Smooth, I silently told myself. Also, nice work on avoiding Zach.

“Hey,” Zach said in that friendly, laid-back, perfect voice of his.

“Oh,” I said, and then, proving that I was skilled in the art of conversation, added, “hey.”

He flashed me one of those smiles and held out his hand. “Zach Faraday. I don't think I've ever properly introduced myself.”

He obviously expected me to shake his hand. I hesitated.

“Barbara Bunting,” I said. I shook his hand quickly.

“See, I feel better now.”

I certainly didn't. I felt nervous and weird, and I prayed that someone, anyone, would walk through the deserted hallway and interrupt our meeting, but no one was in the hallway. They were busy scoping out the volunteer opportunities and eating the free chocolate chip cookies.

“I have to go,” I said.

“Okay, I'm starting to get paranoid. Was it something I said?”

Yes, it was everything you said. It was also everything you didn't say, just the way you can look through me with those cold blue eyes or set me instantly on fire with that perfect smile. How could I explain to him that I knew I needed to avoid him at all costs, at the risk of throwing away everything I'd always wanted.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I said. It was the best excuse I could think of on short notice. I hated it.

“Oh, okay, um,” Zach stammered. I knew he wanted to say something but I didn't want to hear him say it.

I speed-walked in the direction of the nearest girls' room, doing my best impersonation of someone who desperately needed to pee even though I think he knew I was faking it.

I locked myself in a stall and just stood there trying to remember how to breathe. What was wrong with me? Why was I allowing myself to get so freaked out over some random guy? I told myself that he was just a guy, that he wasn't really special, but like my excuse about needing to pee, it was a complete lie. Zach was not just some guy, and if being the best-looking guy to ever set foot in Shallow Pond's high school qualified as special (and how couldn't it?) then Zach Faraday had specialness oozing out his ears. So I tried a different tactic. I tried telling myself that someone who looked like that and dressed in those sort of clothes and drove a car like that must be a stuck-up snob. I told myself that he was probably a complete asshole. The only problem there was that, so far, he seemed more like a nice guy than an asshole. I clung to the flimsy excuse that the nice-guy thing was just an act to hide his true asshole nature.

As for why I clung to this excuse, the answer was once again simple. If I allowed myself to start seeing Zach as a sweet, gorgeous guy who had the ability to turn me into mush with a single glance, then it was only a matter of time

before we started dating, before I became head-over-heels in love with him, before I made him the sum total of my existence, only to have my heart smashed to smithereens when he dumped me. Maybe it was a lot to infer from a few encounters, but I'd seen the scenario play itself out with Annie and I had no desire to follow in her footsteps.

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