



## Shallow Grave

Alex Van Tol

Reading Level: 2.5

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### Book Summary

Shannon and Elliot are forced to clean out an old boat shed for their principal because they were caught putting his Smart car in the woods. The truth—Shannon was guilty; Elliot just happened to be an innocent bystander. So Elliot, the straight-A athlete, is paired with Shannon, the weird, purple-haired Goth girl, and neither one of them is happy about it. The afternoon they arrive at the boat shed starts off without incident; they quickly make a plan and get to work. But then strange things begin to happen: the door slams shut, the walls shake and Shannon stumbles upon an old piece of jewelry. With all the unexplained happenings, Shannon suspects there may be a spirit in the shed with them, so she makes a Ouija board and she and Elliot begin to ask questions. Both are totally unprepared for what happens next; as their fingers burn, a spirit begins to talk to them and identifies herself as Jessica. When Shannon realizes that she knows Jessica, the strange becomes bizarre, and Shannon and Elliot solve a year-old murder.

### Prereading Idea

With students, discuss the fact that some murders go unsolved for a year or, in some cases, many years. Brainstorm with the students some ways that information about a past murder case might come to light so that it could be solved. Students can share ideas from movies or television shows, books or newspapers they have read, or personal experiences of someone they know. Ask students to watch as they read for a very unusual way that information about a past murder is revealed.

## Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- In chapter 6, Elliot remembers some of the urban legends he has heard about people's experiences with Ouija boards. Working in small groups, ask students to define an urban legend, to discuss how urban legends begin, and to investigate those legends that are popular in their city or state. Then have each group of students share an urban legend with the class. Have students present their legends around a “classroom campfire” seated on the floor in a large circle.
- Mystery and crime dramas abound on television and in movie theaters. Working with partners, ask students to write a mystery, complete with characters, plot, setting and intrigue. Students may get their ideas from the news and base their story on a true event, giving credit to the original story. Have students begin by using a storyboard to map out their plot and where/how clues will be introduced. Upon completion of their mystery, ask each pair to present their story to the class.

## Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

### *Characterization*

Shannon and Elliot are completely different at first glance. Elliot’s grandmother would say they are as different as chalk and cheese. Ask students to use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two characters. Have students display their Venn diagram on poster board along with supporting quotations from the text that highlight the similarities and differences of the two characters. Students should add visual elements such as drawings, text and pictures from magazines, and color to enhance their visual comparison. Display posters in the classroom.

### *Theme*

Read the poem “Richard Cory” to the class ([www.bartleby.com/104/45.html](http://www.bartleby.com/104/45.html)). Then share Elliot’s mother’s wisdom, “No one’s life is really what you think it is. Not from the outside” (ch. 4). Ask students how the poem illustrates this statement. Then, ask students to write a justification that this statement could be the theme of the story. Have students include direct quotations and evidence from the novel to support their justification. Have students share their justifications in small groups and obtain feedback as a source of other ideas and quotations. Then have students revise and submit their writings to be posted around the classroom.

### *Allusion*

An allusion is an indirect reference to another literary work or to a famous person, place or event. When Elliot remembers the scene in *The Sixth Sense* in chapter 12, he feels like it is a message from Jessica. Show students the scene from the movie ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRAjzK75M0U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRAjzK75M0U)). After watching the scene, have students list similarities in the two situations. Then have students write a poem for two voices using the list of similarities. One partner should assume the voice of Jessica; one partner should assume the voice from *The Sixth Sense*. Have students practice and present their allusion poems.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. On what criteria do Shannon and Elliot judge each other? How are their judgments incorrect?
2. Elliot is serving punishment for a crime he did not commit. How does this miscarriage of judgment affect his attitude? What are his concerns about being wrongly accused?
3. What does Shannon mean when she makes a reference to karma and karmic points in chapter 1?
4. What does Mr. Harrison's reaction to the incident show about his character? Why is he so unwilling to investigate Elliot's story? Why does Shannon keep quiet about what really happened?
5. In chapter 6, Shannon says she knows how to follow rules, but she chooses which rules are important. What is the drawback to her attitude? How does her attitude affect others?
6. How does the eerie feeling in the boathouse help Shannon and Elliot come together as friends?
7. Why does Jessica choose Elliot to talk to instead of Shannon?
8. The necklace Shannon finds in the boathouse is a symbol of the friendship between Jessica and Sam. Why is it ironic that the very item that identified the two girls as best friends will be evidence against Sam for Jessica's murder?

**Writer's Craft***Imagery*

When the author uses images that help the reader experience the story with his or her senses, writing comes alive for the reader. Ask students to find examples of word images in the novel, and then have them find some of their own in other texts. Do the images in the novel and the ones the students found paint them a picture? Have students write a description of the boathouse using sensory images. Have students switch descriptions with a partner and draw the boathouse using only the written description from their partner. Ask students to share their descriptions and drawings with the class.

*Vocabulary*

Ask students to find the following words in the book and then to look up their meanings in the dictionary, writing the definition that most closely fits the meaning of the word the way it is used in the sentence. Have students add the vocabulary words and their meanings to a student-created writing dictionary to be used throughout the year.

abject (ch. 5)  
falsetto (ch. 7)

assaulted(ch. 1)  
frenzied (ch. 4)

averted (ch. 15)  
infinitesimally (ch. 7)

### **Author Biography**

An avid reader from an early age, **Alex Van Tol** has always loved to write. She wrote poems and short stories all through school. After teaching middle school for a few years, she took the plunge and began finishing all the novels she had begun in her spiral notebooks. Alex lives in her seaside home in Victoria, British Columbia with her family.

### **Author Website**

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