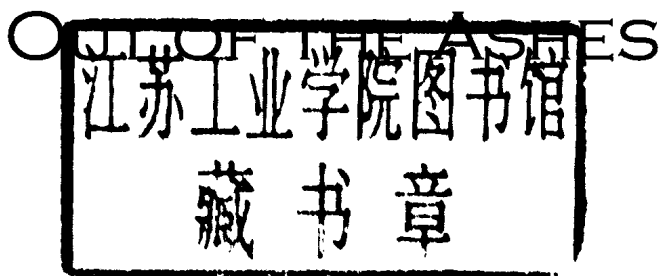


A Shelby Belgarden Mystery



OUT OF THE ASHES

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**A BOARDWALK BOOK
A MEMBER OF THE DUNDURN GROUP
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This book is dedicated with love, admiration, and
pride to my daughter, Pamela Sarah.

CHAPTER ONE

“For the last time, I’m not interested!” I guess I sounded pretty rude, but I just couldn’t help it. It must have been, as my mom would say, the umpteenth dozen time I’d told Betts that I just plain didn’t care how often Greg told his friends he thought I was special.

After all, Greg wasn’t my type. He would never be my type. This is not to say I knew for sure what my type was at that point in my life, but I was one hundred per cent certain he wasn’t it.

We were walking home from class, and Betts was making yet another attempt to help me see that Greg was the Man of My Dreams. This is one of her favourite expressions this year, and I can tell you it was starting to wear on my nerves. Betts herself proclaimed that she’d found the Man of Her Dreams at least four times a week, and each time it was a new fellow. If that wasn’t

bad enough, she'd decided she was best qualified to pick out the Man of My Dreams for me. Even that might not have been so bad if she'd picked someone other than Greg. He'd been nothing but a source of humiliation to me almost from the first time I'd met him.

I guess I'm making Betts sound pretty boy crazy. Well, she does tend to be that way. But Betts has been my best friend since the fourth grade, and she's got oodles of other good qualities. I do my best to overlook her crazy notions because I think she invents all this romance in order to spice things up here in Little River.

I have to admit, this isn't the most exciting place to live. It's the kind of town where nothing much ever seems to happen, and sometimes you get the impression that the whole place is half asleep. The inhabitants, all five thousand of them, go about their business in a sort of mechanical way, as if they're characters in a movie where the same scenes are played over and over.

Not that it isn't a nice place. It is. My mom says it's the kind of town that picture postcards are made of, with a lot of big old homes that were built around the turn of the century. The streets are wide and clean, except for in the autumn, when the leaves float down from all the trees. We have so many trees that in the fall the whole place takes on the mottled colours of a yellow-orange cat. Then the residents come out with garbage bags that look like

pumpkins, and before you know it there are grinning orange faces everywhere.

Our only sources of entertainment are the bowling alley and a movie theatre where, unlike big theatres, there's only one show playing at a time. With so little to do, the kids in town mostly hang out at each other's places or spend time at the soda shop.

There's a river running along the outskirts of the north side of town, and it's just about as lazy as the town itself. Most of the time there's hardly a ripple on the water, which is probably why canoes are the most popular of the boats that you see drifting along during the summer. Betts likes to talk about how romantic canoes are too!

Anyway, this whole story really started about four months ago. It seems only fair to go back to the beginning.

The funny thing about the beginning of a story is that it can be pretty hard to find. It might have been the first day of school in September, when I vaguely noticed a new guy in the cafeteria at school. In a small town like Little River, that's news. But in all honesty, I hadn't paid much attention to Greg Taylor at the time.

I can tell you though, if I'd known what kind of mess lay ahead, I would have taken greater notice.

He was a grade ahead of me, so he wasn't in any of my classes, which turned out to be a blessing. The way

events shaped themselves over the school year, I'd have hated having to sit next to him in a classroom. It was hard enough avoiding him in the hallway when things started getting weird.

I'd been really excited about school this year. It was my first year in the high school, which was a big deal in itself. Also, I'd gotten my braces off during the summer and had finally, as Mom said, blossomed a little. I'd been waiting for both of those events for years!

I'm no Marilyn Monroe, don't get me wrong. But at least there are a few curves on the landscape now, which took their good old time in arriving.

I figured that with these new developments, this would be the best year I'd had so far. I'd been sweet on Nick Jarvis for a couple of years and thought maybe he'd finally notice that I existed. Actually, he already knew, but not in a good way, thanks to Betts. I'd made the mistake of confiding in her, and the next thing I knew, every time he passed me in the halls his friends would nudge him with their elbows, and he'd roll his eyes and pull a few faces.

I'd burn with shame when that happened, but I couldn't really blame him. After all, Nick is a jock, and a darned good looking one at that. He can pretty much take his pick of the girls, and that's what he's done. It always encouraged me to see that he never stuck with any one girl in particular but dated loads of them. In my

heart I knew that when the Breast Fairy, as Betts puts it, finally visited me, he was going to realize that he'd been waiting for me all along.

Then the romance of the century would be ignited, and the rest would be history, a story that ended with "Happily Ever After." At least, that's what kept me going and helped me get past all the jeers from Nick and his friends in the junior high years.

So there we all were at the start of tenth grade, and there I was, Shelby Belgarden, who had never had one single date, ever. I was ready. Romance was sure to come calling, and I was going to be right there to let it in.

My mom gave me lots and lots of the parent talk thing, those long lectures on nice girls and not chasing boys and so on. Some of what she said made pretty good sense, and the rest was, I figured, part of her job as a mother. Sometimes Dad joined in the conversations, but in an embarrassed way that made it hard not to giggle right in front of him.

One of the things that really sunk in from all those "mother-daughter talks" was that if you let a boy know you like him, it might just scare him away. I'd seen the proof of that in action when Betts got the word out that I was into Nick. It had taken some doing to persuade her that I'd lost interest in him, but I'd managed it. Now, I figured that if I just played it cool, he'd come around.

I clearly remember Betts and me sitting in the cafeteria that first day of school. She noticed Greg right away. Betts notices everything!

"Who's that?" she whispered, pointing across the room at him.

I grabbed her hand and hauled it back down onto the table. Looking in the direction she'd indicated, I saw that she was pointing to the new guy. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. He had dark hair and appeared to be of average height.

"Beats me," I said, noticing that Nick had just walked into the cafeteria and was sitting down beside Jane Goodfellow. She was tossing her head back and laughing in what I couldn't help but see was a pretty phony way. Jane is nothing if not phony, so this came as no surprise.

"He must be the son of that weird guy who moved into the old Carter house," Betts was speculating. "The only other new people in town are the couple who bought the drugstore from Jake's dad, and they're too young to have a kid in high school."

"Who?" I asked, distracted by the sight of Nick leaning over close to Jane. His smile was all over her, and it made my stomach hurt.

"The guy. The new guy." Betts' voice was exasperated. "Where's your brain gone off to anyway? What else were we talking about?"

“Oh, yeah, I guess so.” I vaguely resurrected what she’d just said. “What makes you say his dad is weird?”

“Everyone knows about that,” she half groaned. “How is it that you never hear anything that’s happening in town?”

“I dunno. I guess I have better things to do than listening to gossip.”

“Oh, for sure.” Betts was laughing now. “Your life is just so full of exciting things and all. I can see why big news to everyone else is of no importance to you.”

“Mmmmmm.” Nick was touching Jane now! His hand was resting on her shoulder. I silently put the curse of a thousand zits on her, something that usually cheered me but didn’t seem to help today. “So, tell me what’s so weird about this guy’s dad then, since you’re just dying to force this information on me.”

“He goes around town quoting poetry!” Betts’ eyes were triumphant as she passed on this bit of news. I guess she figured it was pretty darned interesting.

“So?” I knew I was taking out my misery over Nick and Jane on her, since my tone of voice was getting nasty, but I couldn’t help it.

“So, you don’t think that’s kind of odd?” Betts was picking up her lunch tray, and her face had a hurt look on it. I felt sorry right away and offered her one of my mom’s chocolate chip cookies to make amends.

"I guess that is weird," I said. She brightened up and told me a few stories about this stranger moving to town and breaking into poems on a number of shopping trips.

"Mrs. Wells said she was half afraid of him. She said it was downright scary how he came in for a grocery order and started going on like a crazy person, reciting some poem about birch trees when she complained that there were kids climbing the trees in the town square."

"Robert Frost," I named the author automatically.

"*What* are you talking about? Who is this Robert guy?"

"Never mind." We'd taken one of his poems the year before, and I liked it so much that I read some others he'd written, including "Birches." But I knew Betts thought poetry was stupid and wouldn't remember it.

"Where does he work?" I asked, bringing her back to what we'd been talking about. I couldn't help wondering how she'd managed to hear all these things about someone I hadn't even known existed. Betts and her family had been away visiting relatives for the whole month of August and had just arrived back in town a few days before the start of school.

"That's another thing. He doesn't work. He only leaves the house when he goes to a store or to the post office. No one knows where he gets his money. Maybe he's some sort of criminal and he's hiding out in Little

River!” Betts seemed excited at that idea, as if it would be a great thing, but I found it a bit much.

“Well, in that case, we’d better steer clear of the criminal’s offspring,” I whispered ominously, nodding toward the new kid.

I had no idea how much I’d come to mean those words!

CHAPTER TWO

Betts is like a dog with a bone sometimes. She just grabs onto an idea or bit of information and never lets go until she figures she's gotten as much as possible out of it.

I knew that she wouldn't rest until she had the complete lowdown on the new boy in town, and I was right. She'd make a great investigative reporter if she ever had the opportunity.

It was the very next day that she had more to tell me. Goodness only knows where she gets her information, but she sure does get it.

"Shelby. Shelby!" I heard my name called from somewhere in the crowded hallway of the school. Her face appeared a few seconds later, and I could see right away that she was fairly bursting with news.

"Hey, Betts. What's up?" I asked, knowing full well she didn't need any prompting.