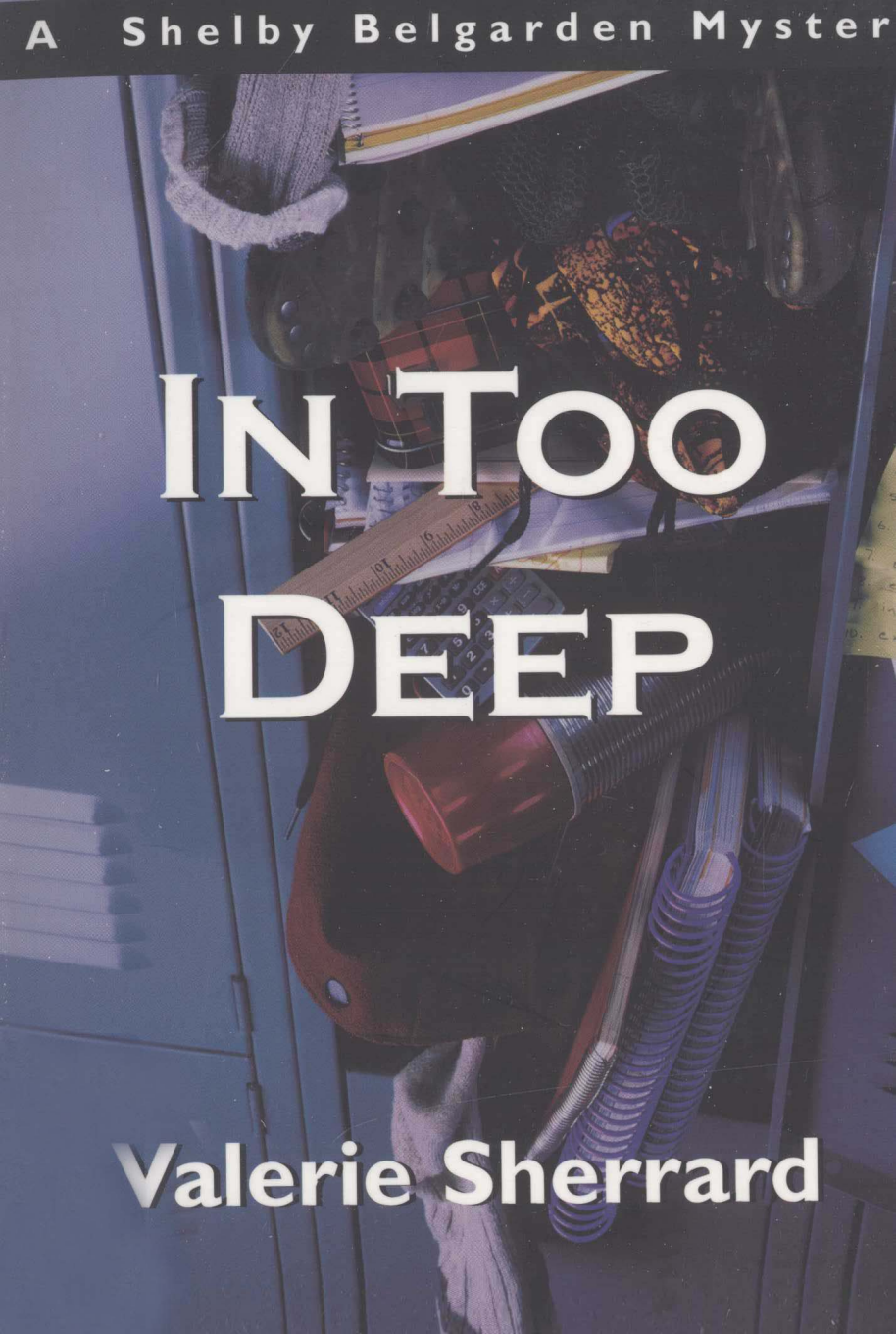


A Shelby Belgarden Mystery



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**A BOARDWALK BOOK
A MEMBER OF THE DUNDURN GROUP
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**This book is dedicated to
Dylan, Michelle, and Bryan Sherrard,
who are loved more than words can say.**

CHAPTER ONE

The first time I ever saw Amber Chapman she was pulling a long, red wagon that held a bulging plastic garbage bag. I knew right away she wasn't from Little River because she had on this weird outfit that made her look as though she bought her clothes in a second-hand store for the insane. Her jacket was badly worn green leather with a big yellow sunflower centered on the back of it and her pants billowed out in huge purple puffs that made it look like a long skirt at first glance. It was the strangest combination I'd ever seen.

There was something about her besides her unusual attire that caught my attention though, something in her manner of walking. Maybe it was the way she carried herself, her chin high and her eyes flashing dark darts as she made her way along Dylmer Street.

In any event, by the time I realized I was staring, she'd noticed me and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Do you have a problem?" Her gaze took me in, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that she was sizing me up and forming an opinion that was less than flattering.

"Nope," I answered as calmly as I could, although it was unnerving to stand there being appraised. "I just noticed you, you know, because I haven't seen you around before."

She didn't answer, nor did she turn away. Instead, she seemed to move toward me without actually taking a step, just leaning forward slightly and tilting her head up a bit.

"I'm Shelby Belgarden," I finally ventured. I offered a smile at the same time, but it wasn't returned.

"Well, good for you. I'm thrilled for you I'm sure," she replied haughtily.

"Has your family moved here recently?" Her attitude didn't exactly invite conversation, but there was something about her that made me keep talking.

"No, my family has not moved here recently." She spoke in short, clipped syllables, giving each word a peculiar sort of exaggeration. "I have moved here recently."

"By yourself?" I was astonished at the idea. She couldn't be more than fifteen.

"Not that it's any of your business, Shelby Belgarden, but yes, I moved here by myself."

"You live alone?" I couldn't help myself, even

though it was clear my questions weren't welcome.

"Did I say I was living alone?"

"Well, if you moved here by yourself ..." I trailed off, feeling confused.

"Maybe I came here to live with someone." Her hand rose in the air beside her and a finger poked toward me. "And maybe you should run along and bother someone else with your stupid interrogation."

"I was just trying to be friendly," I said lamely. It was no use. She turned away, picked up the handle of her wagon, and walked off without so much as glancing back. I couldn't help but notice that she managed to look dignified as she walked, in spite of her unusual attire and the fact that she was pulling along a kid's wagon.

It was unsettling, that's for sure. It wasn't so much her rudeness either; it was more the way she appeared to be so angry at the world that bothered me. I wondered what made her act that way and why she seemed so determined to be nasty.

When she'd almost disappeared from sight I headed over to my best friend Betts Thompson's house. I hadn't been planning to go there, but if anyone knew who the mysterious stranger was, Betts would.

Her face lit up when she opened the door and saw me standing there. That's one of my favourite things about Betts, the way she's always happy to see me. I

can't remember ever feeling as though I was intruding when I've gone to her place unexpectedly.

"Hey, Shelb, come on in."

As we walked into the living room I saw books and papers spread out on the floor and asked her what she was doing.

"The biology assignment," she moaned. "My folks freaked over my last progress report. They told me if I don't bring my marks up I'm not getting anything for Easter."

In my house there's no such a thing as gifts for Easter. I'd get a chocolate bunny, and Mom still does an egg hunt even though I'm probably too old for that. Still, it's fun. But Betts always gets some really expensive presents. It's like Christmas all over again at her house.

It's the same thing with grading. A lot of kids get something from their parents for passing at the end of the school year, and Betts's gift is usually something really big. I asked my mom about it once.

"How come I don't get anything for grading?" I questioned casually at dinner one night.

"But you do, dear," Mom smiled. "You get to go into the next grade. You get a free education and an opportunity to do well for yourself and have any career you want."

Then there was some long, boring talk about kids in Third World countries who never even have the chance

to read and write, and how privileged we are in Canada. I never brought it up again.

As Betts and I sat down in the muddle on the floor I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She doesn't like school much and usually just does what she needs to do to get by. It looked as though those days had come to an end.

"I don't know how this all got into such a mess," she sighed. "I even found some of my biology notes in my math binder. It's going to take forever just to sort it all out and then I have to do those stupid charts."

I knew what she was talking about because I'd passed in the same assignment a couple of days earlier. The teacher had warned the class that anyone who was late was going to lose five marks for every day it was overdue.

"I'll help you get things organized," I offered. She perked up right away, and we set about putting her notes in order. As we worked I told her about my encounter with the oddly dressed girl.

But for once Betts wasn't up on the news. I could see that it pained her to tell me that she didn't know anything about the town's new arrival. Betts always knows everything that's going on, and I knew it was horrible for her to have to admit she was behind in such important gossip. I almost wished I hadn't mentioned it, because there was a good chance she would ditch her work and go off on a fact-finding expedition.

“Well, if she’s in school we’ll find out who she is soon enough,” I pointed out.

“Maybe she’s not, though. Maybe she got kicked out of school where she lived before and her parents sent her away to teach her a lesson.”

Betts has a great imagination and can come up with a scenario to cover just about any situation. The problem with that is that sometimes she forgets the stories are her own inventions and the next thing you know they’re being spread around as if they were facts.

“And maybe she’ll be in class on Monday,” I laughed, hoping that injecting another idea into the conversation would prevent her from going wild with her theory.

“Who can I call that might know?” The question wasn’t really directed at me; it was the kind people ask out loud when they’re talking to themselves. I couldn’t help giggling at the intense look on her face.

“I swear, Betts, if you put as much effort into your schoolwork as you do in digging up gossip, you’d be a straight-A student,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “I would, if it was half as interesting. Anyway, you sound like my mother now.”

Accusing someone of sounding like a parent is a pretty heavy insult, but I knew she was only teasing. I finished helping her put her notes together and then said I had to get home.

My mother was in the kitchen basting a chicken for

dinner when I landed. There were potatoes and carrots on the table and I picked up a knife and started to give her a hand peeling. She likes it when I pitch in without being asked, and she always says thanks when I'm done. Today was no different, and it struck me that this is stuff she does every day of the week, but no one ever thanks *her* for doing it.

As we washed the vegetables I told her about the strange girl I'd met and how badly the conversation had gone between us.

"Sounds like she isn't a very happy person," Mom remarked.

I thought that was a funny way of putting it. I would have described the girl as mean or hateful. The idea that she was unhappy hadn't occurred to me at all. When I thought about it, though, it made sense. No one could be very happy if they acted that way.

I found it hard to concentrate on the book I was reading before bed that night. I kept picturing the flashing eyes and angry face and it distracted me from the words in front of me.

Well, Betts will know by tomorrow, I thought as I was drifting off to sleep. I guessed I could wait that long to find out something about the mysterious outsider.

I might have had more trouble sleeping if I'd known what was ahead, and how she was going to figure in the events that were coming.

CHAPTER TWO

It turned out that it wasn't necessary for Betts to fish for information because the halls at school were abuzz with talk about the new student. Having met her the day before, it came as no surprise to me that most of what was being said was negative. The main theme was that she was just plain weird.

When I saw her walking alone in the hallway the first thing that struck me was that her outfit was even more outrageous than the one she'd had on yesterday. She wore a skirt that looked for all the world as if it had been made by tying a bunch of scarves together, with triangles of different colours and designs hanging at varying lengths. Her top was tight blue denim with an assortment of buttons sewn on here and there. As bizarre as the ensemble was, I thought it looked kind of cool. Still, you can't get

away with wearing something that's so different from everyone else at Little River High.

Whether she knew it or not, Amber had branded herself. From my brief encounter with her on Sunday, I figured she didn't really care.

"Her name's Amber Chapman," Betts told me, grabbing my arm in the hallway. "And she's staying with the Brodericks."

"You mean the gas station Brodericks?" I don't know why I asked that. The old couple who owned the gas station were the only folks in town with that name.

"Mmmhmmm. I heard that she's the granddaughter of Mrs. Broderick's sister, who married a foreigner and moved out west years ago. But that's all I could find out."

She seemed so disappointed not to have more news to share that I almost laughed. The only thing that held me back was knowing how seriously Betts takes the role of knowing other people's business. Some folks collect things, but Betts collects gossip.

It was hard to picture Amber living with the old couple. As sweet and tolerant as they are, they must have been as startled as the rest of us by her appearance and bad manners.

Aside from comments about her clothes, stories of her rudeness were spreading fast among the students at school. The few kids who had tried to talk to her had

been rebuffed as quickly and thoroughly as I had been the day before. If being left alone was her game she was certainly going to be successful at it.

When lunchtime came it was obvious that everyone was waiting to see what she'd do when she got to the cafeteria. As soon as she got to the entrance a hush fell over the room. Most of the kids took quick peeks in her direction, but others, like Betts, were more overt about watching her and stared outright.

If she was aware of the stir she was causing, her face didn't show it. Except for the fact that her dark eyes scanned the room, she was so expressionless that she could have been a statue. Then she walked in and made her way directly to an empty table in the corner, looking neither left nor right as she walked. When she got there, she moved a chair around to the end of the table and sat with her back toward the rest of the room.

"Total nut case," Betts commented when she'd drawn her eyes back to our table.

"She's different all right," I couldn't help agreeing, even though I don't like to judge people. It was a lesson I'd learned recently, so maybe it hadn't completely taken hold.

"Perhaps she just marches to the beat of a different drummer." Greg Taylor slid into the chair across from me as he joined the conversation. My heart did a little jump, as it does whenever I see him lately. I'm hoping