

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN SHERRI FIRST SET EYES ON THE DILAPIDATED BUS STATION

in the town of Lewton, the little hairs on her arms stood on end and a familiar thrill of curiosity stirred inside her. Her reporter radar told her that trouble was coming. It never failed to send up a signal flare when there was a story to uncover.

Michael liked to tease her that maybe it meant she was psychic, like she knew something bad was going to happen. But Sherri didn't buy all that hocus-pocus stuff.

"Lewton, all passengers for Lewton." The bus driver's voice crackled through the speakers overhead as the Greyhound rattled to a stop in the gravel parking lot. Sherri set down her dog-eared copy of *Jane Eyre* and peered out.

It didn't look like anyone had stopped here in a long time. Thorny weeds shot up through the crumbling pavement. A lone, weather-beaten bench sat beneath a dangling sign that read: WELCOME TO LEWTON. But the W and the T in the sign were so faded that it looked like Sherri had just arrived in *Leon*.

Sherri's curiosity eclipsed her twinge of disappointment at the ramshackle look of the place. Jumping up from her cramped seat, she strode toward the front of the bus. She felt the eyes of the other passengers on her back. The driver had

already bounded down the steps and out into the deserted parking lot. She caught up to him just as he hefted her giant pink suitcase onto the cracked pavement.

Sherri had expected a quaint bus station in the middle of a bustling tourist town. This was the beginning of summer, after all.

“Excuse me?” she asked. “What’s up with this place?”

“It’s Lewton.” The driver shrugged, slamming the luggage compartment shut and straightening up. “Someone coming to meet you, miss?”

“My great aunt should be here any minute.”

“That’s good. Not many taxis come this way anymore,” the driver said, ambling back toward the bus doors. “I can’t remember the last time I *had* a passenger stop at Lewton. I keep expecting the bus company to pull the route—take it right off the northern schedule. Have a nice day now.”

The doors slammed shut. Sherri stepped back and watched the bus disappear down the lonely, two-lane road. That’s when she remembered her book.

Damn, I left Jane Eyre on the bus! Sherri hefted her backpack over her shoulder and dragged her heavy suitcase toward the splintered wooden bench. She glanced at her watch: 8:30 p.m. She was fifteen minutes late, but there was no sign of Aunt Gillian or anyone else. Sherri dug into her purse for her cellphone. No bars. She glanced around for a payphone. No luck.

Great. Sherri thought back to all the online articles she’d read about Lewton. They had all described it as a picturesque little town on the shores of Otter Lake. It was supposed to be crammed with antique shops, ice cream parlours and all the kinds of things tourists from the city loved about small towns.

It sounded like the perfect place to be a student reporter for the summer.

But then she remembered the brochure she had picked up at the little greasy spoon restaurant where the bus had stopped a few hours ago. She pulled it out of her purse and looked at it again. The brochure read: *Welcome to the Town of Lewton—A Gem in the Heart of Muskoka. A Great Place for Families!* The cover photo showed a beaming family walking down what looked like Main Street. A mom and a dad clasped hands with their little blonde girls—twins. But there was something off about the picture. They looked too perky, and that was when her reporter's radar had first kicked in.

But she hadn't dwelled on that feeling for long because then she'd found a brochure for the Berry Grove Bed and Breakfast. Sherri flipped to that brochure now. It looked much more inviting. This was Aunt Gillian and Uncle Walter's place, where she would be staying for the summer. The photo on the cover showed a pristine, three-storey farmhouse with a wide, shady porch wrapping around the front and a two-person swing hanging near the screen door. Flower boxes bursting with lavender decorated the windows and a giant weeping willow dominated the front yard. It looked absolutely perfect.

A long, high whistle snapped Sherri back to the present. She shoved the brochures back into her purse and peered down the road, trying to find the source. A moment later a young man appeared, whistling a tune. He was impeccably dressed in tan slacks and a crisp white shirt. He looked so clean-cut and polished that he reminded Sherri of those young men who used to show up on her parents' doorstep on Saturday mornings holding gilded copies of the Bible. But what stood out most

about this man was his blindingly bright neon orange vest.

“Excuse me,” Sherri called, getting to her feet.

Without missing a beat in his stride, the man turned toward her, waving.

“Hello, hello! Welcome!”

He looked so animated, so happy to see her, that for a moment Sherri thought he must have been expecting her. Could this be Uncle Walter? No, couldn’t be. Uncle Walter would have to be at least thirty years older. And, as the man got close, she could clearly read the nametag pinned to his vest: DOUGLAS, SALES ASSOCIATE.

“Well hello there,” the man said, taking her hand in an enthusiastic shake. “My name’s Doug. You just get into town?”

Sherri nodded though she felt a bit uneasy. “Uh, hi . . . Doug. I’m Sherri. Yeah, I just got here.”

“Staying on a while, I hope!”

“For the summer. Hey, I was wondering . . .”

“Are you by any chance looking for work?” he said, interrupting her.

“Excuse me?” Sherri asked, laughing off his question. “No, I’m not looking for work. I’m looking for the town.”

“We’re always looking to bring people into the Shopwells family. Hold on a sec.” He slid his backpack off his shoulder and rummaged inside.

“Shopwells? The big box store?”

“You’ve heard of us—wonderful!”

“Sure.”

Douglas pulled out a clipboard and pen and offered them to Sherri. “Shopwells is so much more than your average big box store. We’re a lifestyle solution. Here’s a job application in

case you change your mind. You'd make a fine member of our Shopwells family."

"You carry that around with you, huh? That's some aggressive recruiting."

The placid smile never left Douglas' face, and Sherri wondered if he was on drugs.

"Listen, I really just wanted to know how far it is to town? I mean, if I had to walk there?"

"Not far at all. It's about three clicks down that way." The man pointed in the opposite direction from where the bus had disappeared. "In fact, I'm headed into town myself to go to work. Come on, I'll show you the way."

"Uh, that sounds like a long walk."

"A fit employee is a healthy employee," Douglas said in an even, rehearsed tone that made it sound like he was reciting from a manual. "And a healthy employee is a productive employee. Shopwells cares a great deal about the health of its workers. In fact, we offer a flu shot to all new hires. Tonight I'm working the evening shift. You'd think it would be tiring, but work at Shopwells is exhilarating. Helping the customers is all the reward I need!"

"Uh, right . . . thanks for the offer. But maybe I'll just wait for my aunt." *Aunt Gillian*, she thought, *you can show up any time now, please and thanks. Save me from this whack job!*

As if on cue, the sound of a car badly in need of a tune-up broke in. A moment later, a wood-paneled station wagon rattled into the parking lot, and Sherri let out a long breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. "That must be her," Sherri said as she grabbed her luggage. The station wagon's horn beeped twice and an arm covered in about a million

jangling silver bracelets darted out the window, waving.

“Sherri? Sherri dear, helloooo!” called a singsong voice as the car stopped.

“Nice to meet you, Douglas,” Sherri said over her shoulder as she rushed toward the station wagon.

“See you at Shopwells,” he called back. “You’ll shop well at Shopwells.”

Aunt Gillian climbed out of the car. Her hair was an unnatural, almost violent shade of red twisted up in a bun that had come loose around the base of her neck so that strands flew about her face. She had the same bright blue eyes as Sherri’s father and they sparkled as she beamed at Sherri. She wore a long, flowing peasant skirt and a frilly blouse. When she stepped forward to give Sherri a hug, Aunt Gillian’s whole body jiggled along with the frills and ruffles of her clothes. “Welcome, welcome dear!”

Sherri couldn’t answer. Her face was muffled against her aunt’s giant bosom, which smelled like a warm kitchen—like baking spices and beeswax. Sherri returned the hug with enthusiasm.

“Well, let me get a good look at you!” Aunt Gillian said, releasing Sherri and slipping a pair of glasses onto the tip of her nose. “My goodness, you’re a woman now! What are you now? Eighteen? Nineteen? Your uncle and I haven’t seen you since you were barely walking!”

“I’m almost eighteen.”

“Let’s get your bags. You must be exhausted after your trip, and I’ve got a nice dinner staying warm in the oven for you!”

Aunt Gillian put Sherri’s bags in the trunk and slid into the driver’s seat. Sherri fastened her seatbelt and glanced behind

them. The entire back seat was loaded with cardboard boxes so that they couldn't even see out the rear window.

"What's all that?"

"That's why I was late. I was down at Shopwells. They were having the most marvellous sale on canning supplies, and I guess I lost track of time."

"You must be planning to do a lot of canning, huh?"

"Oh, Sherri dear, don't you remember that we're a berry farm as well as a bed and breakfast?"

Sherri pictured the part in the brochure that promised "homemade jams and jellies for sale." But the giant box of jars made it look like Aunt Gillian was preparing for an army of guests.

"You just wait until you try my wild blueberry and raspberry!" Aunt Gillian said as she shoved an ancient-looking cassette tape into the dashboard. A mournful country tune filled the car. "I'll bet you won't want to go back to Toronto in September without a half-dozen jars!"

As they rolled away, Sherri glanced out her window at the empty lot. The lone light bulb over the welcome sign had flickered to life. It swayed in the summer breeze.

"Aunt Gillian," Sherri said. "What's up with the bus stop?"

"*Up*, dear?" Aunt Gillian asked, distracted. She was half watching the road, half glancing at herself in the rearview mirror. "Oh dear, I am a sight, aren't I? This is no way to greet a new guest."

"I'm not *really* a guest. I'm family. But the bus stop . . ."

"Of course, dear. But you're *our* guest. And I feel a little embarrassed because there was a time when you'd never catch me with a hair out of place or without my good pearls on

when I came to meet a new batch of guests,” she said, sighing.

“I wasn’t even sure this was Lewton. The bus stop looks so rundown. The driver said they might even take Lewton off the route. Aren’t tourists coming up here anymore?”

“Just a lull, dear. We’re just in a little lull,” her aunt said. “But Shopwells is turning things around. Since they opened a new flagship store it’s been like night and day, your Uncle Walter says.”

“Why?”

“Oh, well, because it’s . . .” Aunt Gillian furrowed her brow as if she couldn’t quite remember why. “It’s just been a godsend, that’s what Walter says.”

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, until Sherri dug the Berry Grove brochure out of her purse.

“Hey, check out what I found in the restaurant where we stopped for lunch.”

Aunt Gillian quickly glanced at the brochure. “Well now. They still have those out, do they? How lovely. We had those printed ages ago. When we get home, though, please don’t show it to your Uncle Walter. We’re a little behind on getting those updated. It will just remind him of one more thing that needs to be done and, really, he’s had so much on his mind lately. Look, here we are!”

The station wagon’s headlights caught the fading letters of a sign at the edge of the road: BERRY GOVE BED AND BREAKFAST: HOMEMADE JAMS AND JELLIES FOR SALE. A red arrow pointed left.