

# Prologue

TIME IS ALWAYS. IT IS NOW, IT IS THEN;  
IT CANNOT BE STOPPED, AND IT WAITS FOR NO ONE.

I asked myself once again: *Charlotte, have you lost your mind? Have you gone completely off the deep end?* My saner inner voice was becoming repetitive. In fact, it was getting on my nerves! Not for the first time, I tried to reassure myself that, yes, while even thinking about doing something like this would be considered crazy, attempting it was absurd—yet, here I was. I was on my way to Owasco Lake, New York, on what could prove to be the greatest, and quite possibly last, adventure of my life.

As the bus travelled East on the thruway, my mind was racing. My thoughts turned unexpectedly to the conversation I'd had with Jessica yesterday morning. She'd called about dropping some boxes off at the house. Given that I had some running around to do, I told her I'd leave the side door unlocked for her or Michael. She reminded me of a letter that had come for me, which she'd left on the table by the phone. As I told her I'd be in touch tomorrow, I scanned the table and the floor at its base, but saw nothing.

After speaking to Jessica, I'd gone to see my lawyer to review the handling of my affairs if I hadn't come back within two years. Chances were, if I hadn't come back by then, I wasn't coming back. That's assuming, of course, that I made it there at all.

I expected to be gone for a year or so, and had suggested that Jessica and Michael live in my house during that time. It was a win-win situation—my house would be lived in and looked after, and they would have somewhere to stay together while they saved for a house of their own.

Upon returning home, I was struck by how empty the house felt. The butterflies in my stomach started fluttering. *This is not an ending*, I reminded myself. *It's the beginning of the adventure of a lifetime!* I went upstairs and released the staircase from the attic, climbing up with the last of my boxes. I couldn't help but smile as I looked around the large open space. This attic wasn't a gloomy, confined room; it was properly floored and insulated, with two high, half-circle windows letting in the sunlight. Though it had a low ceiling, I could walk through the middle without having to duck my head. When I was little, it had been my playroom. We'd painted a wall pink, hung a large blackboard, and taken up a little table, chairs, and tea set. I still remembered sitting at the table with my biggest teddy, Super Fluffy, and my bunny, Alice, sharing tea and cookies. When I was a little bigger, I'd come up here with Jessica and we'd shared our secrets. Now the floor space was occupied by a rolling rack hung with off-season clothing, boxes of Christmas decorations, books, and keepsakes. I put the last boxes onto the floor and, after one last look around, closed up the attic. It was now midafternoon and all that remained for me to do was write my letter to Jess.

The weather this March had been remarkably warm, and I was hot! *First things first: let's get out of these sweaty clothes and freshen up.* I dropped my clothes to the floor, reached in behind the glass shower door, and turned on the water. I took down my ponytail and brushed out my hair and when the temperature was just right, stepped in. *Mmm, this, I will miss!* Questions rushed through my mind. Would I succeed in making this journey? Could it even be done? I had seen Elizabeth's name on that list on my computer and made up my mind to try to save her, but would I even be able to find her? Is it possible to change things that have already happened? Would there be consequences? Completely engrossed in my thoughts as I was, it came as a shock when Michael's face came into view in the open shower door. As I looked at him, confused, he smiled and stepped in, pulling the door closed behind him. "Michael, what the—" He cut me off.

“Charlie, when I realized you were in here, I had to come. I just want to be with you one last time, to say goodbye.” His hand ran up my arm, before his fingers lifted my chin, his touch was familiar.

I put up a valiant fight, I did, but he knew me too well.

When he left some time later, I felt only emptiness. I sat on the edge of the bed, turning to avoid my reflection in the mirror. That door had closed some time ago. I thought back to the evening we’d called it quits. We had both known that breaking up was the right thing to do, that it just wasn’t to be. I’d come up to bed after he’d left and cried until I had no tears left. A soft, unfamiliar voice whispered to me in my dreams that night: “Every ending is a new beginning, Charlotte.” These wise words had stayed with me.

It was about a year later when he and Jess got together, and they were perfect for each other. I hoped that they would have a good life together, I truly did. I felt no jealousy, no hard feelings, though now I did feel a small amount of guilt. I suppose that my fear and uncertainty about what lay ahead of me had caused me to grab hold of the feeling of love and protection he’d offered, fleeting as it was. Without question, it would be easier to move forward when I was no longer in the here and now. Tomorrow would change everything.