

## Chapter One - Touchdown

The small plane jolted slightly as its wheels kissed the narrow stretch of tarmac, and a small jarring bump stirred Charlotte from her half-sleep.

She blinked against the harsh light peeking through the window, her head heavy with jet lag, her body stiff from hours in transit. The familiar discomfort of airplane travel clung to her like static.

Outside, the mountains rose in muted blues and greys. A crown of mist clung to the treetops as if the forest were exhaling after a long, quiet night. Somewhere just beyond those endless stretches of pine and rock was the town Charlotte hadn't set foot in for nearly fifteen years.

She shifted in her seat, brushing a curly red strand behind her ear. The rest of her hair was obediently straightened, though a stubborn frizz had started to creep in at the ends.

Her black blazer was wrinkled from the long flight despite her best efforts, her high-waisted trousers creased at the knees. Methodically, she tugged at the sleeves of her blazer, more out of habit than discomfort.

Everything about her screamed polished Toronto professional, even now, slumped at a window seat on a half-empty regional flight.

She sighed as the plane circled around the tarmac to park, giving a brief showcase of the mountains, endless trees, and old-town charm.

"At least we landed," an elderly man chirped in the aisle seat beside, a thankful grin on his face.

She gave him a polite smile in reply.

The regional airport was little more than a barn with windows. Two gates (arrivals and departures), a few benches, a vending machine that still took coins... Not even a baggage carousel.

As Charlotte stepped off the small plane, she felt it immediately: the crisp bite of mountain air, sharp with pine and lake water. It filled her lungs, shocking and clean, and she instinctively reached into her bag to fumble for her vape.

*Not here*, she thought to herself. *People will stare at you like damn zoo animal.*

Tucking the vape away quickly into her purse and stepping into the arrivals area, someone called out to her.

"There she is!" The small and high-pitched but familiar voice of her cheery mother. "Charlotte, over here! Hi, honey!" She waved with both hands, bouncing lightly.

Her parents stood just past the flimsy rope barrier, bright-eyed and bundled up despite the mild spring air. Her mom had a hand-woven tote and a long wool coat in forest green that Charlotte was pretty sure her mom had bought in 2003. Her dad wore a faded fisherman's cap and smiled like the sun was rising.

"Our Little Lady, Lottie," her father greeted her as she approached. Charlotte's face lit up with a small but genuine smile, the fatigue ebbing just a little.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," she greeted them, placing her bags on the ground to hug them. Her parents wrapped her in eager arms and the warm scents of lavender hand cream and old flannel.

"Oh, sweetheart, it's so good to see you," her mom said, pulling back just enough to cup her daughter's face. "You've hardly changed a bit."

Charlotte chuckled. "Liar. I'm thirty-four and I dye my hair religiously now."

"Well, you look wonderful," her dad chimed in. "Even if you do smell like recycled plane air."

She grinned and rolled her eyes. "Nine hours of travel and at least two delays. Be grateful I showed up at all."

They laughed, but a quiet beat followed.

Charlotte glanced around the tiny airport lobby, suddenly struck by the familiarity of it all: the carved wooden bench by the wall, the vending machine with faded candy inside, the volunteer-run tourism board kiosk manned by a dozing man in a fleece vest.

A strange, uncomfortable pang she couldn't name tugged at her chest.

"Alright. Where's the car?" She asked, trying to shake the feeling. "I need to sleep for at least fourteen hours or I'll start hallucinating my inbox."

Her mom looped her arm through Charlotte's. "Come on. We'll get you home."

And just like that, Charlotte found herself heading back to the house she hadn't set foot in since she was 19 years old.

A different woman now, returning to a place that had hardly changed at all.