

Chapter 1

Aboard the Charlotte
Off the coast of Florida
July 7, 2006

The young woman stood alone and solemn as the warm hues of sunset danced on the vast ocean before her. She hugged the telescope to her chest as she stepped closer to the water's edge. Churning sea foam washed over her bare feet and soaked the hem of her billowing, white gown. Turbulent winds, from an approaching storm, tugged at her neatly pinned hair. She wept, paced back and forth in the pink sand and stepped into the beckoning surf. The water was past her knees then up to her waist, but still she walked on until her head disappeared below the surface of the hungry sea.

Charlotte bolted upright on the cabin bed, coughing and gasping for air. This nightmare had plagued her as a child. Now it was back, but more vivid than she remembered. The colors of the landscape were richer, the sound of crashing waves was louder, and a salty tang lingered on her tongue even now that she was fully awake. The trigger for the reoccurrence of this nightmare sat before her, staring and patient. Charlotte stood from the cabin bed, flipped the light switch on and took a deep breath. She kneeled before the old portrait of a young woman who could have been her twin. As she studied the portrait, a nagging question entered her mind. Is it possible for twin souls to exist hundreds of years apart from each other? She yearned for the answer as she touched the face in the portrait, then her own.

The morose expression on the woman's face, which was skillfully immortalized on canvas, suggested a sorrowful secret had been locked away in her heart. Charlotte could only guess what the secret was, but she felt as if she knew the woman intimately. The high cheek bones, turquoise eyes, full lips and slight upturn at the end of a slender nose were very familiar. If not for the differences in the woman's style of dress and hair, Charlotte would swear she was gazing into a mirror.

The eyes had a hauntingly familiar look of loneliness and loss in them. Charlotte had experienced similar emotions after the deaths of her parents. Through many hours of therapy, it was determined that the nightmares were caused by feelings of abandonment. Her father died in an accident aboard a navy vessel, and her mother committed suicide by swallowing an entire bottle of sleeping pills. Charlotte cried herself to sleep many nights after their deaths, but the nightmares and hurt were eventually loved away by Uncle Douglas, her father's twin brother. He took custody of Charlotte at the age of six.

Douglas Townsend was a tall, handsome man with neatly-trimmed salt and pepper hair. His good looks, stamina and generosity made him popular with the ladies. Charlotte was surprised that Brittany, his latest playmate, hadn't tagged along for the cruise to Bermuda. The raven-haired beauty looked as though she belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine and was at most only a few years older than Charlotte. If Charlotte was

prone to jealousy, Brittany surely would have brought out the little green-eyed monster, but time and time again her uncle had proven no one would ever take her place in his life. His unwavering devotion was comforting to Charlotte as a child and easily carried her through her difficult teen years. She missed him terribly when she left for college and knew her absence was difficult for him as well. She worried about him being alone and wished he would find a companion who would love him and be genuinely devoted to him. Every time she broached the subject, he assured her that he was happy with his life.

“Are you feeling any better, Charlie?”

Charlotte jumped at the sound of her uncle’s voice. She turned and saw him standing in the doorway of her cabin. Rainwater dripped from his foul-weather gear, puddled at his feet and gave the small compartment a fresh, natural bouquet which was preferable to the new-boat scent she had been breathing for the past two days.

“I didn’t hear you come down. I thought you were still on deck, bravely battling the elements.”

“The weather is starting to clear up,” Douglas said. “I thought I would enjoy the cozy, dry cabin with you for a while.”

“Who are you trying to con, Uncle Doug, you hate it down here. You need the freedom of the open sea around you and the feel of fresh breezes blowing in your face,” Charlotte stated with certainty.

“You know me too well, Charlie. I actually came down to check on you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m still a little seasick,” Charlotte replied, holding a damp cloth to her forehead. She saw the regret in her uncle’s eyes for persuading her to join him on the boat. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. I’m really looking forward to being in Bermuda.”

“And off of this rolling boat,” Douglas said, finishing her unspoken sentiment. “Sorry, Charlie, I’m sure this weather will improve soon, and you’ll enjoy the rest of the voyage.”

Douglas had insisted on sailing Charlotte to Bermuda on his new forty-five foot sailboat as a gift for her twenty-fifth birthday. She was never a big sailing enthusiast, but wouldn’t disappoint her uncle by missing the boat’s maiden voyage, especially since he had named her *Charlotte*. He promised her a grand adventure which included tracking the origin of the portrait he had purchased from an estate sale in Virginia. The man who sold the portrait to Douglas said it was a painting of a distant relative of his from Bermuda.

As an antiques dealer, Douglas focused on furniture for resale and indulged in collecting firearms and edged weapons for himself. He didn’t usually invest in artwork, but purchasing the portrait and making sure Charlotte saw it was part of the mission; the fate of Earth depended on Charlotte accomplishing her task. Douglas loved his niece as much as he hated the thought of letting her go. It broke his heart to know soon he would lose her forever.

“I guess the weather could be worse, Uncle Doug; we could be out here in the middle of a hurricane.” Douglas had taught her to look for the silver lining in every cloud.

“Now you’re talking. This is only a mild inconvenience that will pass.” Charlotte followed Douglas from the cabin to the galley and sat down at the table. He pulled bottled water from the refrigerator and took a package of Saltines out of the pantry for her. “Try to get some of this down; it will make you feel better.”

“Yes, mommy,” Charlotte replied. Douglas winked and ruffled her hair.

He noticed Charlotte spent a lot of time studying the portrait and knew it triggered the nightmares again. Did she remember something from her past life? He couldn't let this opportunity slip by without trying to get her to open up about it.

"Are you as intrigued by the portrait as I am?" he asked.

"I'm not sure intrigued is quite the word to describe what I feel. It's more like a haunting *dèjà vu*," Charlotte explained. She nibbled on a Saltine and took a sip of water.

"That's understandable; she does look a great deal like you." Douglas took his gear off, grabbed a dish towel to wipe his wet face, and sat down beside Charlotte at the galley table.

"It's more than that," she said, folding the damp cloth into geometric shapes with her shaking hands.

"I'm listening." It was hard watching Charlotte battle the anxiety she felt when faced with something difficult, but he was proud of her for pushing on.

"I'm keeping you from helping with the boat." Charlotte knew she shouldn't have said anything. Now her uncle would analyze it and attempt to fix it somehow. He was a perpetual handyman for the difficulties in her life.

"No, the boys can handle it out there for a while, you go on," Douglas urged.

"Well, how do I explain this?"

"One word at a time," Douglas replied.

Douglas popped a Saltine into his mouth and waited for Charlotte to collect her thoughts. Patience and understanding were qualities he had mastered when he'd taken Charlotte into his life, but he had cherished the journey with her and missed her terribly when she went away to college. She'd told him she intended to apply for a job as a history teacher, but he had hoped to persuade her to join him in the antiques business, so they could spend more time together before she was taken from him. Douglas hadn't realized Charlotte's departure would occur so soon. Nineteen years with her was not enough. Damn SOLÄR for choosing her for their cause, and damn him for ever agreeing to join them as a member.

Douglas had been a senior in college when he'd been recruited by SOLÄR—Society of Light and Reformation. Their objective was to prevent Earth's destruction in the year 2084 by altering history. According to his training manual, the birth of crucial scientific, environmental and political figures could be facilitated by restructuring the life of their ancestors. Saving the world one prearranged birth at a time was an intriguing and influential premise, but had Douglas known his own family would be impacted by his membership in SOLÄR, he would have reconsidered his decision to join the society. Idealistic views and actions of youth often turn to regret.

After his secret induction into SOLÄR, Douglas was introduced to the high council which consisted of an exclusive number of scientists, scholars, historians and seers who ruled on the changes to be made in history. The subordinate members were artisans, guides and reformers. They were responsible for carrying out the high council's rulings. Douglas was one of many appointed guides for Charlotte. She was to be a reformer. The reformers were involuntary members of SOLÄR. It was forbidden to enlighten them with any details of their task as it could cause a catastrophic change in the desired outcome. The council assured Douglas of Charlotte's happiness in her new time and life. They said she would marry and have children. A descendant of her first-born son would be an oceanologist who would play an important role in Earth's survival by inventing a unique

way of harnessing eco-friendly power from ocean tides. This hydropower would be more efficient than any currently in use and would eventually become one of the primary sources of power for the world.

With every minute that drew them nearer to Charlotte's departure, Douglas' regrets mounted. Would SOLÄR have chosen her to be a reformer had he not been involved in their organization? Charlotte was probably on their roster long before his induction. His only solace was she would be happy. After all Charlotte had been through in her short life, Douglas couldn't deny her that happiness.

"Do you remember the dream I used to have when I was little?" Charlotte asked.

"Um hum." He couldn't help but remember the dream that had kept them both awake for a time until Charlotte trusted him enough to take care of her. He'd worked so hard to rid her of the dream and give her a normal childhood. It pained him that she had to be reminded of it.

Charlotte shook her head. "You're not going to believe this..." She was hesitant to continue. She was a champion at outside-of-the-box thinking, but this thought was ridiculous even to her.

"Try me," Douglas encouraged. After being a part of SOLÄR for years and seeing with his own eyes what they could do, nothing seemed impossible or bizarre.

"I think the woman in the portrait is the woman from my dream. I never saw her face in the dream, but the dress and hair are the same." Charlotte waited for her uncle to say something. "I know it sounds absurd."

"In what way is it absurd?"

"How could I have dreams about a woman who lived hundreds of years ago?"

"The world is a mysterious place, Charlie. I believe anything is possible. People used to think the world was flat, and they would fall off of it if they sailed past the horizon. The realization of something beyond the horizon was proven by just one person who was willing to believe and take a chance."

"But this woman could be my twin. How do you explain that?"

"Maybe there is validity to everyone having a double."

"From that long ago? Her style of dress suggests she lived in the eighteenth century."

"It's something to think on, isn't it?" He wished he could tell her everything—even a little of what he knew about her destiny. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't. "Hopefully we'll find some answers once we reach Bermuda."

"Hopefully," Charlotte echoed.

Douglas knew Charlotte's anxiety over the portrait was escalating now that she was reminded of her suicide. The dream was a window with an important view into her past. It was crucial that she did not repeat the mistake once she went back to her previous life. For the remainder of their time together, Douglas wanted to get her mind off of it. The best way to do that was to get her involved in something. Keeping Charlotte busy was the best way to control her anxiety.

"Listen." Douglas looked up toward the boat deck.

"Listen to what? I don't hear anything," Charlotte replied.

"Exactly. The rain has stopped, and I think the swells have actually calmed a bit. That's my cue to go back up. It's a little too stuffy and confining down here for me. Why don't you come on up with me; the fresh air will do you some good. David and George are interested in seeing you emerge from seclusion. They've each asked about you

numerous times since we embarked.”

Charlotte sighed. “Please stop trying to fix me up. I’ll have plenty of time for a love life once I get a career established.”

Charlotte wasn’t sure if she would ever be ready for another relationship. There was a painful wound in her heart, still open and fresh, from an eye-opening affair with her college professor. She had been so in love and so naive. She’d been stupid enough to think she was the first student who had ever warmed his bed. Charlotte had been infuriated with the entire male race for his betrayal, especially her uncle who seemed to be in the same category with the womanizer. After the initial hurt wore off, she couldn’t be mad at her uncle. He was nothing like the professor. Doug was always honest with his female friends about not wanting a serious relationship.

“Who’s trying to fix you up?” Douglas smiled, and Charlotte scowled at his weak denial. “Life is too short, Charlie. Spread your wings, and have some fun.”

“You certainly know all about that! A man of fifty should be settled down, not spreading his wings for every young thing who bats her eyelashes at him.”

Douglas grinned. “When did you become such an adult? It makes me feel old.”

“You’ll never be old, Uncle Doug. Women will still be falling at your feet when you’re ninety, and you’ll still be romancing them as if you’re twenty.”

“That’s why I have to stay in shape.” Douglas flexed his biceps.

Charlotte laughed and shook her head. “A gym membership well spent.”

“So, what do you say? Are you ready to come up on deck?” Douglas asked.

“I don’t feel quite up to it yet,” Charlotte answered. “Maybe I’ll join you in a little while.”

“No rush, take as much time as you need. Don’t forget your life jacket when you do come up,” he reminded her.

“Aye Captain,” Charlotte responded and playfully saluted him.

He paused at the companionway. “Have I told you how much I love you, Charlie?”

“Only a million times, Uncle Doug, but I still like hearing it. I love you too.”

Douglas made a thumping motion with his hand over his heart. For as long as Charlotte could remember, it had been her signal from him that she was always in his heart. It gave her great comfort, especially when they were away from each other. Charlotte returned the loving gesture and watched her uncle disappear up the companionway. She did love him—as if he was her father. The happy smiles which Charlotte remembered seeing on her mother’s face when Uncle Doug visited made her wonder if Douglas really was her father. It wasn’t important; Douglas had been her father in every way that mattered. She would always think of him that way.