

Title

by

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CHAPTER TWO

Sam Jackson sat at his desk wondering where the years had gone. Not that he was that old, he and his twin, were celebrating their twenty-eighth birthday today.

How could that be? Sam asked himself. It couldn't have been more than a few weeks that they'd just turned ten and Seth had announced to the world he was going to be a doctor.

Wasn't it just yesterday they'd been begging their father to go faster as they sped across the lake, screaming with laughter, as the boat bounced over their own wake?

Just the thought of Seth brought a deep sadness to Sam's normally stoic features.

He hadn't heard from Seth since their parents' funeral almost six months before.

Sam slid a finger across the screen of his tablet bringing up an image of he and Seth on their fourteenth birthday. They had the same smile, he remembered as nostalgia warmed him. The same blue eyes and the same black hair. Seth's nose may have been a little sharper and Sam's face a little thinner, but they were practically identical. When they were kids most people couldn't tell them apart. It had been a little game they'd played with each other; betting who could tell them apart and who couldn't.

They'd even fooled some of their teachers in high school. Seth was better at Science than Sam, and Sam was a whiz at math, so they'd pretend to be one another and take the tests ensuring they both kept up their grades. At least until Mr. Maroney, their science teacher, caught on and kept them both in detention for a month. When their father caught wind of it, they'd been

grounded for two months. Not being able to drive their shared car, go out with their friends or play video games for that long had taught them both to respect rules.

Sam shook his head and swiped to another picture of he and Seth. He chuckled at that one; they'd been about five, he remembered, both dressed like Batman because neither of them would give up and choose a different costume for the Halloween themed birthday party their parents had thrown them that year.

Sam loved his brother. They'd always been the best of friends . . . until their eighteenth birthday. That was when their lives turned upside down.

No one could explain what had happened to the once free-spirited teenage boy whose lifelong dream had been to be a doctor. No one, medical doctors and psychiatrists alike, could explain what had broken inside his brother's mind the night they'd snuck out of the house with two six packs and a bottle of their father's favorite whiskey, to celebrate their birthday in private. It had been a rite they'd held to since they were twelve; to spend the few hours before the moment of their birth together.

That night had been different, though. They were heading into their manhood and it was to be a momentous occasion for them both. They had planned it down to the finest detail and the night was supposed to be the best one of their lives.

Sam didn't remember much about that night, only that they'd awakened the following morning on the deck of their family's cabin cruiser in the middle of Lake Hartwell. He remembered the headache that made his skull feel as if it had exploded into tiny pieces and pierced his brain.

When he'd finally woke their mother was standing over him her eyes worried and her forehead creased. He remembered the nausea too, and his stomach churned at the memory.

As his mother tried to get Sam on his feet, their father tried to bring Seth around. It had gotten a little scary when he wouldn't wake up. The fear on their mother's face, the concern on their dad's was etched into Sam's memory.

When Seth finally awoke, all of that had increased a hundred-fold. He became violent, fighting against the hands that tried to keep him calm, as his nightmare kept him in its grip; screaming and ranting nonsense about someone putting something inside his brain,

Seth had been so far out of his head that he'd punched their father in the face and tried to jump over the side of the boat.

Sam shook his head to dispel the painful memory, closing his eyes and wishing things had been different. He looked down once again at the iPad tablet in his hand and the pictures he rarely looked at.

The dreams he'd had the night before were a montage of painful memories, culminating in an overwhelming need to remember happier times. He didn't want to think of his parents' deaths, or his twin brother's emotional and mental decline.

He especially didn't want to think about the woman he'd once thought of building a life with. She'd walked away from him, nearly two years ago, without a backward glance. The three years they'd spent together before that, had meant nothing to her, apparently, but everything to Sam.

He'd not been able to move on and he didn't know if he really cared to. He'd had women since then. Not even real relationships. A few dates here and there, but nothing he allowed to go deeper than that. He couldn't help comparing those few women to Sarah. It was unfair, he knew, but also unavoidable in his heart and mind.

A sharp rap on his office door brought his head up, wiping away the memories he didn't really want to dwell on anyway. He set the tablet to the side of his desk and picked up a file he should have been considering rather than reminiscing about his past.

"Come," Sam said, his voice commanding as his years as an officer in the United States Marine Corps demanded.

The door opened and Private Martin Wilson saluted his commanding officer as he entered carrying a FedEx envelope.

"This came for you, sir." He handed the package to Sam and stepped back, his hands behind his back, shoulders straight and eyes forward.

"Thank you, Private. Dismissed."

Wilson saluted again, turned on his heel and left Sam alone.

He looked at the return address and frowned. It was from Seth, the return address unfamiliar. He tore open the envelope and looked inside. A smaller brown envelope was all he saw and tipped it out onto his desk. Curiosity getting the better of him, Sam didn't take his time as he ripped the top edge of it open and poured its contents into his hand.

A small plastic case, no bigger than two-inches, landed in his palm. It was the type of thing that would hold a SIM card for a phone or a digital camera. The corner of his mouth tilted up, causing a dimple to sneak out and soften his stern features.

Sam opened the plastic case and removed the small SIM card. He slid the tiny card into the reader with a dexterity belied by his large hands. As a Special Ops member, he'd made an art of finessing thin wires and devices; more than his own life had depended on it.

Within seconds the screen came to life, flashing an image of Seth sitting in what looked like a cluttered room. A basement, perhaps? Where castoffs of a family's life and tools hung on

the wall behind him. The lighting around him was dim, a single bare bulb hung over Seth's head, spotlighting him for the camera.

He looked tired, Sam thought to himself, and lost.

Sam turned up the volume and sat back to listen to what his brother had to say after so many months of estrangement. He hoped it would be news that he'd finally gotten the help he so desperately needed.

It wasn't.

"Hey, Sam," Seth's recorded image said, a sad excuse for a smile on his face. "Happy birthday. Wish we could be celebrating it together. I know it's been a long time since we talked. I hate how things went so far off track since Mom and Dad . . ."

There was a brief pause as Seth looked away from the camera as though trying to control his emotions.

"The voices keep coming back, Sammy," Seth continued, his voice despondent. "The new meds worked for a little while, but they just keep coming back. No matter what I do or where I go, they find me. I can't make it stop."

Sam's heart thumped against his ribs and unease at Seth's admission had him swallowing hard.

"If you're watching this then I'm dead and so are a lot of other people . . . Innocent people . . . I don't want to hurt anyone, Sammy. I never wanted to hurt anyone." Seth swiped a trembling hand over his forehead before continuing. "But, since that night, my brain hasn't been my own. I don't know how to explain it. . . I want to stop them, but they won't let me. They're too strong . . . and I'm too weak."

Sam swallowed hard; he could almost feel the pain his brother must have felt.

“Oh, Seth. Why don’t you just call me? We can talk this out,” Sam told his brother’s image. A bad feeling crept over Sam as he continued watching the video.

Something has happened. Something bad. He’d had a sense of foreboding since he woke up that morning. He’d attributed it to the dreams, but now, the sensation grew downright ominous as Sam watched his brother on the screen.

“I wrote it down,” Seth continued, his voice was soft, almost a whisper, before it grew fierce and demanding once more. “Everything. I gave my journals to a friend of mine for safe keeping. Her name is Karma Taylor. She lives up to her name, but she's a great lady.”

Seth leaned closer to the camera as he spoke fiercely. “You have to make them understand that I'm just a weapon. Just like all the others. We're all just weapons they use against us. Talk to Karma. She knows the truth.”

Sam’s pulse increased and a tickle at the back of his neck caused the fine hairs there to stand on end. It was a sensation he remembered well from his tours in the Middle East. It was always a precursor to something bad and he never ignored it.

“I really wish you could remember what happened that night, Sammy.” Sam watched as his brother’s eyes grew damp and filled with regret. “We were more than brothers. We’d been best friends back then, Sammy. We even had our own secret code, remember?”

Sam chuckled at the reminder. He hadn’t thought about that in years.

“But I don't blame you,” Seth said, his half smile bringing out a dimple; a mirror image to Sam’s. “Don't blame yourself, either. It's not your fault . . . That's about it. I love you, bro.”

“Jesus, Seth. What the hell have you done?” Sam asked the dark screen as he rubbed a rough palm over his face.

He didn't have time to consider his next step before a hard rap on the door brought him to attention. Without waiting to be invited in Private Wilson burst into his office followed by two men wearing dark suits and fierce looks.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Wilson said. "These gentlemen insisted on seeing you immediately."

Sam could hear the urgency mixed with frustration in the young private's voice.

"Thank you, Private. Dismissed." Wilson left, nodding to Sam as he closed the door behind him. The subtle gesture let Sam know that if he needed anything, Wilson would be there in a flash.

"Gentlemen," Sam said, rising to his feet. "What can I do for you?"

The older one, a man in his late fifties with graying at his temples and the subtle signs of an athletic body going soft, reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a black leather identification folder.

"I'm Special Agent Jefferson Danson of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." He flashed his badge, holding it out for Sam to get a clear view. "This is Special Agent Jacob Breen. We need to ask you some questions about your brother, Seth Jackson."

Jacob Breen, about his own age Sam guessed, stood at attention, his dark espresso skin, broad shoulders and shaved head giving him the look of a man prepared to do whatever needed to be done without question. He hadn't achieved the cynical countenance that police officers and federal agents tended to develop after a few years on the job. He was young, Sam thought, he'd learn fast and develop the thick skin that would either protect him from the cruelties that humans inflict on each other or wither his soul to where his own humanity was lost.

“What about my brother?” Sam asked, doing his best to hide the panic that slowly rose within him. His chest felt tight as he faced the two agents.

“When was the last time you spoke to him?” Danson demanded with no pretense of courtesy.

“I haven’t spoken to Seth in almost six months, Special Agent Danson.” The fine hairs on the back of Sam’s neck stood at attention. The tickle had grown to a full-blown itch.

“Really?” Danson asked, his features stoic and unblinking. “That’s not quite true is it?”

“Excuse me?” More than a little offended at being called a liar to his face, Sam’s spine went rigid and his hands balled into fists.

Danson pointed to the FedEx envelope still laying on Sam’s desk and smirked. “Didn’t you just get a package from him this morning?”

Not backing down nor relaxing his stance, Sam stared at Danson as he spoke. “It’s our birthday, Special Agent Danson. If you know we’re brothers, you also know we’re twins. It’s customary for siblings to correspond on that occasion even if they haven’t spoken directly in some time.”

Danson’s gaze shifted from Sam to Breen.

“Have you seen the News this morning, Lieutenant Jackson?” Danson finally asked.

“I’m confused,” Sam said as the itch began to slither its way up from between his shoulders to the base of his scalp. “What does the News have to do with my brother?”

For the first time since they barged into his office, Breen spoke. He wasn’t as adept at controlling his emotions, Sam noticed, as Breen’s voice growled out, and his dark features glistened with rage.

“Seth Alexander Jackson died this morning, from a fall,” Breen informed Sam, showing no compassion for his loss. “Off a twenty-story building in Greenville, South Carolina.”

The words didn’t make any sense to Sam. They were garbled and his brain refused to understand what his ears were hearing. He shook his head trying to clear it, but the words were scrambled and undecipherable.

It took several seconds for what Breen had said to sink in.

“What?” Sam whispered. “Seth’s dead?”

He shook his head again, slowly, trying to clear the fog that had taken over his thoughts as Breen continued his tirade.

“After he opened fire on a crowd of innocent people enjoying a Saturday morning with their families at a street fair.

“Families, Lieutenant Jackson,” he repeated angrily. “Fathers, mothers . . . Children were murdered while in their mother's arms as they tried to shield them with their own bodies!”

Sam stumbled backward, gripping the arm of his chair before falling, helplessly, into it.

“No . . . no, no, no. Seth wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t . . . “

He couldn’t think. His mind was numb and the fist around his throat had tightened to the point he couldn’t draw in oxygen.

“He's been positively ID'd, Lieutenant Jackson. Two hundred and thirty-eight casualties, a hundred and eighteen dead,” Danson informed him. “Makes your brother's rampage one of the worst in this country’s history, behind nine-eleven, and Las Vegas in 2017.”

It’s not possible, Sam told himself. Seth’s still alive and as soon as I wake up, I’ll laugh at this whole thing.

“What did your brother send to you, Lieutenant?” Danson demanded as he leaned over the desk, glaring at Sam.

The fog clouding his thoughts began to clear as Sam stared up into a pair of angry gray eyes. The heat from them was enough to slap Sam back to reality as he shifted in his chair, Danson took a step back.

“Pictures,” Sam finally said, his voice breaking. He cleared his throat as he reached for the tablet he’d set aside. The other men watched him passively as he tapped the screen and slowly scanned through them once more.

“Pictures of some of our past birthdays when we were kids. We’d always sneak off for a few hours and celebrate alone. Just the two of us.”

After the last picture, Sam pressed a tiny button on the side and the SIM card slid out. He hadn’t intentionally meant to lie to Danson. It was as if someone else was in control and he was outside his body watching the events unfold.

He slowly placed it into the plastic case and handed it over to Danson.

“I didn’t have time to make copies, so I’d appreciate it if I could have this back,” Sam stated quietly. “Or at least get a copy of it.”

Danson took the card and pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket. As he dropped the SIM card into it, he grimaced.

“I’ll see what I can do, Lieutenant. I’m sorry for your loss.” Danson folded the bag and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. “There are a lot of people wanting answers. It’s my job to find them.”

“Yeah, and I’m one of them,” Sam added brusquely. “My brother never hurt a living soul in his life, Special Agent Danson. If he was the one who did what you’re accusing him of doing, then something or someone drove him to it.”

“Your brother has had . . . issues for some time, Lieutenant. That much we know,” Danson stated, his expression never wavering. “If there was more to it, we will find out the truth, I can promise you that much. If you think of anything else that will help us find those answers, give me a call.”

Danson placed a business card on Sam’s desk before turning and walking toward the door. As Breen followed his superior, he nodded to Sam and spoke softly.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Lieutenant.” Breen’s expression and tone of voice lacked sincerity. Sam ignored the trite banalities that were often recited to the bereaved. They didn’t ease the pain, nor did they comfort him. Seth was gone and no amount of hollow words would change that fact.

After the FBI agents left Sam sat back and stared into space. His mind refused to believe that his brother had done what he’d been accused of.

Dead? Sam thought. *How can Seth be dead?*

His chest ached and his eyes burned as the images of his brother’s youthful, laughing face flashed across his mind like an old-fashioned home movie.

He thought back to their sixth birthday party when Mom and Dad hired that cowboy clown who kept falling off his horse just to make the kids laugh. Their twelfth birthday when they each received a new bicycle. Their sixteenth when Dad handed them a set of keys to their first car. Of course, they had to share the ten-year-old Chevy, but they didn’t care. They had wheels which meant they had freedom.

And then the night of their eighteenth birthday flashed across his mind. The pain that stabbed through his brain was fast, vicious and unrelenting, for a full minute. Sam grabbed his head and squeezed his eyes shut to block out the blinding light that intensified the agony. His breath heaved out in heavy pants as the warm trickle of blood flowed from his nose and dripped down onto his uniform shirt.

Finally, the pain ebbed, and Sam tilted his head back squeezing his nostrils to help staunch the flow.

“Sir?” Private Wilson asked after rushing into Sam’s office. “Should I get a medic?”

“No,” Sam told him, his voice weak and shaky. “I’m fine. Just got a bloody nose. It happens.”

“Yes, sir. Another migraine?” Wilson asked, concern for his superior officer evident on his frowning face.

Sam only nodded as he slowly regained his composure.

“Can you grab another shirt for me, Private?” Sam asked, pulling several tissues from the box in the drawer of his desk. “And some Tylenol.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.” Wilson hurried out of the office, leaving Sam to recover in private.

He’d been getting the headaches and nosebleeds since his late teens. They started around the same time Seth had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. The doctors told him they were brought on by stress and anxiety.

Sam thought that was just bullshit the medical field came up with when they didn’t have a clue what was really wrong. If it was caused by stress and anxiety, why didn’t he have them the whole time he was stationed in Afghanistan where he’d done two tours in high combat areas?

By the time Wilson returned with his clean shirt, Sam had pulled himself together enough to project the military officer he truly was.

“Thank you, Private. That will be all.”

“Yes, sir,” Wilson said, saluted and turned toward the door. Turning back to Sam, he spoke quietly, his voice deep and filled with compassion.

“If there’s anything I can do, sir. I’m here for you . . . I’m sorry about your brother, sir.”

“Thank you, Martin. I appreciate that . . . I take it those two agents spoke to you about it as well?”

Wilson nodded. “Yes, sir. They did. Since I’d never met the man, I couldn’t tell them much. They asked about you, too.”

“I’m sure they did. If there’s another visit from them, Private, just be honest and cooperate. Answer their questions.”

“I will, sir.”

“That’ll be all,” Sam said with a half-smile as he returned the salute. “Thanks for the shirt.”

Wilson nodded then left Sam to his thoughts, closing the door quietly behind him.

He went into his private bathroom and, after removing his bloody shirt, splashed cold water over his face. Sam gazed at his reflection in the mirror. He saw a man approaching thirty staring back at him; short black hair, a slight bump on his nose from where it had been broken during a training accident and blue eyes accentuated by a straight slash of dark brows. The creases furrowing his forehead were new, however, along with the uncertainty that hid in the depths of his expression.

After the shock he’d received earlier, was it any wonder, he asked himself.

He dried his dripping face before donning the clean shirt. Buttoning it, he marched back to his desk with a determined stride and brought his desktop computer to life with a shake of the mouse and replayed Seth's video.

He wondered again why he'd given the wrong SIM card to the FBI agents. It was something his hands seemed to do of their own volition since his brain had pretty much stopped functioning. He didn't think anyone else knew about the video anyway. If it came to light, he'd deal with it then. Now, however, he had other priorities to contend with.

His brother's death topped that list.

How was he supposed to deal with that kind of news? He'd barely gotten over the loss of his parents not even six months before and now his twin brother was gone as well?

Sam watched the video again, jotting down notes on a yellow legal pad as he watched Seth's image flash across the screen.

Once it was over, he Googled Karma Taylor and found her website almost immediately.

"So," he said to her photograph that graced the homepage. "You're one of those, too."

He read briefly that she'd been an up and coming associate in a law firm in DC before her abduction . . . by space aliens.

"Jesus, no wonder Seth trusted you." Sam snorted in disbelief. "You fed into his delusions."

Her picture showed a mixed-race woman with dark hair pulled back from an attractive, heart-shaped face. Her small, straight nose, high cheekbones and warm, honey-chocolate eyes made you want to believe every word that came out of her wide, full mouth.

"Well, Karma Taylor. I think you and I have a few things to discuss," Sam whispered to her image.

He grabbed his desk phone and called his assistant. “Yes, sir?” Wilson asked.

“I need the number for a woman named Karma Taylor.”

“Yes, sir. Do you need an address as well?”

“Whatever you can get on her, Martin.”

“I’ll get that right away, sir.”

Sam picked up the business card Agent Danson had left on his desk and studied it for a few seconds before shoving it into his pocket. A moment later his landline rang. He answered the call before the second ring began.

“What have you got?” Sam asked.

“Karma Taylor, as it so happens, is in Savannah for the next week, sir. She’s doing a presentation for the Comic Con that’s going on this week. I have her cell phone number. Do you want me to make the call?”

“No, I’ll call her myself. Give me the number.” Sam jotted down Karma’s phone number next to the notes he’d made from Seth’s video. He hung up the phone and pulled out his personal cell phone. He keyed in the digits and waited for his call to be answered.

“This is Karma Taylor’s phone, who may I ask is calling?” a professional sounding, female voice asked.

“I need to speak with Ms. Taylor. It’s urgent,” Sam told the voice.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the woman answered. “Ms. Taylor is very busy preparing for her presentation. If you’ll give me your name and number, I’ll be happy to give her a message.”

“Oh, I think she’ll talk to me. Tell her Sam Jackson, Seth’s brother, is on the phone.”

“I’ll let her know, Mr. Jackson. But, as I said, she’s very busy.” Sam could hear shuffling of papers and muted voices in the background while he waited. His thick fingers drummed on his desk as his irritation grew.

“Sam,” a warm, smiling voice greeted a moment later. “This is Karma.”

“So, Seth told you about me,” Sam remarked coldly.

“Of course, he did. We were friends.”

“Really?” Sam growled out, letting his anger get the better of him. “How good of a friend were you, Ms. Taylor? Did you know he was going to do it?”

He heard a sharp, indrawn breath and a small spurt of satisfaction flashed through him. Yes, he decided, it was petty. But he didn’t really care. He wanted answers and according to Seth’s last words to him, Karma Taylor had them.

“I won’t discuss this on the phone, Sam.” Karma’s voice had turned from warm to ice. No doubt in defense at Sam’s heated reply. “I’m doing a presentation at the Civic Center at three o’clock this afternoon and I’ll be busy most of the week. I’ll try to make room in my schedule for you in a couple of days. That’s the best I can do.”

“Unacceptable, Ms. Taylor. I need answers, today.”

“As I said, I have a very tight schedule,” Karma said, letting out a sigh after a few seconds of unrelenting silence. “Where are you? Maybe I can fit you in after the presentation.”

“I’m in my office at Parris Island Marine Base. It won’t take me an hour to get to Savannah from here. I’ll meet you at The Coffee Fox on Broughton Street; fourteen-thirty hours—that’s two-thirty civilian time,” Sam informed her, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “That should give us enough time for you to answer my questions and get to your presentation by three.”

“That isn’t convenient for me, Sam. I’ll need time to prepare my notes and visuals. I’ll make time for you after—”

“Now, Ms. Taylor. What I have to say won’t take long.” His voice held the authority of a man who was used to having his orders followed without question. When in combat, it had saved lives and he knew how to use it in any given situation; even when dealing with uncooperative civilians.

“Fine. Two thirty. I could use a good cup of coffee. You’re buying,” she stated bluntly before cutting off the connection.

Sam stared at the silent phone and shook his head grinning. He couldn’t help but admire a woman who could turn your demands to her own benefit. That took a special kind of talent.

Chapter Three

It didn't take Sam the full hour to get from Port Royal, South Carolina to The Coffee Fox in Savannah, Georgia. Traffic was relatively light on Interstate 95 and he didn't really care that the speedometer needle edged past ninety on more than one occasion. He was a man on a mission, and he wasn't going to let something as insignificant as a seventy mile an hour speed limit keep him from completing it.

He found a parking spot quickly—an unusual event for the peak of tourist season—and hurried into the coffee shop. He spotted her almost immediately, sitting near a window. She was sipping from a large, white ceramic mug. A plate with a partially eaten pastry sat at her elbow.

Her picture didn't do her justice, Sam decided, as he moved purposefully through the empty seating area. The woman was classically beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled back from a heart-shaped face that accentuated sharp cheekbones, a long straight nose and full pouty lips that tilted up in a warm smile as she turned toward him.

“Sam,” she said, motioning for him to sit in the empty chair across from her.

“Ms. Taylor. I see introductions aren’t really necessary.” Sam pulled out the chair and sat, his back ramrod straight and his face a stern mask.

“No, I suppose they aren’t.” She put down the cup and studied Sam as he settled into the chair. “You and Seth are, were, identical twins, after all. His hair was longer, and he had more of a sadness in his eyes. Yours are harder, colder.”

“Did you know he was going to do it?” Sam asked, ignoring her remarks.

“No, Sam. I didn’t know what he had planned.” Karma looked away from his penetrating glare then looked back, her eyes softer, kinder. “All he told me was that he couldn’t make the voices stop. I tried to help him. I even suggested he seek professional help. He refused.”

“Seth had been in and out of institutions since we were eighteen years old, Ms. Taylor. It didn’t help.”

“I know, Sam. That wasn’t the professional help I meant. There are others who—”

A tall, skinny waiter dressed in black, approached their table, cutting off Karma’s remark. He gave Sam an admiring smile before asking what he’d like. Sam ignored the look and, with a tight smile of his own, ordered an iced coffee. He waited until the young man hurried away with the promise of bringing his drink in just a few minutes before directing a burning scowl back at Karma.

“I need answers. Real answers. Not some bullshit about alien abductions and government conspiracy theories. He said you knew the truth. That’s all I’m looking for.”

“I was abducted, too.” The seriousness of her gaze told Sam she believed every word she’d spoken.

“Jesus. Is that why he came to you?” he demanded. “You conned him into thinking you believed his wild stories about that? You do know he was diagnosed as schizophrenic, right? He was a sick man and you took advantage of that. Why? What was in it for you?”

“Nothing! He was my friend, Sam, that was all. We cared about each other and we helped each other,” Karma told him, her voice low and adamant. “Seth was not crazy. You of all people should have believed him.”

“Why? Because we’re twins?”

“No . . . Because you were both abducted at the same time. You just blocked it out.”

“Did Seth tell you that?” Sam asked with a snort of derision. Karma remained silent as she picked up her coffee and took a sip.

“Look, we were not—” The waiter returned with a tall, frosty glass of iced coffee, no cream, and set it in front of Sam.

“Can I get you a pastry?” the waiter asked, standing a little closer to Sam than he was comfortable with. He wasn’t homophobic, he just didn’t like anyone invading his personal space.

“No, thank you,” Sam said with a tilt of his lips, earning a delighted smile in return from the waiter. “Just the check, please.”

The waiter nodded before heading back into the kitchen.

“I think you have an admirer, Sam,” Karma said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Sam picked up his drink and downed half of it before getting back to their conversation.

“Seth and I were not abducted by aliens. I don’t know what he told you, but the truth is we took our parents boat out on the lake and got wasted. He had a reaction to the alcohol, and it sent him into a psychotic episode triggered by a chemical imbalance in his brain. That’s it. End of story.”

“If you believe that, then why are you here?” Karma asked.

Sam could see the shield around her emotions was beginning to fracture. He didn’t want to hurt her, he just needed answers.

“Seth said he gave you his journals. I want them back.”

“His journals?” she asked, disgust and frustration warring in her eyes. “You could have told me that on the phone. You didn’t have to drive all the way to Savannah and drag me away from an already hectic schedule. I would have gladly brought them to you or had them delivered by a courier.”

“I want to know what your relationship was with my brother and why he did what he did. I needed to see your face when you told me.”

“Why? So, you can rub my face in the fact that I couldn’t stop him? I already carry that guilt. He was my friend.”

Sam’s eyes tracked the tear that slid down her face as she battled her own emotions over the loss of a friend. A pain he was all too familiar with.

“We went through a lot together,” Karma continued as she roughly swiped at the dampness on her cheek. “We helped each other and now he’s dead. Believe what you want, Sam. You’re going to anyway. But I’ve told you the truth.”

She glanced at the slim gold watch on her wrist and drew in a deep breath. “My presentation begins in twenty minutes. Feel free to attend. It might even open your mind to new possibilities . . . I’ll give you the journals afterward. Just promise me that you’ll read them, Sam. Every word of them.”

“Ms. Taylor,” Sam began.

“For God’s sake, call me Karma. You’re just being deliberately annoying, now.”

Sam grinned at her reprimand as he rose from his seat.

“Karma,” he amended. “I don't think you'll convince me of much more than you need psychiatric counseling and heavy doses of medication. I only want my brother's journals.”

“You might want to bring the rest of your drink along. That way you'll have something to wash down all that crow you'll be eating.” Karma smirked at him before turning on her heels and heading for the door. “Oh, and don't forget to pay the tab.”

She exited the coffee shop without a second glance. Sam was speechless for a moment at her audacity. He chuckled to himself as he pulled his wallet from his pocket, looked down at the bill and then counted out enough money to cover it and a generous tip.

When he stepped out into the sultry afternoon, Karma was standing on the sidewalk waiting for him. Had it been another time, and they'd met under different circumstances, Sam thought, he might have enjoyed an afternoon of getting to know what really made Karma Taylor tick.

“Fine,” he told her as they began walking toward his car. “I'll watch your presentation. Then, you give me the journals and we'll be done. I won't contact you; you don't bother me with this nonsense. Deal?”

“And you'll read the journals?”

Sam scowled and nodded his assent. “It's a deal. Where are you parked? I need a ride back to the Civic Center. I don't have time to call for a cab or an Uber.”

“Of course you do,” Sam stated dryly. “Why am I not surprised? Didn't you rent a car when you got here?”

Karma shook her head. “I prefer to use public transportation when I'm in a strange city. Keeps me from having to ask directions and navigating unfamiliar streets.”

“I prefer to drive myself,” Sam said, pointing across the street. “I’m parked over there.”

“A control freak, I should have guessed.”

“Nope, just someone who knows what he's doing and where he's going.”

“I stand corrected. An arrogant, control freak.”

“Not arrogant; confident. There's a difference.”

“Not much of one,” she pointed out with a satisfied smirk. “You’re pricklier than Seth.”

“Yes, ma’am,”

“You're also a lot more annoying. Is that intentional?”

“Determined. It's a positive character trait.”

“And modest, too.”

“Are you trying to live up to your name or is it just me?” Sam asked. He almost enjoyed the sparring as they approached his car.

“Just you,” Karma told him, patting his cheek. “I'm usually not this easy to get along with. Just ask my ex-husband.”

Sam laughed out loud at her jab as he reached into his pocket and dragged out his keys.

“This is me,” he stated unnecessarily as he hit the unlock button on the fob. The horn honked and lights flashed on a dark gray, Lincoln sedan.

“Of course it is,” Karma remarked dryly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sam asked, a little insulted.

She grinned at him and made no further comment on his choice of automobile as he opened the passenger side door for her. After closing her door, Sam frowned as he climbed in on the driver’s side, her jibe about his wheels still stinging.

What was wrong with his car? He liked his car. It only had about seven thousand miles on it and was top of the line with heated and cooled leather seats, along with every bell and whistle they could think of to put in a car. So, what if it wasn't a flashy sports car or a giant SUV that some men seemed to equate with their own virility? He liked the sleek, contemporary style, it road like a dream and had a kickass stereo system. His phone was Synced to the car so he could drive hands free and still stay in touch with the base should the need arose.

He dismissed the woman's attitude as inconsequential as he started the car. It wasn't like she'd be riding in it often, he told himself. He was only giving her a lift this one time. He'd collect Seth's journals and then they'd part ways.

Sam had no use for nutcases like Karma Taylor. Alien abductions, government conspiracies and brainwashing, was nothing more than make believe. Something that stimulated the already warped and overactive imagination of far too many people.

If they wanted to conquer evil, there was plenty of it to go around without importing it from another planet. All they had to do was look in their own back yards.

Chapter Four

Karma looked out at the crowd and her stomach churned. She always felt a little queasy just before speaking to a large crowd. It usually passed after the lecture started, but with all that had happened over the past several hours she didn't think it would be so easy this time. She just hoped the coffee and croissant she'd eaten at the coffee shop would stay down.

Today's presentation was going to be even more nerve wracking than usual. She'd come into possession of information that, she was sure, the government didn't want made public. Proof that they were hiding important truths the people had a right to know.

They could claim they'd been keeping it quiet for national security reasons, but Karma didn't buy that line of propaganda. She had first-hand experience of what was really going on.

She shuddered at the memories that threatened to engulf her. She couldn't let them take root. Not today of all days. She'd come too far to let her loss keep her from her shining the light on something that had been kept in the shadows for over five decades.

There were always a few hecklers scattered about the audience, it was expected at a conference such as this. They would think it was funny to try to poke holes in her theories and

laugh at the crazy lady up on stage. But she was prepared for them. She'd been doing these types of venues for a year and a half and she'd learned a few tricks to shut them up.

Showing them irrefutable proof worked most of the time. But there were always those few who refused to believe what they saw with their own eyes.

She peeked through the curtains once more and her stomach did another summersault. It didn't help that Sam Jackson was in the audience. After watching him strut into that coffee shop, Karma pegged his type easily. The frown he'd worn she attributed to the loss of his brother. The haughty attitude and rude innuendos, however, told her that he was a staunch supporter of the "If I can't see it or touch it, it isn't there," mentality.

He was arrogant, opinionated, cocky and, she was sure, just waiting to make some derogatory remark the first chance he got. It gave her a small bit of comfort that, as a military officer, she thought he would restrain himself from making snide remarks during her presentation.

She glanced down at the note cards in her hand trying to remember everything she needed to make them understand. It was all too important to keep hidden. She'd tried to tell them all what was really going on, but no one would listen, calling her unbalanced, crazy, telling her she needed psychiatric help and medication for her delusions.

Even her husband, the man she'd loved practically since the moment they'd met, wouldn't stand by her. They'd both lost in the end and she'd finally given up trying to convince him what had happened that night. She still had nightmares two years later and it was still like an open wound.

She remembered the mad rush to the hospital the night her water broke and the bright lights that flashed all around the car, driving them off the road. The next thing she remembered

was people in surgical garb, rushing around and mumbling. Her vision had wavered in and out and she'd felt like she was floating.

Then, she heard him crying. Her baby boy; the joy that filled her had been immediately replaced by fear and fury as she reached for him.

When she woke again in the hospital bed, they'd told her he was stillborn. He'd never drawn his first breath.

They lied! She'd screamed at her husband. *I heard him cry.*

After leaving the hospital, she'd taken up the banner and marched into this crusade alone; going wherever she could find an opening to shout out the truth. Praying all the while that the right person would finally open their eyes and break down the right doors for her to storm through with what she knew.

Now, here she was again, facing a room full of people; some believers, others wanting to believe. And then there were those like Samuel Jackson.

Tara Smith, her assistant stepped out onto the stage and the crowd settled to a low murmur. With her bright, vivacious smile, Tara went into her routine to warm up the audience, stoking their anticipation.

“With us here today is a woman who, I'm sure, you have all heard of,” Tara stated, her voice echoing throughout the wide auditorium. Karma wondered briefly if Tara really needed the small microphone that was clipped to her lapel, her voice projected so well.

“Two years ago, Karma Taylor was an up and coming litigation attorney with the highest percentage of courtroom wins in her firm's sixty-two-year history,” Tara informed the rapt faces before her. “Her dedication to find justice for her clients meant that she put in hundreds of hours reading through reams of testimonies, asking more questions and digging deeper than anyone

else to find the facts to help those who needed a powerful voice to speak for them. To bring the truth out into the open. She will share with you today all the facts she's excavated from hundreds of thousands of propaganda and false statements about the phenomena of Alien Abductions.”

Karma plastered a wide smile on her face as she stepped out onto the stage.

“Here she is! Ms. Karma Taylor!” The audience erupted into a rowdy applause with a few cheers tossed in. Tara applauded as well, letting them go on for just a few moments before rounding out the finale of her introduction.

Karma stepped up to the podium, her smile still in place, her breath even and her heart pounding like a sledgehammer as she gave Tara a brief, firm hug.

“You’ve got this! Knock them on their asses, boss-lady.” Tara whispered into her ear before melting into the background and disappearing behind the heavy, midnight-blue, velvet curtain.

A large screen lowered from the ceiling and an image of her latest book cover practically jumped out at the audience, begging them to read it to learn *The Whole Truth*.

The air-conditioner did little to dispel the heat and humidity and her added nervousness caused sweat to dampen her dark-caramel skin and trickle between her breasts. She’d worn her lightest weight summer suit of pale peach silk and had her hair pulled back from her face in a professional twist. Her entire aura projected one of confidence. She couldn’t afford to look anything less than professional.

The applause died down, as Karma placed her note cards in front of her. She scanned the multitude of expectant faces and let out a slow breath.

“Thank you for that wonderful introduction, Tara. I just hope I can live up to that build up you just gave me,” she said with a light laugh.

She surreptitiously slid her finger over the remote control that sat next to her note cards and a small laser pointer. The image on the giant screen flashed to one of a dark country road shadowed by moonlight.

“Good afternoon, everyone. As Tara mentioned in her wonderful introduction, my name is Karma Taylor. First, I’d like to thank you all for coming here today. I was a practicing lawyer well versed in litigation and presenting only the facts of each case.” She paused for a moment, letting the information sink into their minds.

“That being said, what I am about to tell you, here today, is documented fact that I, and many of my associates, have thoroughly and painstakingly researched and verified over the past two years.

“I know after hearing what I have to say some of you will brush it off as hype for my latest book or as a fantasy. Others will laugh and call me delusional or crazy . . . a few of you will even believe that what I am saying here today is God’s truth. I’m here to present to you documented facts. To convince you, without a shadow of a doubt, that what you see here will prove that we are not alone. Our planet has been visited repeatedly by intelligent beings from other worlds.”

Straightening to her full five feet six inches, Karma lifted her shoulders and her features sobered as she continued with her presentation.

“September nineteenth, nineteen-sixty-one,” Karma began. “Betty Hill, a forty-one-year-old woman and Barney, her thirty-nine-year-old husband, were on their way home from a vacation in Canada. It was around ten o'clock p.m. when they saw what they thought was a star moving erratically in the sky. Barney stopped, got out of the car and, using binoculars, began

watching the object. It was so close, with those binoculars, he could see people inside the object that would later be described as a spaceship.”

Her finger slid over the remote again and the image on the screen flickered to one of a blurred, file copy of what looked like a flying disc surrounded by lights.

“They got back inside their car and tried to follow the object. They swore they'd only been driving a few minutes . . . They found themselves thirty-five miles from where they should have been.

“The next day Betty called her sister and told her of the incident. She insisted that Betty call Pease Air force Base and tell them what she and Barney had seen. Major Paul W. Henderson told Betty that a UFO was confirmed on their radar that same night.”

A soft murmur sifted through the crowd as some shifted in their seats. Karma felt a flash of satisfaction at their response but maintained her professional expression.

“Betty and Barney Hill's experience that night is considered the Flagship Case of confirmed alien abductions. There have been many others since then.”

Karma continued telling the stories of other documented alien abductees, where the evidence found had proven their authenticity, as images flashed on the screen behind her with each accounting.

“November fifth, nineteen-seventy-five Travis Walton, a logger, was abducted and was missing for five days before he was returned . . . They even made a movie of that one.” The comment brought a round of laughter, as she'd hoped it would.

“These abductions,” she told them, her countenance returning to the seriousness of her message. “And a multitude of others, are documented and evidence has supported the truth of them. Over the last fifty plus years UFO sighting reports have not only increased but abduction

cases have excelled. Many of which have never been reported to proper authorities. Who would believe them?”

She picked up the bottle of water sitting on a small table next to the podium and uncapped it. She took a sip and slowly replaced the cap; a ploy, she knew, that enhanced the anticipation of the audience as they waited for her to continue.

The image behind her changed to a black and white photograph of a smiling, clean-cut man in his mid-thirties. His hair was cut into a crew-cut and the suit he wore was standard attire for a professional looking man in the nineteen-sixties.

“Charles Joseph Whitman . . . August first, nineteen-sixty-six,” Karma stated matter-of-factly. “An ex-Marine sharp-shooter stabbed his mother and wife to death before climbing the clock tower at the University of Texas in Austin and then proceeded to kill eleven other people. During the investigation, a letter of apology was found next to his mother’s body, and a suicide note was left at the scene.”

The screen flashed again, showing a partially typed, part handwritten, letter as Karma stepped around the podium. Using the laser pointer, she brought the audience’s attention to a specific section of the suicide letter.

“He’d tried speaking to a doctor about the violent thoughts he’d been having, but nothing was done. In his suicide note, Whitman asked that an autopsy be performed.”

Now, Karma thought, is the moment of truth. They’ll either believe what I’m telling them or laugh their asses off.

“Although Whitman had never mentioned an alien abduction, he suffered from several of the symptoms documented by other abductees: Tremendous headaches, violent thoughts,

nightmares . . . Whitman was a very intelligent man but did poorly in school. He couldn't focus. He had brushes with the law after leaving the military.”

The screen began to flash headlines of mass shootings that had taken place over the past half century. Shootings that included the Palm Sunday massacre in 1984, Columbine in 1999, and Las Vegas in 2018 as well as one of the Twin Towers engulfed in flames in 2001. There were over thirty headlines that flashed across the screen as Karma remained silent for a few moments, letting them absorb the painful and horrific memories they invoked.

“I’ll bet,” she asked with a grim smile as she stepped in front of the podium. “You’re all wondering what on earth this has to do with alien abductions, aren’t you?”

Karma’s gaze passed over the audience, landing on several who stared up at her with rapt attention. They were really listening to her and her gratification lifted a few degrees higher.

“When the autopsy was done on Charles Whitman, a tumor was found in his brain. What the autopsy didn't state was what caused that tumor.”

A diagram of the human brain appeared on the screen replacing the blaring headlines.

“I’m not a doctor and I won't get into the boring details of how the brain functions,” she promised. Using her laser pointer again, Karma began pointing out different sections of the brain, describing their functions as briefly as possible, so she didn’t bore her audience with needless information. She needed them to understand how she’d come to her conclusions.

“The hypothalamus controls violent impulses and bad intentions. This is the area where the tumor was found on Whitman,” she explained. “Scientific studies have shown that this area, and the Ventrolateral Hypothalamus, can be stimulated to either increase or decrease aggressive behavior. Researchers have been working on a way to use this type of therapy to treat certain

mental illnesses like schizophrenia. A disease that countless abductees have been diagnosed and treated for. Unsuccessfully, I might add.”

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly as she retraced her steps to stand behind the podium once more. Her gaze slid over the sea of faces, landing on Sam, who’d taken a seat in the last row, closest to the door.

“My belief, and I’m still compiling data to support this, is that some abductees have had biometric micro-transmitters implanted in the hypothalamus when they were abducted. When the time is right, an impulse is sent to the transmitter to stimulate and provoke whatever event they’ve been programmed for. Whether it’s to set off a bomb that will kill hundreds of people at a coffee shop, blow up an airplane . . . Or open fire on an unsuspecting crowd of people at social gathering places like bars, churches, schools.”

Her gaze never left Sam’s as her voice lowered to a sympathetic, yet adamant tone. “And just this morning, as most of you might have already heard, a street fair in Greenville, South Carolina has been added to that increasing list of mass shootings.”

The room erupted in a cacophonous roar that took nearly a full three minutes to quiet, as people gasped, swore and demanded clarification.

“Wait just a damn minute!” a man shouted, jumping up and charging toward the stage. Several security guards stopped him and escorted him out of the auditorium as he shouted obscenities at Karma. She’d heard them before, perhaps not to that extent, and she was thankful the man hadn’t been left to disrupt the audience any further.

“I know how shocking and incredible this sounds. It’s like science fiction right out of Hollywood,” she declared loudly, trying to make her voice heard over the roar of the crowd. “But you only have to put the pieces of the puzzle together.”

The crowd began to shuffle and shift in their seats, some from anger, she knew, and others from fear and disbelief.

“Our technology has grown at a rapid pace over the past century, by leaps and bounds . . . We can see farther into space than ever before.” She chuckled at the confusion that had started to settle over them as the room began to calm once more.

“I have a point, I promise you. I’m not just jumping from one topic to the next with nothing to connect them. Just bear with me.”

Here we go, she thought to herself, gripping the pointer in her hands so tightly her knuckles were beginning to whiten. The screen changed again to that of a full moon glowing in a starlit sky.

“Sixty years ago, a Polish astronomer, Kazimierz Kordylewski discovered two patches of light orbiting our planet. Astronomers Gabor Horvath and Judit Sliz-Balogh, of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, have obtained clear evidence of the clouds using a specially equipped telescope in a private observatory in western Hungary. The Kordylewski clouds, as they’d become known by, orbit Earth about 250,000 miles away, roughly the same distance as the moon.

“One cloud,” she said, using the pointer to show the approximate location of the clouds. “Orbits ahead of the moon. The other behind in specific regions of the sky.

“Though the clouds seem to have been in existence at least since 1961, when Kordylewski first detected them, no one really knows how long they’ve been there . . . Or what’s really at the center of them.”

She picked up her bottle of water and drank several swallows, hoping she didn’t choke on it. She was getting into the most powerful, and technical, section of her presentation. This, she

knew, would either sway them to her side of the argument or push them to the more conventional beliefs that she, and those like her, needed to be put away.

“In 2015, the Keck Observatory in Mauna Kea, Hawaii discovered a galaxy composed of 99.9 percent dark matter. It was dubbed Dragonfly 44. It is, according to the ones who discovered it, as big as our own Milky Way galaxy.”

“What is dark matter, you ask?” She gazed out over the faces; their attention focused solely on her every word. “In short, it is matter that does not reflect light and the Dragonfly galaxy is comprised of nearly one hundred percent dark matter.

“My theory,” she said, her voice strong and betraying none of the trepidation she truly felt. “Is that they are using some sort of shield comprised of this dark matter to keep other species from seeing what they’re really up to.

“I believe that ships with deep space capabilities have been sent to our planet for reconnaissance. Ships from deep inside the Dragonfly forty-four galaxy. They are hiding in our own atmosphere, hidden from us in the Kordylewski Clouds.”

She paused for a moment as the room grew silent. She could hear her own heart pounding and wondered if those in the first three rows could hear it as well.

“Everyone has heard of Roswell New Mexico and the ship that crashed there in 1947,” she continued, displaying images of vintage news articles of the crash. “And how our government covered it up. They've kept this secret all these years.”

“They know about the ships that come here and abduct our people for experimentation,” she imparted emphatically, rushing on as her words grew in strength and determination.

“The government has made deals, signed treaties, with them believing these extra-terrestrial beings are interested in commerce, a swapping of knowledge and technology.

“Steven Hawking, one of the world’s most renowned physicists, once said that if Earth were visited by a technologically advanced race, they would not be a benevolent one. He was absolutely correct.”

Karma leaned over the podium, her voice deepening with the emotions she felt boiling up and ready to spew forth.

“They are programming abductees to kill. With every rampage, every mass shooting, the population shouts louder and louder for gun control. They are trying to disarm the general population so that when they do strike we will have no way to fight back.

“These,” she told the audience as the mass shooters’ faces flashed rapidly across the screen. “Are the weapons they are using to destroy us. We are killing ourselves for their benefit and we must find a way to stop them.”

A loud voice from somewhere in the middle of the crowd called out, “They need to up your medication, lady!” causing nervous laughter to erupt in waves as several people rose from their seats and moved toward the exits.

“I can’t believe I wasted an hour of my day listening to that crap,” another voice called out.

“At least it was air conditioned,” another voice consoled.

“Please!” Karma called out over the hecklers, trying to gain their attention once more. “You have to believe me. I have proof that what I’m telling you is true. You can’t let them win!”

Karma pleaded as the room began to empty. “We’ve been conditioned to ridicule and deny anything relating to the existence of extraterrestrials, but I have proof! Secret government documents, eyewitness accounts of . . .”

Karma finally gave up as the last few stragglers abandoned her. Except for Sam, who slowly sauntered toward the stage where she stood, drowning in her defeat.

“That was, ah, quite interesting, to say the least,” Sam said, looking like he was trying, and failing miserably, to hide a self-satisfied smirk.

“Laugh all you want, Sam,” Karma snarled, glaring at him. “Everything I’ve said here today is documented fact from Betty and Barney Hill to Charles Whitman to your own brother.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t,” Sam told her with a non-committal shrug. “I remember reading about most of the shootings in the newspapers. It’s the connection to hidden galaxies and alien abductions that most people find difficult to swallow.”

Karma slammed her fist on the table, tipping the bottle of water over. “Then you’d better take a drink of water and choke it down because here’s something else you’re going to find hard to take. Our time is running out. It won’t be long before they land on the White House lawn. I’ve done my homework, Lieutenant Jackson, and you’d better try hard to remember what happened to you and Seth before his life went to shit.”

“Karma, stop it,” Sam snapped angrily.

“No! You listen to me. I know that our government has lost control of the situation. The aliens have broken the pact that was originally put in place. They will—never mind,” she told him, shaking her head.

She pulled a dark brown, leather, case from beneath the table next to the podium and slid it across the floor toward Sam. “Take it. It’s Seth’s journals. Read them, Sam. All of them. You’ll be surprised at what you find in them.”

Sam studied her for a moment, like he was about to say something sarcastic but changed his mind. He took the case in hand and turned to leave.

“Take some unsolicited advice, Sam,” Karma called out to his retreating back. After turning back to her with an unspoken question on his face, she continued. “If reading those don't jog your memory, try hypnosis . . . Before it's too late for us all.”