



THE WEAPONS THEY USE

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A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Although this book is *a work of fiction*, there are multiple references to actual events that have been in news headlines over the years. These references are included to add suspense and intrigue to the story as a whole and in no way meant to disrespect any person or persons who were present at these events, the victims, their families, the military or first responders who came to the aid of the victims.

This book is meant to entertain soft science fiction readers and is purely from the creative, (although somewhat chaotic) mind of the author.

Prologue

A frown caused his dark brow to furrow as he looked down at the duffle bag at his feet. A moment of confusion washed over the man as he wondered why he was standing atop a twenty story building.

His heart jolted as the voice in his head reminded him of his mission. He'd tried everything he could think of to prevent what he now knew was inevitable.

"I don't want to do this!" the man cried out, anguished and ashamed as he stared up into the bright morning sky. He wasn't sure if he was pleading with God or . . . the voices he'd lived with since he'd turned eighteen. Either way, it didn't really matter what he wanted. It only mattered that he comply with their demands.

Shaking his head he drew in a long breath and let it out slowly. No, it didn't matter what he wanted. It was too late to change what was coming. All he could do, now, was try to save as many lives as possible.

Letting out a mirthless chuckle, he shook his head again. In a short time, everyone would make up their own stories, their own truths as to why he did what he was about to do. None of them would come close to the truth. He barely believed it himself and he'd lived with it for ten years. It was only fitting, he decided, that it happen today.

His twenty-eighth birthday.

The morning sunlight flashed off the building across the street, making him squint against it. It was a beautiful day. Too beautiful for what was to come. The sky shouldn't be that pure shade of blue and the white, fluffy clouds should be darker, angrier. It would suit the coming events much better. But, if it was raining and ugly out, he wouldn't be there, doing what he didn't want to do.

He looked down over the ledge at the crowd below and prayed for a miracle. One that would send him back to a time where he believed he had a choice of what his life would be.

He missed the time before . . . when his only worries had been keeping his grades up and which college had the best premed courses. When his heartbeat picked up and he couldn't help the shy smile that formed of its own accord when Jenny Masterson was nearby.

He'd been a different person back then. A different life. One he barely remembered most of the time. The voices kept those things hidden behind the darkness. Occasionally, the good memories would resurface and it gave him the strength to fight against *them*.

Why was he here again? Oh, yeah.

He watched a young couple walking, hand-in-hand, as they dodged through the throng of people at the street festival below. They looked so happy. Do they know? he wondered. Would they have changed their plans if they did?

The thumping music and murmur of their laughter rose up to greet him, bringing back a distant memory of when he was a kid, himself. How his family had gone to a carnival and he'd eaten too much cotton candy and threw up. Sammy had teased him mercilessly about "pink vomit" for years after that. It had become a family joke.

He lifted his face to heaven and prayed that his brother would forgive him one day. A deep ache of regret squeezed his heart knowing what his actions today would do to his twin. But it couldn't be helped. He'd lost the battle, and this was his penance.

Those who died today would save millions in the end. Their sacrifices would not be in vein, he consoled himself, and once the truth came to light it would lead to his own redemption.

Resignedly, he opened the duffle bag he'd lugged up twenty flights of stairs and began to slowly place the pieces together. He slid the bump stock into place.

His mind was blank as he followed the instructions from the voices in his head until the rifle was assembled and the high-powered scope was set into place. Rubbing the moisture from his eyes, he then peered through the lens of the rifle scope.

Him, he decided as the blurred image of a middle-aged man with a paunch belly and a scruffy beard sharpened in the crosshairs. He slowly squeezed the trigger as he eased out the breath he held.

The man fell to his knees, almost simultaneous with the loud crack of the rifle shot, and then onto his face. He watched the woman beside the dead man look down in confusion. Then her uncertainty turned to shock and she screamed as she dropped to her knees at her man's side.

A few people turned to see what was going on and looked as if they were about to offer their assistance. Then, a ceaseless barrage of gunfire had the terrified crowd screaming as they scurried for cover.

The music screeched to a discordant halt, replaced by panicked shouts and stampeding feet. When the clip was empty, he mindlessly slapped a second clip into the rifle and continued firing.

He didn't bother using the scope as he sent the spray of bullets in a wide arc into the panic-fueled mob below. His mind was numb, his eyes unfocused; he couldn't stop.

They were in control of him, mind and body.

Someone, a cop or an armed civilian, returned fire. A chip of cement sliced across his cheek and blood seeped from the graze, mixing with the dried tears he'd shed for the lives that would be lost. He didn't bother wiping it away nor did he acknowledge the sting of the injury. Nothing penetrated the darkness that had blanketed his mind.

The relentless thrumming in his ears blocked out the screams of agony and the sharp popping of his weapon. When the rifle was empty once more, he reached for the third clip.

His hand stilled. He lifted his head, tilting it to the side. He listened to the chaos erupting below as the breeze caressed his face. In the distance he could hear the sirens shrieking to the rescue. A car alarm was blaring below, and there was weeping. It was heart-wrenching and that, more than anything else, brought him back to his senses.

They were gone . . . the voices had quieted. For the first time in too long to remember, he was alone in his own head and he smiled.

Then laughed as the relief washed over him. Then, he fell to his knees and wept. His body trembled and his shoulders shook with wracking sobs as he held the rifle in a loose grip.

So many innocent lives stolen away because he was too weak to fight them any longer.

He thanked God his parents weren't around to see what he'd done . . . what he'd become.

"God, forgive me," he whispered, rising to his feet before stepping up onto the ledge of the roof and then tossing the rifle into the void.

He looked up into the sky once more, lifted both of his hands, extending his middle fingers.

"Fuck you, you bastards!" he bellowed and then pointed to the dead and dying on the ground. "I stopped you! That's what we humans call *free will!*"

Laughing at his triumph, he spread his arms wide and smiled. "I'm finally free, Sammy. I'm finally free."

He closed his eyes and leaned forward, letting gravity take over.

Chapter One

05:00 hours, Friday 25 October

With his back and legs straight, shoulders tense and his arms bulging, Sam Jackson began his morning routine of one hundred rapid pushups. His nose came within an inch of the dark blue rug that covered the hardwood floor, before his biceps flexed, pushing his well-toned body up again. The sweat poured off him, coating his bare chest and dampening the olive green boxers he'd slept in.

When that didn't wipe away the images that haunted him, Sam rolled onto his back and began a punishing round of sit ups. His shoulders barely grazed the floor before he was up again, twisting his body as he tapped his knees with opposite elbows.

From years of military service, Sam had honed his body into a lethal fighting machine. At the age of twenty-eight, and at the rank of Second Lieutenant, he'd already surpassed several of the goals he'd set for himself even before joining the Corps.

He and Seth had both known from a young age what they wanted to do with their lives.

Sam pushed himself through the grueling routine, blanking his mind. He didn't want to remember that time. When they'd slipped out, after their folks had gone to bed, and taken the Dragonflyer, their family cabin cruiser, out onto Lake Hartwell to celebrate their eighteenth birthday.

Pain echoed inside his head as he tried to fight off the memories.

Most of the time, Sam had no problem locking everything about that time in a mental box and forgetting about it.

It was how he'd survived two tours in Iraq as well as life when he return stateside.

But this time nothing worked. The nausea he'd felt back then made his stomach churn and his throat burned with acid as he fought back the need to vomit.

Sam increased the speed of his routine, grunting with the exertion of each rep. He closed his eyes, hoping to blot out the image of his mother's worried face as she stood over him.

The image of his father trying to bring Seth around flashed across his eyelids. The sound of the old man's voice as he tried to waken Seth, and the fear in it, increased Sam's heartrate more than the arduous calisthenics he was putting himself through.

As the memories refused to relinquish their hold on him, Sam's eyes burned with sweat and—though he would forever refuse to admit—tears as his mind replayed the scene.

Once he'd finally wakened, the nightmare that had Seth in its grip refused to release him as he had fought violently against the hands that tried to keep him calm.

"They're coming back!" Seth had screamed, over and over again as he tried to escape. "We have to get away! We have to get away or they'll kill us all!"

The worst part, Sam recalled, was the blood that seeped from Seth's nose and ears as he grabbed their father's shirt, begging him to listen. "They put something in our brains, Dad. You have to believe me. They made me watch as they did it to Sam, too. We have to go to the hospital and get them to take it out."

"It's okay, son," their father told Seth as he gently wiped at the streaming blood. "We'll get you the help you need."

"You promise?" he asked, finally calming down just a little. Then, Seth's eyes widened and his breath panted out. "They're coming!"

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.

The ache at the back of his head and in his temples, forced Sam's mind back to the present. He let himself fall onto his back, covering his eyes with his arm as his heart pounded. He felt the warmth trickle from his nose and swiped his hand over it, holding up his bloody fingers.

"Damn it," he grumbled as he pulled himself to his feet and headed for the shower.

He dropped his damp shorts onto the floor before stepping under the cool spray. He dipped his head down, watching the dripping blood as it swirled around his feet.

He didn't want to think about his brother and what had happened back then. He didn't want to think about the death of their parents, or his time spent in the Middle East.

Nor did he 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.

Why, he wondered, had every painful event he'd experienced over the past decade come back to haunt him today?

Sam turned off the shower with a frustrated twist and then jerked the plastic curtain aside. He grabbed the clean, white towel, swiping it over his close cropped, black hair and then over his face, wiping away the last traces of his bloody nose, leaving the towel stained.

He stared down at the pink and crimson splotches and his heart gave one hard jolt before settling back in his chest. His eyes blurred for a brief moment, then just beyond the edges of his vision, shadows shimmered.

He dropped the towel and took a step backward, bumping into the toilet where he lost his balance. He felt himself sliding into panic mode. Something else he hadn't done since he'd finished basic training at Parris Island, where he now trained new recruits.

The shadows drew closer, their long, thin arms reaching for him. Sam threw up his hands as if he could ward off the goblins, knowing in the deepest part of his subconscious mind that if they wanted him, nothing would stop them.

The episode lasted less than a moment before it drifted away like a whisp of smoke in a strong wind.

It didn't matter. The damage was done. The nightmare from his youth had returned with a vengeance, tearing at his brain and shaking every barricade Sam had built over the years to their foundations.

What made the episode worse was that he was wide awake and lucid. That, as far as he could remember, had never happened before.

He was a soldier, damn it. He had witnessed some of the most horrific abominations one human being could do to another and remained stoic, knowing that the death of the terrorists who perpetrated those atrocities was justice for the victims.

He'd watched the love of his life walk away telling him, "It's for the best, Sam." Did he fall apart when his heart was shattered by her? Hell no, he did not.

Why then, he wondered again as he continued to try to rub away the ache in his head, *was this happening now?*

When no answer seemed to come, he drew in a long, slow breath and then released it through his nostrils. He repeated the breathing exercise until his heartrate declined and the thumping in his temples eased.

He slowly rose to his feet and took a tentative step. When the thumping in his brain didn't seem to increase, he counted himself marginally better.

He made his way into his bedroom feeling more confident with each step. By the time he stood in front of the walk-in closet, he felt almost normal. His headache was nearly gone and he no longer felt as though his heart was trying to make a break for it through his ribcage.

After quickly dressing, ensuring that his tie was straight and his black shoes gleamed like new, Sam walked into his neat kitchen for his first cup of coffee of the day. In spite of the incident he'd experienced in the bathroom, he wouldn't have to leave for at least another hour.

Sitting at the small kitchen table, a steaming mug of black coffee at his elbow, Sam scanned the headlines on his smart phone. He tried to focus his mind on the local happenings, thinking he might decide to go out to dinner. Maybe somewhere in Savannah. It was his and Seth's birthday after all.

From as far back as Sam could remember, he and Seth had been practically inseparable.

At least they had been until the night of their eighteenth birthday.

Sam picked up his mug and stared down into the depths of the dark brew. "Happy birthday, Seth," he said, his voice low and subdued, before taking a deep drink.

He missed his brother; they hadn't spoken since they'd buried their parents six months ago.

He set the cup down and stared into space for a moment as a slow smile tilted his wide, full lips. Memories of what they'd been as children all but wiped away the dregs of the morning. He pushed himself to his feet and hurried to his home office.

It took him several minutes to find the disc with the pictures of he and Seth when they were kids. He knew it was in the desk somewhere. He sat down in the leather chair, pulling open drawers and then slamming them shut again, before finally finding it.

With a triumphant chuckle, he slid the disc into the DVD drive and transferred them to a SIM card.

Sam was going to track Seth down, he decided as he waited for the transfer to finish. It was their birthday, after all, and they should be spending it together. They were all each other had left.

Maybe, if Seth was staying close enough, they could meet for coffee or something to celebrate their birthday together. Like they used to when they were kids.

Thinking the pictures would be a nice gift for his brother, Sam placed the card into a small plastic holder and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

They might give Seth something good to remember, Sam told himself as he rose to his feet. Maybe if Seth could see what life had been like, before the horrors of his mental illness had dug its tentacles inside his mind, Sam and Seth could be a family again.

Thinking of their childhood had lifted Sam's mood, shoving aside the remnants of whatever it was that had him in its grip after his shower.

Grabbing his keys, his briefcase and his phone off the kitchen counter, Sam stepped into the small laundry room and out the door that led to the two car garage.

As he turned to lock the door that led into the house, he felt the little hairs on the back of his neck tingle. He'd felt the sensation before, usually when he was in a combat situation. It was the first time since he'd been stateside, however.

He glanced around, taking in every detail of his surroundings. He knew every inch of his home, the garage and everything in it. Nothing seemed out of place.

Once inside the car, he watched in his rearview mirror as the automatic door lifted. He slowly backed out, pressing the button on the remote once he cleared the door. He waited until the metal had touched the asphalt before continuing to back out of his driveway.

The street was quiet, a few lights were on in some of the houses in the upper, middle-class, neighborhood. A car up the street was backing out of the driveway, and the sun was just cresting over the horizon, painting the dark sky with a pink haze to the east.

He tried to shake off the unease and remind himself that today he was going to do everything in his power to reconnect with Seth.

"Come hell or high water," as his grandfather used to say.

#

Chapter Two

12:15 Hours

Second Lieutenant Samuel Jackson sat at his desk in his office at Parris Island Marine Base. His uniform crisp, the creases in his trousers sharp enough to slice a finger, and his spine as straight as if it were made of steel.

He was a Marine, and proud of that fact. He refused to allow himself to slump in a chair just because his job, now, consisted mostly of pushing papers and training cadets. That didn't mean he should let his body, or his mind, go soft.

There were too many enemies out there, some known and obvious, others hidden in the shadows and disguised as friends. Hadn't he learned that one the hard way in Afghanistan and Iraq?

Sam placed another progress report in the basket filled with other files he'd already gone through. The paperwork was the part of the job he liked the least, but it was something that had to be done. It was tedious and time consuming but it kept the chain of command informed of the progress of each cadet under his command.

Sam knew he had a good group of cadets this time around and they seemed to want to be the best Marines they could be. A few of them reminded him of himself when he'd first signed up, young, headstrong, full of piss and vinegar, and thought they knew it all. Not being one to smile often his lips tilted slightly, hinting at the possibility of dimples.

He glanced down at the screen of the tablet that sat on the desk to his left. As if of its own accord, his finger slid across the screen. The picture that came up had been taken when he and Seth just turned ten and his twin brother had announced to the world he was going to be a doctor.

He swiped the screen again and another picture of them came up. They used to be inseparable, he remembered. Their parents often joked they were conjoined twins at the hip. Where one went, the other was right beside him. If trouble had found one, it usually involved the other, as well.

Sam hadn't heard from his brother since their parents' funeral and Seth had taken their deaths hard. He'd been staying with Sam for about a month, after he'd lost his third job in as many months and had no place else to stay. He had hoped they could put the past behind them and find that friendship they'd had before.

Then Seth had tried to end his own misery, and had Sam not altered his normal procedure and gone home for lunch that day, Seth would be dead. Once Seth had recovered from the overdose, he disappeared, and they hadn't seen each other since.

Sam shook off the memory and scanned a couple more photographs. The next one was taken only a few weeks before their eighteenth birthday.

Before the night they'd both fallen into a nightmare that Seth had never been able to escape.

They had the same smile, the same blue eyes and 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 which one was who. 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 their junior year in high school when 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, a classic, 1970 Chevrolet Camaro, canary yellow with black stripes, or go out with their friends for that long had taught them both to respect rules.

Sam shook his head, chuckling at the memory.

"What were we thinking?" he asked himself.

Thinking of how it used to be, Sam let out a long, heavy sigh.

"What happened to you, Seth?" Sam asked, knowing there was no real answer to why some people succumbed to a mental illness and others didn't.

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.

Instead, it had turned out to be the worst.

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 First Class Martin Wilson, a tall, lean African American man in his early twenties, 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 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. He'd used one just like it earlier that morning when he'd compiled the images he'd been scanning on his iPad.

"Still of one mind, aren't we, Seth?" he said with a chuckle. Maybe his brother was trying to reach out to him as well. The thought lightened his heart just a little, with the hope they'd get back what they'd once had.

Sam opened the plastic case and, after digging in his desk drawer for the card reader he knew was there, plugged it into the USB port on his desktop computer.

Within seconds the screen came to life, flashing an image of Seth sitting in what looked like a cluttered room. A basement, perhaps? With 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.

He turned up the volume and sat back to listen to what his brother had to say after so many months of estrangement. Sam hoped it would be news that Seth had finally realized it was time to come home.

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 tone filled with despair. "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 and then through his shoulder length black hair, 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. The same one he'd had when he stepped out his front door that morning.

Something has happened. Something bad.

"I wrote it down," Seth continued, his voice was soft, almost a whisper, before it grew fierce and demanding. "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, a precursor he knew, 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 smirked 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 stony grimaces.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Wilson said, his dark eyes wide with restrained anger and apprehension as he gave his superior officer a quick, sharp salute. "These gentlemen insisted on seeing you immediately."

"Thank you, Private," Sam said, returning the salute. "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, turning to the two, grim faced men. He'd pegged them as feds before they had a chance to speak. He'd seen the type before, dark suits, hard eyes and an arrogance that beat anything a stalwart Marine, like himself, could achieve. "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. His dark gray eyes had the look of a man who wouldn't be easily dissuaded from his goal. One who had seen and heard the worst humanity could inflict upon themselves and expected the worst was yet to come.

"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 Alexander Jackson."

Jacob Breen, about his own age Sam guessed or a few years older, stood at attention, at Danson's side. His dark espresso skin, broad shoulders and shaved head gave 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 thicker skin of a hardened agent or give up and go into a less caustic field. At that moment, however, Breen's dark brown eyes projected the man's emotions like a neon sigh.

The guy was furious. About what, Sam assumed, he'd find out very shortly.

"What about my brother?" Sam asked, doing his best to hide the panic that slowly rose within him. He had the terrifying feeling the visit from the FBI had something to do with the video Seth had sent him, it couldn't be a coincidence. He didn't believe in them and his chest tightened 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 tickle at the back of his neck had become a full blown burning as it carved a path down his spine.

"Really?" Danson asked, his tone disbelieving as he glared at Sam. "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. His wide shoulders lifted as every nerve in his body tensed for a battle.

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 asked as he turned back to face Sam.

"I'm confused," Sam said, returning the glare as he looked from one face to the other. "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 undecipherable, his brain refusing to understand what his ears were hearing. 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." Breen took an aggressive step toward Sam. Danson held up his hand, wordlessly stopping his partner's advance.

"Families, Lieutenant Jackson," Breen repeated angrily. "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 as the torrent of accusatory words slammed into him. The strength left his muscles as Sam fell, helplessly, into it.

"No . . . no, no, no," Sam kept repeating, shaking his head. "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, his voice a low, animalistic growl. "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 stormy gray eyes. The heat from them was enough to slap Sam back to reality as he shifted in his chair, forcing Danson to take 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. He hadn't consciously thought about what he was doing. It was as though his mind had stepped aside and someone, or something, else took control of his body.

It happened sometimes, or at least it used to, when he was in a war zone. When they'd been under fire, his training would take over and he did what needed to be done to survive.

"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 slowly placed it into the plastic case that still sat on his desk blotter 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 frowned.

"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, trying to regain some control of his emotions. He shoved everything aside, focusing on the next step, the next act, that was required to complete his mission.

"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 is more to it, someone else calling the shots, 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.

Sam could almost see the rigid control Breen had forced himself to maintain as he glared at him, forcing out words that lacked any semblance of sincerity. “I’m sorry for your loss, Lieutenant.”

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 it, but they didn’t care. They had a hot set of wheels which meant they had freedom, and the muscle car didn’t hurt their reputation with the girls, either.

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. He bit back the groan that threatened to escape as he gritted his teeth so hard, he thought his jaws might crack.

Finally, the pain began to ebb. He drew in a slow breath as he took one hand from his throbbing head and wiped at the stream of blood. He tilted his head back and squeezed his nostrils to help staunch the flow.

“Sir?” Private Wilson asked after rushing into Sam’s office. Sam didn’t answer, he couldn’t. He kept his eyes closed and breathed slowly through his mouth.

“Should I get a medic?” Private Wilson asked, stepping closer, his voice heavy with concern.

“Nah,” Sam told him, trying to make light of the situation. “I’m fine. Just got a bloody nose.”

Sam chuckled, hoping it would keep Wilson from asking too many questions. “I haven’t had one like this since I was a teenager.

“Yes, sir.” Wilson paused for a moment and Sam could see the indecision in the young private’s eyes before he began to speak. “No disrespect, Sir, but what happened with the Feds?”

“Can you grab another shirt for me, Private?” Sam asked, ignoring his subordinate’s inquiry as he pulled 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.

The migraines and nosebleeds had started around the same time Seth had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. The doctors diagnosed them as stress related and brought on by the trauma of his twin brother’s psychological issues. Sam thought that was just bullshit the medical field came up with when they didn’t have a clue what was really wrong. If they were caused by stress and anxiety, why didn’t he have them after he’d joined the Marines and left home?

Or the whole time he was stationed in Afghanistan where he’d done two tours in high combat areas? If that wasn’t high stress, he didn’t know what would be.

He’d thought he’d outgrown them until the day he learned of the crash that killed his parents. Since then, he’d only had a couple of migraines, but the nosebleeds seemed to be increasing in frequency.

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, Lieutenant.”

“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. Honestly.”

“I will, sir.”

“That’ll be all,” Sam said 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 and through his hair. Sam looked up, not bothering to dry the frigid drops as they trailed down his neck. Gazing at his reflection in the mirror he assessed his own features.

What he saw there, was a man approaching thirty with short black hair. A multitude of scars he’d gathered during his years in the Military, marred his back, shoulders and one on his leg. Sam touched a finger to the long, thin line that led from just beneath his left ear and trailed along his squared jawline to the tip of his chin.

That one, he remembered, was a reminder of the hand to hand combat with a knife-wielding terrorist who had decided to hide behind a pregnant mother and her two young daughters.

Sam came out of that incident a little bloody but alive, as did the woman and kids. The terrorist ended up with his own knife buried in his throat.

Pulling himself back from that bloody memory, he continued the analysis of his features. His nose listed ever so slightly to the left and sported a slight bump at the bridge from where it had been broken during a training accident.

He examined a pair of deep blue eyes as they stared back at him, with their straight slash of dark brows and thick, black lashes. Perhaps the heat he saw in them, others might assume was the intensity of a soldier doing his duty.

What he knew it to be, was anger and pain.

The creases furrowing his forehead were new, however, along with the uncertainty that showed in the way his wide, full mouth tilted down at the sides.

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. He took in the room where his brother had shot the video, recognizing some of the items.

“Son of a bitch . . . the lake house!” Sam choked out. “He’s been staying at the lake house.”

Sam hadn’t gone back to that place in years. When they were kids, he loved going there and had often asked his parents why they couldn’t live there all the time.

After . . . that night, every time he’d thought about the place, his head would throb, and an unnatural terror would send him into a panic attack. He never understood why. The shrink his parents made him talk

to, after Seth's emotional break, had said it was his subconscious mind telling him it was the place where Seth had gotten sick. Because of that, his own body manifested physical issues to keep him away.

Sam thought that, too, was all bullshit just like the diagnosis of his migraines and nightmares.

He jotted down a few more remarks Seth had made during the video, including the part about the secret code they'd created. He needed to try to remember exactly what it was, it might help him find out what the hell happened that sent his twin brother over to the dark side.

Once the screen went dark again, Sam Googled Karma Taylor and found her website almost immediately.

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

Her picture showed an attractive, mixed-race woman. Her dark hair was pulled back from a heart-shaped face giving her a professional, no-nonsense mien. Her small, straight nose, high cheekbones and warm, honey-chocolate eyes seemed to broadcast above average intelligence. The expression on her face made you want to believe every word that came out of her mouth. A mouth, Sam thought as his eyes focused on it, that looked soft and erotic.

Shaking off the unexpected tap at his libido, he jerked his eyes back to the paragraph beneath it. According to the description it had been taken at one of her speeches. A large banner plastered to the wall above her head shouted the title to her latest best seller, *The Whole Truth*, complete with the image of the book cover and the tagline, "Time is running out for Earth. They're already here!"

He read briefly that she'd been an up and coming associate in a law firm in DC. She'd left there two years ago, after six years, to pursue the truth of extraterrestrial existence on earth and her subsequent abduction . . . by space aliens.

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

He read further about Ms. Taylor's exploits, focusing on some of the "facts" she'd gathered and how the government had covered them up for decades. Her entire website, Sam decided, was nothing more than a promotion to sell her latest "tell all" book. According to her most recent blog, she was appearing in Savannah Georgia at the Civic Center, giving a presentation that same afternoon and would be in town for several more days.

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

He grabbed his landline and called his assistant. "Yes, sir?" Wilson answered.

"I need the number for a woman named Karma Taylor. According to her website she'll be in Savannah for the rest of this week."

"Yes, sir. Do you need the hotel information 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 shirt pocket. A moment later his landline rang. He answered the call before the second ring began.

"What have you got?" Sam asked.

"I have her cell phone number, and the name of the hotel where she's staying. Do you want me to place the call? Set up an appointment?"

"No, I'll call her myself. Give me the number." Sam jotted it down 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 woman.

"This is Tara Smith, her assistant, 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 fingers drummed on his desk as his irritation grew.

"Sam." A warm, smiling voice greeted him a moment later. "This is Karma."

"So, Seth told you about me," Sam remarked coldly.

Fury blew through him as he remembered his brother and how he'd missed him. He'd wanted to find him, get him the help he needed, and this woman used his twin to further her own warped crusade. To sell her books and line her own pockets by reinforcing delusional minds with her rhetoric.

"Of course he did," she told him. He could hear the warmth in her voice, and it infuriated him further. "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, Karma Taylor had them.

"No, I didn't know what he was planning. 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," Sam informed her, unbending. "I need answers, today."

"As I said, I have a very tight schedule," Karma repeated, 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. He used the same tone when dealing with new recruits.

"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. Then again, he thought, she'd been a lawyer and they had a knack for turning things around on you.

"I'm going to have to watch myself around you, Ms. Taylor," Sam said, frowning at the image that still smiled out from his computer screen.

Chapter Three

14:20 Hours

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.

By the time he got to Broughton street he had ten minutes to spare. He hoped Ms. Taylor was the type of person who respected punctuality. He was in no mood, at that moment, to cater to the woman's capriciousness. His head still ached, though it was down to a dull throb thanks to the four Ibuprofen he'd swallowed before leaving the base.

He found a parking spot quickly—an oddity most of the time—and hurried into the coffee shop. He spotted her almost immediately, sitting near a window.

A point in your favor, he granted internally as he watched her long slender fingers wrap around the large, white ceramic mug. She lifted it to her lips and took a brief, delicate looking sip before replacing it in the saucer. 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. She was dressed much like she'd been in the photograph on her website. Professional looking skirt and jacket in a pale peach color that seemed to highlight her light caramel skin tone. Her sharp eyes followed his every step as he approached the table where she sat, her spine ramrod straight.

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

Sam pulled out the chair and sat, his face a stern mask. "Ms. Taylor. I see introductions aren't really necessary."

"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. Although," she said and then paused as if examining every inch of the man before her. "His hair was longer, he didn't have a scar and he had more of a sadness in his eyes. Yours are harder, colder."

"Did you know he was going to do it?" Sam demanded, 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. 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,” she told him, her voice firm and so low he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

He was usually a pretty good judge of a person when he looked them in the eye. Some of his men used to call him a human lie detector. Sam watched her closely, hoping to see some telltale sign that she was the coldhearted bitch he’d portrayed her to be. The type of person who would lie, cheat and steal to get what she wanted.

The directness of her intense, unwavering gaze told Sam she believed every word she’d spoken.

He leaned forward, his face inches from hers. “You believe that bullshit?”

“It’s the truth, Sam,” she insisted, not backing away from his intentional invasion of her personal space. “I don’t care if you believe me or not. Seth did.”

“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?” Sam demanded sarcastically as he sat back in his chair. “We may have been alike in a lot of ways, Ms. Taylor. But I’m neither delusional nor am I gullible.”

“No,” she told him, her eyes going from bold to compassionate. “Not because you were identical twins . . . 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, male or female.

“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 sharply, uncrossing her legs and clutching her fists in her lap.

Sam could see the shield around her emotions was beginning to fracture. He didn’t want to hurt her, he just needed answers. He no longer thought of her as a charlatan now that he’d met her and gotten her measure. She was just a woman almost as confused as his brother had been. He drew in a deep breath and tried to push back his own frustration.

“I want Seth’s journals.” He watched as emotions flashed across her pretty face so fast it made him wonder which one would settle to form her reply.

Surprise, he decided with an internal smirk. *Good*.

“His journals?” she asked. “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 chaotic schedule. I would have gladly brought them to you or had them delivered by a courier.”

“I wanted 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. Seeing it softened something inside him. She’d cared deeply, apparently, for his brother. She was grieving as he was, he realized, and she was hurting. It was 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—”

“For God’s sake,” she swore, her tone harsh and louder than it had been. “Call me Karma. You’re just being deliberately annoying, now.”

Sam grinned at her reprimand as he rose from his seat. Of course he was trying to goad her, and she’d called him on it. He appreciated her straightforwardness and decided that, had they met under different circumstances, he might have liked to get to know her a little better.

“Karma,” he amended, giving her a slight nod. “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,” Karma smirked at him as she, too rose from her chair. “That way you’ll have something to wash down all that crow you’ll be eating.”

She turned on her Prada sheathed heel and then called over her shoulder as she headed 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. Then, pulling his wallet from his left hip pocket, chuckled to himself. He looked down at the bill, counted out enough money to cover it, along with a generous tip, and then followed her out of the coffee shop.

When he stepped out into the sultry afternoon, Karma was standing on the sidewalk waiting for him. The air was warm after the coolness of the coffeehouse and a line of perspiration dotted Sam’s brow. Heat didn’t really bother him, however. He’d had to tolerate hotter weather while he was on his last tour while wearing body armor and carrying his pack.

“Fine,” he told her, turning to look her in the eyes. “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?” When Sam scowled and nodded his assent, she gave his arm a quick pat. “It’s a deal. Where are you parked? I need a ride back to the Civic Center.”

“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.”

“Don’t you have GPS on your cell phone?” he asked. He couldn’t believe anyone, in this day and age, wouldn’t have at least the barest necessities. To him, a smartphone was an essential part of life when in unfamiliar surroundings. He’d paid a hefty price for his own Thuraya X5 when he’d returned stateside and counted it worth every penny.

“Of course I have GPS on my phone. I like to take in the scenery when I’m in a new place and that means letting someone who’s familiar with the area do the driving,” she explained as she held a hand over her forehead to block the sun and looked around. She turned to face him once more. “Where are you parked?”

He could hear the exasperation in her voice and let out a snort of derision. “I prefer to drive myself. I’m parked over there.”

“A control freak, I should have guessed.” She smirked at him as she took a step in the direction he’d pointed.

“Nope,” he told her as he easily caught up to Karma. “Just someone who knows what he's doing and where he's going.”

“I stand corrected,” she stated, as she soon had to quicken her steps to keep up with his longer stride. “An arrogant, control freak.”

“Not arrogant; confident. There's a difference.” He noticed she'd begun perspiring and her breath was coming out a little faster. He slowed his pace to give her a little reprieve from having to race along beside him in the thick, heavy heat of the late summer afternoon.

“Not much of one,” she pointed out, unrelenting in her continuing list of his obvious flaws and differences from his brother. “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,” she said, sarcasm evident in the way she sneered as she spoke.

“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. He hadn't thought he'd have cause to smile much in the next few days, or weeks, but she'd made him laugh.

The surprise must have shown on his face because she turned back to face him, a well-defined brow arching over her left eye and a warm smile on her face.

The laugh died as quickly as it had erupted, and he turned from her penetrating stare. “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 as she stepped closer to the vehicle and stood beside the passenger's side door.

“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 door for her. After closing it, Sam frowned as he climbed in on the driver's side, her jibe about his wheels still stinging.

Yes, he told himself, there were a lot of things more important that he should be trying to figure out rather than being pissy because some woman didn't like his car. But dammit, he was a guy and guys had a special relationship with their cars.

What was wrong with it? he'd like to know. 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 Ford 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?

And just because it was a more sedate color than she might think it should be, that was just her problem. 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 arise.

Screw it, he thought, dismissing 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, he thought, wondering if he was trying to convince himself of that fact.

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

15:05 Hours

Karma looked out at the audience, that filled the space to capacity, and her stomach churned. She'd always felt a little queasy just before speaking to a large crowd and this time it was no different. 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'd even considered, after hearing the News earlier that day, postponing her presentation.

But, she'd told herself, with what Seth Jackson had done, it seemed more imperative than ever that she make them understand that time was running out.

She just hoped the coffee and croissant she'd eaten earlier would stay down.

The fact that Sam Jackson had intimated that she was complicit in his brother's crime, had nearly sent her into a rage. But, she'd refrained from ripping his face off and then kicking him in the balls before walking out.

He was hurting, even if he was being an arrogant ass. So, she tried to remain sympathetic. It had been difficult, but she had maintained her self-control. She couldn't afford to land in jail for assault. She had a job to do and nothing was going to stop her.

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 own loss keep her from 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.

Sam Jackson being one of them.

She peeked through the curtains once more and her stomach did another summersault. It didn't help that her eyes landed on Sam as he settled into his seat at the back of the auditorium. 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 "I don't believe anything you say and only believe half of what I see," mentality.

That impression was reinforced with each minute she'd spent in his presence as she nearly bit her tongue off refraining from lashing out in her own grief at the loss of her best friend.

As she watched him gaze around, smirking disdainfully, at the people crowded into the seats, she couldn't help but chuckle. The man was arrogant, opinionated, cocky and, she was sure, just waiting to make some derogatory remark about her presentation the first chance he got.

It gave her a small bit of comfort that, as a military officer, he'd restrain the snide remarks and wait until they were alone to make her look and feel like a fool.

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 any longer. 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 side. 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 the memory throbbed 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 had finally been born. 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 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 on the podium in front of her. Next to the podium, stood a table where her laptop computer and two extra bottles of water sat. She scanned the multitude of expectant faces and let out a slow breath as she rearranged the third bottle of water and a laser pointer, that Tara had placed on the podium, within easy reach.

"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. 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. I'd like to thank you all for coming here today. This is my first time in Savannah. I've had the opportunity to do a lot of traveling and I've visited many cities in the past year and a half. But, honestly, I think Savannah Georgia has to be the most charming and beautiful place I've been, so far."

The audience applauded in appreciation of the compliment and she waited until it died away before continuing.

"As Tara also stated, I was a practicing attorney 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.

"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."

She paused for a moment to build suspense as some in the audience shifted in their seats, leaning forward as if they didn't want to miss a single word.

Karma lifted her shoulders, adjusting her posture to her full five feet six inches, sliding her eyes over the audience as she began her lecture.

"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 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 and uncapped it, 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 2017 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, pointing at the screen with the wave of her hand as she continued. “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.

“My belief, and I’m still compiling data to support this, is that *some* abductees have had biometric micro-transmitters implanted in the Ventrolateral Hypothalamus when they were abducted. When the time is right, an impulse is sent to the transmitter to stimulate and provoke whatever event they’d 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. For the most part, she was glad to see, they'd settled down a little.

"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.

"I have a point, I promise you. I'm not just jumping from one topic to the next with nothing to connect the dots. 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 44 galaxy. They are hiding 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 loudly.

“At least it was air conditioned,” someone else consoled.

“We’ve been conditioned to ridicule and deny anything relating to the existence of extraterrestrials,” Karma insisted, her voice overridden by the derisive laughter, rude remarks and stomping feet of the mass exodus. “There are secret government documents, eyewitness accounts . . . I have proof that what I’m telling you is true. You can’t let them win!”

She finally gave up the battle to regain their trust 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. Anyone can weave facts into fiction and make it sound credible. 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 learn.”

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.”

#

Chapter Five

16:45 Hours

As Sam walked across the parking lot, carrying the briefcase that held his brother's journals, he felt a pang of sympathy for the woman. She was beautiful, intelligent and friendly enough, that, he wondered what had put her on the path she was on.

Had it not been for the biggest line of bullshit he'd heard this side of the nut house, coming from Karma's mouth, he wouldn't mind getting to know her a little better.

Did people really believe in that stuff? He knew his brother did, but a woman like Karma Taylor? Seth had been sick. Why else would he do what he'd done?

The tickle on the back of his neck had all of Sam's senses going into full combat mode as every muscle in his body tensed in preparation for attack. He was being followed.

As he pulled open the back door of his car, Sam saw the reflection of the man who had followed him from the convention hall. Tall, maybe an inch over Sam's six feet one inches, and built about the same with broad shoulders, trim waist, and a posture that looked ready to spring into action at the first provocation. He respected that, being a soldier himself, and recognized the man's bearing of self-discipline.

His dark blond hair was neatly trimmed around his ears and brushed back from a high forehead. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses and the expensively tailored suit he wore hid the holster and gun Sam knew he probably wore. He had government agent written all over him from the arrogant smirk on his face to the determined steps he took toward Sam.

He tossed the briefcase onto the back seat before turning to face his stalker. He liked looking people in the eye as he took their measure and could tell, almost before they'd spoken their first words, whether their intentions would be benign or aggressive.

Sam didn't like the fact the other man's eyes were hidden.

"Lieutenant Jackson," the man said as he reached into his inside jacket pocket to retrieve his credentials and flashed them in Sam's face. "Conner Dietz, Homeland Security. I need a word with you."

"I didn't know my brother was going to do what he did," Sam ground out before Dietz had a chance to ask. He slammed the car door and tried to step around Agent Dietz, who countered Sam's move.

"I haven't spoken to him in several months," Sam stated, his lips a firm line and his eyes narrowed against the bright sunlight. "Why don't you ask your friends from this morning? I've already gone over this with them."

Dietz gave him a tight grin, more of a grimace, as he replaced his credentials inside his jacket. "That's only part of why I need to speak with you, Lieutenant. Can we go somewhere private?"

"I'm on my way back to the base. You can call my office and set up an appointment for tomorrow morning or find someplace closer. Up to you."

Sam glared at Agent Dietz. He didn't want to deal with any more questions. His mind was still reeling from learning what his brother had done, and his head was beginning to ache again. He had enough questions of his own that needed answers and hoped Seth's journals would provide a few of them.

“This won’t take long,” Dietz told him. He gave Sam another smile before walking around the car and reached for the front passenger side door. “We can talk here.”

What the hell? Sam thought to himself, his resentment at Dietz’s audacity fueling his resistance. He didn’t like being cornered, it brought out his defensive nature causing him to dig in his heels and fight back.

“Fine,” Sam agreed, biting back the words that he really wanted to say. He needed to choose his battles, and in the larger picture, Dietz was just a blip on his radar.

As Sam climbed into the car Dietz slammed the passenger side door, harder than necessary.

“Really?” he demanded, glaring at the other man.

“What?” Dietz asked, a wry smile on his face as he glanced around at the car’s immaculate interior. “You keep this car looking like new inside and out. Is that an obsessive-compulsive issue?”

“I’m a Marine,” Sam informed him, as though that answered the question. He wasn’t about to explain anything until he knew what exactly Homeland Security wanted with him.

“What can I do for you, Agent Dietz?”

Dietz stared at him for several seconds as though he were weighing his words before speaking.

“For a man, a Marine,” Dietz said pointedly. “Who prides himself on being neat, orderly and firmly seated in reality, I find it a little odd, Lieutenant, to find you here listening to Karma Taylor’s conspiracy theories about alien abductions and her *War of the Worlds* rhetoric.”

“You said you wanted to discuss my brother,” Sam reminded him, impatiently. “Let’s get this over with so we can both get on with our jobs.”

“Actually, I said your brother was only part of what I wanted to discuss,” Dietz corrected.

“Get to the point or we’re done here,” Sam interrupted abruptly as he started the engine. The car was sweltering and the first blast of air that blew through the AC vents took his breath away.

“Your brother has been on Homeland Security’s radar for over a year,” Dietz informed him as he turned to face Sam. “Eighteen months to be exact.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. He’d known for years his brother had psychological issues; Seth had even been arrested, shortly after their parents’ death, for trying to break into some clinic. Seth had never said why, and the charges had been dropped. Another mystery he hoped to solve by reading Seth’s journals.

“Why?” Sam finally asked in a clipped tone.

“Let’s just say the activity on his social media pages set off red flags all over the place and it’s my job to find out what he was up to and try to stop it before it’s too late.”

“You failed,” Sam accused, pointedly.

They’d all failed to see the danger his twin brother had presented, not only to himself but to hundreds of innocent civilians. If he’d just tried to reach out to him, Sam berated himself, maybe he would have seen the signs. But he’d thought letting Seth come to him would make things easier for his brother.

Dietz drew in a sharp breath as his lips thinned. Sam’s barb had hit its mark with deadly accuracy.

“Point to you,” Dietz conceded, his smile fleeting. “Unfortunately, we can’t read minds, yet, and we can’t be everywhere at once. What did Seth send to you this morning?”

The last question was such a sharp detour from their conversation Sam nearly blurted out the truth about the video Seth had sent. He’d caught the tactic quickly, however, since he’d used it himself when he’d had to interrogate prisoners.

“What? You and the FBI not communicating? Go figure,” Sam said with a condescending chuckle.

“What was it, Sam?” Dietz asked, his friendly smile returning. “Can I call you Sam?”

“Whatever, Agent Dietz. It doesn’t matter to me what you do.”

“Cut the shit,” Dietz said, his anger slipping through his congenial façade. “I need to know what he sent to you.”

Sam studied the Homeland Security agent for a moment. There was a lot more going on here than the FBI led him to believe.

Why would Homeland be interested in his brother’s crime? It wasn’t as though Seth was a threat to the country. He wasn’t a terrorist, just a man who needed more help than anyone realized.

“Pictures, Agent Dietz,” Sam finally told him, resignation and frustration evident in his voice. He ran a calloused palm over his face, the rasp of his dark stubbled chin echoing in the silence.

“I gave the SIM card to Special Agent Danson when he and his partner barged into my office this morning. And no, I didn't have time to make a copy of it so if you want to see it, call him.”

Sam reached into his shirt pocket and took out the card Danson had given him earlier. He had no intention of calling the agent anyway.

“Here's his card. Now, if we're done, I need to get back to the base and rush hour has started. It'll take me close to an hour just to get to I-95.”

Dietz took the card from Sam and slid it into his own pocket without glancing at it. He shoved the car door open and, as he climbed out, turned back to Sam.

“Just a little friendly advice, Sam. Karma Taylor isn't what you'd call credible when it comes to certain information.”

“I've met the woman,” Sam said, laughing sardonically at the understatement. “I figured that out all by myself.”

Dietz leaned down and lowered the sunglasses he'd worn throughout their conversation. His hazel-green eyes focused on Sam as he spoke.

“Just be careful around her. You don't want to get yourself tangled up with someone who could put an end to your military career. She destroys everyone she gets close to.” He slid the dark shades back into place with a droll smirk. “I should know, I was married to her, and she damn near killed me.”

Dietz slammed the door so hard the car rocked.

“Jesus, Dietz,” Sam growled out to the other man's retreating back. “Get a grip.”

The quick flash Sam had caught, before Dietz slid his dark shades back into place, told him absolutely nothing about the other man. Either he'd been too distracted, or the agent had been that well trained, Sam couldn't be sure.

He knew, however, that should they meet again, Sam would still have to be on his guard where the HSA agent was concerned. Like every other government employee Sam had ever had the misfortune to come into contact with, Dietz was hiding more than he was telling.

It was just a given for the breed.

Before putting the car into gear, Sam pressed the button to close the windows. As he headed toward the interstate, he went over everything that had happened since his alarm clock had dragged him from a night of troubled sleep.

When he'd gotten to the base at seven a.m. sharp, Private Wilson greeted him as he did every morning, with a nod, a hot cup of coffee, a handful of messages and, added “happy birthday, sir.” It had made Sam smile.

Wilson was one of those types of men who seemed to remember just about everything with little prodding. Sam didn't know if he had an eidetic memory or if he was just that good at his job, or both. He'd told Sam once, not long after Martin Wilson had been assigned as his assistant, that he'd hoped to make the Marines his career like his father.

At seven thirty, Sam introduced his newest recruits with what would be expected of them throughout their basic training. When he'd gotten back to his office after seeing all of those fresh young faces, a wave of nostalgia had washed over him and he'd decided to go back over the photos he'd planned to send Seth once he found him.

He'd had some paperwork to complete on the new recruits but had set those aside for a few minutes. He felt that, since it was his birthday, he deserved the down time to celebrate. He'd also thought about having Wilson do an internet search to see if anything popped up on Seth.

That was another thing about the private that Sam appreciated; if he needed information, Wilson knew how and where to find it and it rarely took him long to do so.

Sam had just started to scan through the pictures and take a much-needed trip down memory lane, when the FedEx package from Seth landed on his desk.

That was when his day had turned inside out. Nothing seemed real after that.

Now, Sam was being questioned by both the FBI and Homeland Security, his only living relative, his identical twin brother, was dead. He'd spent the past hour listening to a crazy woman's theories of alien abductions and government conspiracies that would have made any science fiction enthusiast's day.

Sam was never so thankful to have the Corps. His brothers in arms kept his feet on the ground, his mind and body strong and he knew he could always count on them to have his six. They were his family. His only family, now.

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If you want to read more of Sam and Karma's action-packed adventures as they race to save the planet—and themselves—this book is available in digital, paperback and hardcover on Amazon.com and can be ordered from any bookstore across the country.