



**DR. KATHERINE
HUTCHINSON-HAYES**

**A FIFTH
OF THE
STORY**

This is one of the best first novels I've ever read. Not often can we read an authentic thriller that begins in Mali, Africa, and it remains just as believable in Washington, DC. Her well-drawn characters feel like real people. The last 75 pages kept me so engrossed I couldn't put it down to eat my evening meal.

—Cecil Murphey

Suspense at its finest! I kept turning pages, looking over my shoulder, and forgetting to breathe.

—DiAnn Mills
DiAnnMills.com

Dr. Katherine Hayes, author of *A Fifth of the Story*, not only draws you into a fifth of the story but the entire story itself. This is an action movie in book form, with pace, drama, and characters we're accustomed to viewing on Netflix. Katherine skillfully weaves a story arc that the reader can't help but turn each page, relishing each nuance that builds suspense. On a visceral level you'll appreciate the protagonists' character and values, rooting him on to complete his mission despite a daunting array of obstacles. Viewed from the top, as this fictional tale unfolds, one reaches the conclusion that story's premise may not be too far from reality. I highly recommend this book for those who don't mind missing out on sleep.

—Pete Cruz
Author of *No Tears for Dad*
www.petecruz.com

Sometimes we read stories. Other times, we live them. Katherine's captivating knowledge, writing, and plot grab us and refuse to let go. Dive into the adventurous and exhilarating world of a CIA operative, Brock O'Reilly, who wrestles with social issues, friendship, costly love, and a worthy mission. But cancel your appointments because you'll not want to exit Brock's world until you must.

—Rodney Combs, Ph.D.
rodneycombs.com
Journey Better

A Fifth of the Story is a heart-pumping, hang-on-for-dear-life novel. The intricately woven tale will engage your mind and senses so that you might feel like you've narrowly escaped death.

—Sarah Wind
Author of *From Recliner to Revival*

They left a war overseas and came home to a war like no other. Federal agents face a crisis of conscience between ethics and emotion, love and loyalty to the brotherhood versus performing their duty. A probing story of bonds and betrayal, cultural conflict and corruption, a glimpse into the inner workings of federal agencies and the toll on those sworn to protect. Racist plots, crime rings, gun battles, bombs, politics, faith, and intrigue converge to create unrelenting heart-stopping action from the opening scene to the last line.

—Rachael M. Colby, Award-winning writer
www.TattooItOnYourHeart.com

A FIFTH OF THE STORY

DR. KATHERINE HUTCHINSON-HAYES



HARAMBEEPRESS

A Fifth of the Story

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I want to thank God for His grace and mercy that have sustained me throughout this journey. Without His love and guidance, I wouldn't be where I am today.

To my loving husband, children, grandson, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and extended family, thank you for being my rock and for supporting me every step of the way. Your love and encouragement mean the world to me.

To my father and mother, thank you for instilling in me the gift of God and storytelling. Your wisdom and guidance have been invaluable to me, and I am forever grateful.

To my little big brother Andrew, who went to heaven first, I know you're cheering me on from there with our parents. Thank you for always believing in me.

To my mother-in-law, college besties, military besties, church family, author community, Edwina Perkins, and Cecil Murphey, thank you for believing in me and for your unwavering support. Your faith in me has been a constant source of inspiration.

To the FBI, CIA, DIA, and police officers who assisted me in crafting a believable story—thank you for your expertise and guidance.

This book is dedicated to all of you with love and gratitude.

CHAPTER 1

How much for the goat?” Brock pointed to an animal whose ribs jutted through its filthy coat. A fly landed on Brock’s eyelid, forcing it shut with its bulging weight. He smacked himself, missing the target that lazily flew away. The fly buzzed nearby to a freshly butchered camel’s head, then upward, joining a cloud of flies feasting on fish strung by their tails on a clothesline.

Mohammed threw his head back and laughed. His stomach jiggled through his white *bubu*, a traditional Malian gown. “You don’t want no goat, man.”

“No?” Brock scanned the jagged rock path between the crowd of jumbled buildings behind where the vendor sat. Several Islamic schoolboys ran toward the town center. In the distance, a sign for where he’d slept the last few nights at the La Colombe Hotel glistened in the African sun. He’d spent evenings there as the hotel’s singular guest. The adjoining restaurant was a popular eatery during the day, but when the sun set, everyone deserted. Even the manager went home come nightfall.

Brock walked to a rack of knock-off sunglasses displayed on nails tacked through a piece of zinc. He donned a pair and checked his reflection in the full-length mirror perched against the camel’s head. It had been more than six months since he’d been taking the canthaxanthin (food-color) pills. But seeing his tall, muscular, bearded image always took him by surprise. This darker version of himself made his green eyes smolder. Dressed in a head-wrap with jet-black curls peeking through and a mud-cloth dashiki, he really did resemble the accredited Egyptian archeologist his colleagues at the excavation site believed he was.

“You want info,” Mohammed said. “Right, boss?”

“Right.”

“Men you seek.” He used his head to point. “Second building to the left, third floor.”

“Which apartment?”

“Follow smell.”

“What smell?”

“You’ll know.” Mohammed’s mouth opened in an uneven grin displaying betel-colored teeth. “The cost of *that* goat is \$400, Boss,” he said, brown spittle spraying into his goatee.

“That’s a pretty expensive meal.”

He shrugged. “Last meal costs more.”

Brock folded a wad of bills into Mohammed’s meaty palm. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” They wouldn’t meet again, something Mohammed already knew.

Mohammed fanned himself, looking directly into Brock’s eyes. “No, Boss.”

Brock knew this time he was lying.

He picked his way through the bustling marketplace, keeping his head low and his pace even until he got to the second building. Once inside the dank entryway, Brock kept his new sunglasses on but pulled the head-wrap off and reached for the gun strapped to his ankle.

Moving cautiously up the steps to the third floor, Brock came to a landing. He peeked around the corner, checking both sides of the hall before turning left. As he made his way down the tiled hall, a family tumbled from one of the rusted doors. A woman wrapped in a black hijab held the hands of two small children. In true Muslim fashion, she kept her eyes trained on the floor while her husband locked their apartment.

Brock put his head-wrap back on. He bent over, pretending to tie his sandal, and tucked his gun back in its holster.

Dust in the hallway slipped past his allergy medicine and he sneezed.

The father spun around and peered at Brock.

Oh, crap. Bad enough he was paler than most people in these parts. But thanks to the UNESCO archaeological project in the region, the Mali locals saw strangers as looking for drugs, girls, or Allah.

The father smiled politely and bowed. “*Yarhamuka Allah*”—May God have mercy on you.

Brock prayed his Arabic recall would spring into action. He got up and returned the bow. “*Barak Allahu Fik*”—God bless you.

The father indicated drugs were to the left, girls to the right, and the mosque was located below.

Brock switched to French. “*Je suis perdu où est la mosquée?*” he said, explaining he was lost and needed directions to the mosque.

“*Oui.*” The father volunteered to show him the way, so Brock followed the family out of the building to the mosque. The family then left to shop at the market.

Satisfied he was alone again, Brock retraced his steps.

A voice whispered in his ear, “O’Reilly, we got your six covered.”

“I’m tracking.” Brock sniffed the air. The burnt skunky smell of marijuana took him further down the hall toward the boom of French rap music.

Brock crept the rest of the way, stopping every few feet to check the area for movement.

“Confirmed nine targets at location,” the voice said.

“Still tracking.” He reached the end of the hallway. The music from the apartment shook the walls, causing pieces of peeling paint to flitter in the air like brown confetti.

“I’m on location,” Brock whispered. He had crouched outside the door and now stood to adjust his bulletproof vest.

An ice-cold piece of metal pressed upon his skull.

Instinctively, Brock lifted his hands in surrender. He turned to face the person at the other end of the barrel—the father from earlier. *Where’s my backup? Crap.* Beads of sweat slithered down the sides of Brock’s face.

“*Allahu Akbar*”—God is most great. The father’s dark skin glistened in the shadows as he released the safety on his automatic weapon.

“*Mashallah*”—God has willed it. Brock snapped a sidekick into the father’s chest.

The father staggered backward, holding tightly to the gun.

Brock wrenched the gun from his hands and swung the barrel in a wide arc against the side of the man’s head.

The father staggered sideways as a maroon-colored gush of blood streamed from his scalp. Then he went for Brock’s neck.

The automatic thudded against the tile floor.

Brock kicked it away, snatching his own gun from the holster. His fingers curled around the Glock .22 and squeezed the trigger.

The explosion reverberated through the hall. The father's eyes fluttered open in shock. Blood spilled through a gaping hole in his chest as he slid against the wall to the floor.

"Unidentified combatant down," Brock said, adrenaline coursing through his body. With his eyes on the door, he slung the man's weapon across his shoulder, curled his fingers around his gun, and braced himself.

"We got it from here," a voice whispered in Brock's ear.

Seconds later, two agents, Shuggs and Pang, ran ahead, demolishing the door.

Brock reached up and switched out his earpiece for temporary earplugs. Ensuring his earplugs were in place before the anticipated whoosh of a flash grenade that glided past him.

The blast pierced through the dingy dwelling, disorienting the occupants. Bursts of light and shrapnel thundered inside, causing a small tsunami. The kitchen's plumbing exploded, hurling a wave of water down the hall, bringing with it the contents of the cabinets. Silverware bobbed like misguided missiles in the murky water.

Brock replaced the earplugs with his earpiece, thankful that he hadn't lost his connection when the crackle of static came through.

Six muscled, armed men stumbled through a maze of overturned furniture and half-eaten meals. Blinded by the bomb, with their hands raised, they cried out, "*J'ai besoin d'aide Allah! Sa'idnee Allah!*"—pleas for help from God in French and Arabic. One of the dazed insurgents tried unsuccessfully to force his dislodged eye back into an oozing, hollow socket.

Brock and his companions took down each of the men with clean kill shots—close-range bullets to the head.

"Three targets heavily armed in back room, right corner," a voice said to Brock. "Proceed with caution."

Signaling the agents to follow him, Brock sloshed through ankle-deep water in the dark hall.

The group moved in tactical formation past the mutilated bodies toward the last bedroom.

Brock stepped carefully over a twitching, detached arm with three missing fingers. The metallic stench of gunpowder made his breath come in labored, hard and fast. His heartbeat hammered like a paper drum while a stifling silence settled over the apartment. Brock's fingers coiled around his Glock's trigger. Using his foot, he pried open

the bedroom door.

Someone behind the door cursed in French and fired, ripping it off its hinges.

The group of agents took cover behind a large bookcase overflowing with gaming equipment.

Motioning for the others to back him, Brock lowered his body into a growing river of water. He peeked around the door jamb, pumping bullets into a wiry man who popped from behind a barrier of cocaine bricks.

The other agents unleashed another set of rounds into a tall, hulking man who appeared behind a wall of explosives piled onto a mattress. They retreated to reload their weapons.

Brock crawled on his stomach and fired at a third person, a woman who had a rocket launcher aimed at the group from behind a dresser.

An explosion reverberated from within the bedroom toward the agents, blowing out a chunk of wall, narrowly missing Brock. Stunned and bleeding from a busted lip, Brock stood shakily, feeling like someone had belted him in the chest. Pang yelled out a warning.

This warning came as the agent rushed toward a woman with a machine gun pointed at Brock. Shuggs threw a second flash grenade into the bedroom and sprang back into the hall. Shockwaves rocked the apartment in a thunderous roar while Brock and the men knelt, waiting for the remaining sparks to fizzle out.

The sounds from the bedroom faded.

Echoes of sirens clanged in the faraway distance, drowned out by screams of women and children from the marketplace below.

Brock shook his head, and his stomach filled with acid. He checked his watch. They were in a race against time, so the risk of civilian casualties would be low.

“All targets down,” the voice said.

Wiping the sweat from his hands, Brock peered around the door’s column. Motionless bodies soaked in growing pools of blood told him all he needed to know. Brock gave the okay sign to the other agents.

“Document confirmation of wanted targets,” the voice said. “Building perimeter is secured. Vacate in ten.”

“Affirmative,” Brock said.

The other agents split up. Following protocol, they rushed throughout the apartment collecting everything of value to the agency.

Circuiting the room, Brock readied his agency phone to capture

the required images of the three people who'd helped Boko Haram militants terrorize the city for the last year.

Brock crouched on his heels next to the two bodies. They resembled each other. Handsome. Brothers in their early twenties. Both stared open-eyed at the clacking ceiling fan above, limbs posed in unnatural positions. After taking their pictures, he walked to the third body and crouched again.

A dead girl sat erect on the cracked tile floor with her back against the wall, a gun hanging loosely from her hand. Female, about sixteen, with acne covering her forehead, eyes shut as if sleeping. He snapped her picture and got up.

Brock walked to the door and looked back before leaving the space stained with the coppery taste of violent death. Something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. A wave of a tiny palm quivered from beneath a delicate, embroidered blanket he hadn't noticed before.

Shuggs touched him on the arm and motioned for him to leave.

Brock nodded and released a tense breath.

The bundle trembled and then went still. *Oh, God, no.* He was too small, too innocent to be in a filthy place packed with drugs, deadly Islamic terrorists, and more explosives than Brock had seen in months.

Brock ran back into the room, kneeled, and snapped the last picture.

Held tight by a dead teenage mother was an infant covered in blood. The baby stared lifelessly right through Brock as if seeing a secret deep in his soul before departing a brief life.

For the first time since the mission began, a tremor of sadness, of deep regret, gripped him. Brock tapped the hot barrel of his gun against his temple. *What did I do?*

"Retreat now," a voice crackled in his ear. "Time's up."

CHAPTER 2

Did you hear me?" a high-pitched woman's voice said. "It's your turn to report on this disaster we have on our hands."

A lean, redheaded man to Brock's left nudged him.

"Jet lag," Pang said.

Brock shook himself. "Sorry." He rubbed his eyes, studying his team members seated around an oblong conference table in a stark, windowless office. Glancing at his watch, he made the mental adjustment. It'd been forty-eight hours since his flight from Mali to Washington, DC, and they were now in an obscure CIA-owned warehouse outside of Virginia. "Fact of the matter is, I haven't been sleeping well these days."

Pang stifled a yawn. "These long debriefings don't help either."

A smattering of laughter rang out in the room.

Their supervisor, the Directorate of Intelligence Dr. Elizabeth Harper, said, "Understandable, but before I get you pillows, let's finish our meeting."

Shuggs leaned his huge frame over toward Brock and lowered his deep voice. "She's speaking to item eight on the agenda. The analysts have already given their spiel."

"I'm here to report," Brock used his pen to locate the line item, "on our AFRICOM mission in Mali, Africa. My team and I worked in a paramilitary operation alongside analysts and human intelligence agents, who were able to gather a significant amount of data regarding AQIM's relationship to al-Qaeda Central and their involvement in Mali with Boko Haram."

"Continue, Agent Brock O'Reilly," Dr. Harper said, an unusually icy edge in her voice.

Oh, crap, I'm in trouble. She's using my full name. "We effectively

eliminated immediate threats to our national security.” Brock cleared his throat. “Our analysts, as well as counterintelligence, determined that Boko Haram is an al-Qaeda offshoot.”

“In other words,” Dr. Harper questioned, “the mission was *successful?*”

Pretending to look through his brief, Brock racked his brain. *What does she mean?* “Yes, ma’am, you know as much as we do.” Brock locked eyes with Shuggs and Pang. “We were able to neutralize all targets without significant loss of civilian life.”

Dr. Harper walked to a screen in the front of her spacious office. Using a remote, she connected her computer, and several gruesome images emerged. “These pictures were leaked. Human Intelligence in Mali discovered that the info was hacked. Had we not gotten this back from al-Qaeda, pictures of brutally murdered Africans would have been plastered in a humanitarian magazine this morning. The chip is now back in our possession. But there are now activists who are accusing us of lacking compassion for black lives.”

Brock swallowed hard, taking in the new data and seeing the faces of each person he had taken down—including the women *and* children. *If only she knew I grew up in predominantly black neighborhoods. But if I open my mouth now, I’ll sound like a hypocrite. The kind that says their best friend is black when they get caught saying something bigoted.*

“To say your mission was successful,” Dr. Harper lifted an eyebrow, “is only partially correct.” She propped herself against her sleek desk and stared at Brock.

The veterans busied themselves taking sips of coffee. Some scribbled notes.

Dr. Harper adjusted the expensive navy pantsuit on her tall frame and paced the room. She walked past each of the seven men in the meeting before she began speaking again. “What you seemed to have left out,” she leaned down, “is that you did not have clearance to kill half of the other people—the innocent women and children.”

“That’s a lie!” Pang said. “We saved more lives than we took.”

“We always do,” Brock said, knowing it made no difference.

“After this meeting, I have to report an after-action brief, and I have to justify—” Dr. Harper’s voice exploded, “why my people gunned down three children under the age of five and two girls under the age of sixteen!” She peered at Brock. “To whom do I report?”

Crap. I need more coffee and a Xanax. “The NSC.” Brock tried to keep his voice even. “The National Security Council,” he said, examining his empty mug.

“Exactly, and the NSC reports to the Intelligence Oversight Board.” Dr. Harper examined her veined hands, turning her wedding ring around so the fat diamond faced the front. “They ensure certain things are carried out,” she said. “What things would those be, Agent O’Reilly?”

“Making sure that everything is ethical and legal,” Brock said, his voice escalating. “But where are you going with this?”

Shuggs gently laid a hand on Brock’s shoulder.

Lowering his voice, Brock continued. “You asked us to do our jobs, and all three of us did what you commanded.”

“We killed those targets,” Pang said. “Just like we were told to do. And if anyone says anything different, it’s bull.”

Dr. Harper forced a tight smile. “Seems like we have been down this road before.” She walked back to the front of the room, pointing to each picture with a manicured nail.

Brock’s stomach tightened.

“We must review the legality of what happened in Mali, so we do not end up on the front page of every American newspaper as government-sanctioned baby killers.” She paused and surveyed the faces of the seven men. “And that we are *not* viewed as imperialists who are in the business of killing innocent women and children in Africa.”

“Doc, c’mon, these people don’t fight fair,” Shuggs said. “Innocent women and children are commonly used as pawns in places like this.”

“We had no way of knowing the first assailant’s wife and children were strapped with multiple explosives,” Pang said. “They had to be taken down to avoid their killing hundreds of noncombatants in the market.”

“None of us knew about the infant in the target’s house either,” Shuggs said.

“Nice speech, Matthew Shuggs and Andrew Pang, but this is not the first time the three of you have been involved in something similar, is it?” Dr. Harper stood with her back to the group, staring at the pictures on the whiteboard.

Brock clenched his fists, reeling from the calculated words his boss shot at them like bullets. He closed his aching eyes and felt himself pull the trigger on the child he’d killed in Afghanistan two years

earlier. He smelled the hot, slick blood covering his face when the boy's tiny chest exploded.

Everything had changed that day. It didn't matter that the child, coerced by insurgents, had meant to murder them all. *I'm a killer—that's how the rest of the world sees me.*

Shuggs cursed under his breath and threw his pen across the table.

Pang banged his water bottle and got up from the table.

"I suppose Agent Andrew Pang has left the building?" Dr. Harper asked, still gazing at the pictures. Sighing, she pivoted and turned off the recorder.

"Now that was one heck of a cheap shot." Shuggs met Dr. Harper's stare until she finally looked away. "Pang's wife took his kids and left him over that last scandal. We know what happened, but does it do any good? None of us—and I mean ever—intentionally killed innocent people."

"The truth doesn't matter to the outside world," Brock said, his voice thick with resentment.

"Not once has it been distorted by the media." Dr. Harper glanced across the room at a framed photo of the team taken before their first assignment together ten years ago. "I have decided to dismantle and reassign this entire team."

"Oh, my God," someone gasped. Even the most disciplined within the team began grumbling. Chatter in all directions. The air in the room was more chaotic than a crack house on the first of the month.

"It's settled, guys." Brock stood. "We're professionals and know that once the boss makes an announcement like this, the deal is done. We also know this isn't goodbye. It's see you later. Besides, the real meeting," he winked, "will continue tonight at Rusti's. I'll shoot you a text."

When he sat down, Brock received a sprinkling of applause from his colleagues. He looked up to see his boss, a steel wall of reserve, waiting for silence.

"Thank you for that, O'Reilly," Dr. Harper said unsmilingly. "The analysts will have a scheduled meeting with the directorate of CIA staffing today at 15:00 regarding their options. I will be in attendance. You may go now. I need to meet privately with the paramilitary team."

A hush fell over the room as it slowly cleared. One by one, each of the departing four analysts shook hands with O'Reilly and Shuggs

before leaving.

Pang stormed back into the room with his fists balled. "What's going on?"

"Yeah, what happens to us now?" Brock asked matter-of-factly.

"After everything we've done for our country." Pang shook his head.

Dr. Harper pushed back a stray hair from her graying bun. "Gentlemen, please look these offers over. This is an overview of an investigation of local law enforcement agencies." She handed them each a paper with an unmistakable insignia engraved on the letterhead. "It is my strong recommendation that each of you be temporarily reassigned to the FBI, pending your clearances meeting approval."

In silence, the men took a few minutes to read through the offers presented to each of them.

"Wait a second, Doc," Shuggs said. "Do we even have a say in any of this?"

"If you agree to the terms and decide to take a lateral movement into the bureau," Dr. Harper gestured toward a red-stamped envelope next to her labeled *Confidential*, "the agency will not pursue legal action against any of you."

"What a load of bull!" Pang said. "We're the ones that should be suing. I almost lost an arm this time."

"I don't understand." Brock carefully measured his words. "Legal action? That's a slap in the face. Like Pang said, we had some close calls this mission. Fact of the matter is, we have our rights just like anyone else does. And our successes have far outweighed our mistakes." He pushed the offer away. "And this. This is a demotion."

"An offer from the FBI is hardly that."

"Oh, right," Shuggs said.

"This is not punishment," Dr. Harper said.

"Then what is it?" Pang asked, pushing away from the table. "Because it sure ain't a promotion."

Dr. Harper sipped her water. "This is for your benefit. I am buying each of you the precious gift of time. You are my best team. But the smoke must clear before I even attempt to bring you back on board."

"I didn't set my career up to do street hustles," Pang said. "Like some overpaid beat cop."

"So this is what fluency in French gets me," Brock said with a shrug. "A gig with the bureau looking for skinheads."

"Yes, Brock, I know. I also know you have a strong knack for picking

up languages. I have your record right here.” Dr. Harper tapped a stack of files beside her. “But we want to move past this stigma of us versus them. The CIA and the FBI are both reputable intelligence communities.”

“Doc, c’mon,” Shuggs said. “Investigating white supremacy in corrections *and* the police force sounds like a nightmare that we’ll never wake from.”

“This is bull. There’s no way we’re also selling our souls to the FBI,” Pang said.

“I shall ignore that last statement.” Dr. Harper swirled the cubes in her glass, making a tinkling sound.

Shuggs laid a hand on Pang’s shoulder. “Doc, we’ve already lost a lot. We shouldn’t have to lose our pride too.”

“It’s unbelievable that we could fit in with the likes of skinheads and angry idiots,” Brock said. “I don’t see how we fit into *their* world to do *that* sort of work.”

“I’d like the weekend to think about this.” Pang grabbed his briefcase, stuffing the offer inside. “I feel as if my hands are tied,” he said. “But I’d like to pretend I have the freedom to say yes or no.”

“I think he’s right, Doc,” Shuggs said. “We’d like to think about the offer and get back to you on Monday.”

“You have until,” she examined her watch, “tomorrow morning at 09:00.”

Shuggs muttered a string of curses while he walked to the door toward Pang, then looked over his shoulder and let out a breath. “Should we wait for you, O’Reilly?”

“Nah. I’ll catch up with you guys tonight for sure,” Brock said with a reassuring smile and watched his friends leave the room.

When the door closed, Dr. Harper stood with her arms crossed. Her attention focused on the display of the dead still projected against the wall. “I realize *you* come as a package deal.”

“Not necessarily.”

She arched an eyebrow. “The leak here was an intelligence failure, and we all take responsibility for it.” Dr. Harper turned to Brock. “It will take time to establish what is taking place.”

“I suspect similar problems happen at the bureau.”

“Of course, but you did not hear that from me.”

“I understand.”

“You and I both know the CIA and the FBI just coexist. We do not

work together. Neither do we monitor nor spy on each other. Ever. You must remember that once you work for them, you are loyal to only them. But they need someone like you to go into deep cover to root *these* people out. Once all of this happens, there will be a place for you here. I promise.”

“The fact of the matter is, you can’t make that same promise,” Brock frowned, “to the entire team, can you?”

Dr. Harper shook her head. “I cannot. But that stays off the record.”

Brock nodded, knowing there was no such thing. “Sure.”

“*Everything* in the intelligence field you do well; I taught you,” she said. “Each of you has talent—a requirement to be hired with the agency. But that’s not what sets you apart from all the others.” She picked up the offer Brock had pushed away, nudged it back toward him, and pointed to the signature line. “What sets you apart, Brock, is that like me, in order to excel, you must have a higher cause.” Dr. Harper reached into her breast pocket, pulled out her prized ball-point pen, and put it in the middle of the table. “You will fit into *their* world perfectly.”

CHAPTER 3

Brock drove through the damp night to Rusti's. His phone vibrated again. Another text. His friends wondering where he was. He'd taken longer to get out of the office than planned. There had been the private meeting with Dr. Harper, paperwork, assessing every detail of the last mission.

What could I have done to avoid this disaster? Brock shook his head. If they fought the decision to leave the CIA, his boss made it clear that she would leverage an investigation against them. They could fight all they wanted, but a probe would almost guarantee the death of their careers. *Dr. Harper is covering herself and the image of the agency.* The offer for them to transfer to the FBI may've been an arrangement with some hierarchy in the intelligence world as a favor owed. Or perhaps, presenting the opportunity to transfer was a rare attempt at kindness on her part. Regardless, if they wanted to continue working within their field, they'd have to leave the agency. At least for now.

While he maneuvered through traffic, thunder boomed around him. A bolt of lightning struck nearby. The distinct clap of gunfire. Brock gripped the steering wheel, his senses muffled by the fog of his thoughts and a distant memory.

That same distinct sound came again. Closer. A lot closer. Brock tore open his glove box, grabbed his Glock, and kept it in his right hand as he drove cautiously. He peered through his window, searching the night. A swirl of red, white, and blue lights lit the interior of Brock's car while a line of police vehicles raced past him.

Brock found himself transported back five years to when the Iraqi sky in a tiny village had burst into scarlet plumes of fire. An ISIS leader they'd been trailing for weeks had been smoked out of a tiny,

nondescript complex. The agency had been unsuccessful in using the UAVs (weapon-carrying unmanned aerial vehicles) to carry out the targeted killing. They brought Brock's team in to complete the job. Stationed in a nearby building, Brock had lain on his stomach with his night vision goggles on and his laser trained on the target. Foolishly, he temporarily turned the voice in his ear low so he could concentrate on his shot. Intent on his singular mission, he missed the insurgent's all-but-silent approach.

The man jumped on him. Glittering knife in hand, he went for Brock's throat and sliced into his collar bone. Brock blocked the assassin's next stab but slipped and staggered to the ground. Lost the grip on his gun. He fought to stay conscious and was reaching for his weapon when a kick to his skull stunned him. Brock rolled away. Lights flashed. He couldn't tell the difference between the explosions in his head and the ones on the ground.

The assassin aimed Brock's gun toward him. Brock closed his eyes. Waited. When death didn't come, he popped open his eyes. Pang had crept up behind Brock's attacker and snapped his neck. Brock watched the man's lifeless body slump at his feet like a crumpled brown bag.

Pang ripped the assassin's turban from his head, used it to swathe Brock's wound, and created a sling to stabilize his shattered clavicle. He propped Brock up long enough for him to regain complete consciousness. Then Pang took lethal action.

Pang's swift actions ensured the completion of a successful mission without a single casualty to the team.

Dr. Harper and her superiors scrutinized the mission. The recovery of six children's mangled bodies from the targeted site resulted in complaints to the UN and the US embassy. HUMINT (Human Intelligence) had warned the team of the areas in the building holding minors. Brock never heard the warning because he had turned his sound down. Pang didn't get a warning about the children either. His earpiece had become dislodged in the scuffle with Brock's attacker.

During the investigation, Shuggs lied. He reported he'd turned down the sound in all of their earpieces. He had been in charge of their equipment, and no one questioned his statement. Shuggs took responsibility for the communication breach, resulting in a scathing admonishment in his file.

Brock swallowed, remembering his friend's selfless actions. Shuggs

had spared Pang the embarrassment of a reprimand and Brock's removal from being team lead.

Brock realized he was about to run a red light. He hit the brakes and came to a screeching halt in front of a large group. They carried signs, wore masks, jumped up and down, and jeered as if they were in a combat zone.

One of them stopped in front of Brock's car and yelled something that he didn't catch. There was a flash of headlights behind him. Brock jerked his head around. *What the heck's going on?* Over his shoulder, police lights glared through his rear window. He pulled over, tucked his gun under his thigh, and waited. Tires screeched. The officers sped past his car, through the red light, and narrowly missed the pedestrians.

Brock pulled away from the curb and began his drive again. He drove carefully, making sure to avoid the groups of mostly African American people accumulating in the city. Brock was almost at Rusti's when he peered down a side street. Shadowy figures set fire to two demolished police vehicles on a road leading to the local precinct.

He parked in front of the bar and started laughing. Wild, good, familiar—the fusion of emotions surged within him. Brock felt as if he were back in the Middle East on a mission, feasting on adrenaline and about to duck grenades and engage the Taliban. *It's all about the fight, the risk.* And this felt the same. He was stateside about to enter an American bar to hang out with friends on a Friday night. Yet nothing had really changed. He was still at war, still in a fight, just in a different location.

He walked to the bar and opened the worn door. Brock's eyes adjusted to the warm, yellow haze, and he stepped inside a place that was the embodiment of good times and amity. Standing in the weathered, wood-paneled entrance, Brock felt he'd entered the living room of a good friend.

From the peals of laughter coming from a small private dining room in the back of the cramped, rustic bar, the "meeting" had started without him. He headed toward the smell of hot wings and the deep rumble of Shuggs's unmistakable voice.

"It's about time." Shuggs grinned. He rose and slapped Brock on the back. "Glad you made it, buddy. The guys kept asking about you. Thought I was going to have to suit up and go find you myself."

Brock playfully punched Shuggs in the gut. “I’m glad to finally be here, big guy. Hope you’re okay meeting in a bar.”

“C’mon, you know I stopped smoking and worrying about Cindy, my ex-wife.”

Brock looked at the empty bottles by Shuggs’s beefy forearm. “I was referring to your—”

Shuggs held up a hand. “I’ve got a handle on the drinking. Last year was a major setback. But I’m good now.”

“Yeah, I want to be sure you’re alright. If you need a ride, I’ll drive.”

“I’m fine, bro,” Shuggs said. “Truth is, I was planning to meet Khan here tonight.”

“Really?” Brock ran a hand across his jaw. “That’s news to me.”

“Lots you don’t know.”

“It appears that way.” Brock nodded, then walked around to greet the rest of the men in the group. The rest of the team was there along with a few more analysts from other departments. After making his rounds, he returned to his two friends.

Pang handed a cold brew to Brock and raised his head an inch in a small salutation. “I got you, man,” he said and made room for him at the far end of the crowded table.

Brock sat down on the solid wood chair and looked around. “Nice show tonight.”

“Good call in suggesting we all get together,” he said, his face slightly flushed. Shuggs waved a greasy chicken wing. “The guys really needed this after that doozy of a day we all had.”

“Seems like we all never really got a chance to process any of what happened back there in Mali.” Brock sighed and reached for a wing. “Then we come home expecting a thank-you, only to get a Dear John letter.”

“It’s all mind-blowing,” Pang said.

“Anyway, how’d it go after we left?” Shuggs asked with his mouth still full. “You sign at the bottom line yet?”

“Did she offer the golden boy a special deal?” Pang took a long pull from his bottle.

“Something about what happened today just doesn’t sit well with me.” Brock stared at his friends. “I stayed behind to talk to Liz because, as the lead on this last mission, I felt responsible.”

“No need to feel that way,” Shuggs said. “We’re all in it together.”

“It’s true, man. We’re a team.” Pang used his bottle to point to

Brock. "So did you make your decision already?"

Brock shook his head. "Of course not. I wanted to speak with you guys first." He took a swig of his beer.

"I'm glad you waited to speak with us." Shuggs winked. "Did Liz tell you the analysts were going to be reassigned?"

"This isn't classified information," Brock said. "I stuck around the agency to do some paperwork. I was there after the analysts had their meeting. I heard they've been placed within the agency with comparable positions."

"Unlike us," Pang said. "They'll still be CIA."

"Good for them." Brock rested his elbows on the table. "I'm guessing they have no idea we're being strong-armed into transferring to the outside."

"What'd you think we should say to the guys when they ask us what we're going to do?" Shuggs asked.

"We make a decision," Brock said. "Then we present a united front to these guys. We keep it cut and dried like we usually do. Keep it professional."

"I just can't believe we've been put in this position." Pang ordered another drink.

"It's unfortunate, but let's be honest," Brock said with a shrug. "We don't have options at this point."

"Especially with the threat of an investigation if we decide to stay," Shuggs said.

"These bastards from the top are just covering their own behinds." Brock frowned. "It's total bull, and we all know it. But then again, what choice do we have?"

When neither man responded, Brock leaned forward. "Wait," he said. "Maybe this isn't so bad—depending on how you look at it. Pang, you're constantly on international missions with us away from your boys. When you're stateside, you're usually hemmed up in family court."

"Things are about to change." Pang cleared his throat. "But you're right."

"Shuggs, you've got the twins in private school, and you're in the middle of yet another divorce. And me ..." Brock took a breath, "my father, the only real family I've got, had a heart attack recently. He's going to need me now, more than ever before, with Mom in an advanced state of dementia."

The men drank in silence until Shuggs spoke up. “Level with me.” He gestured toward Brock and Pang. “Why would they break us up and then pawn us off to the FBI?”

“I keep asking myself the same thing. When I’m away fighting, I know who the enemy is,” Pang said. “It’s easy to see hostiles when hot sand is blowing in my face. But the enemy here is just blowing hot air, and now ... now they ain’t as easy to figure out.”

“Maybe. Maybe no,” Brock said.

Shuggs toyed with his drink. “C’mon, we all know that catching the perpetrators of white supremacy right now will be like trying to catch spiders in their own webs.”

“We won’t know anything for sure until we’re working our actual assignments.” Brock sat back and rubbed the scar above his left eyebrow. “We’ll get a feel for what we’re up against once we’re done with the nine weeks of training and start as FBI special agents.”

“But we’ll be separated and working in underfunded counterterrorism units,” Pang said.

“It doesn’t change anything.” Brock took a deep breath, realizing for the first time since beginning his decade-long career in intelligence that he’d be without them. “Maybe this is where our journey as friends truly begins.” He cleared his throat. “After all, we’re still brothers, right?”

Pang moved the bottle away from his mouth. “We’re still brothers.”

Shuggs’s brow furrowed. “Always,” he said. “Always.”

“Good.” Brock exhaled slowly. “Because there’s this one thing that still bothers me about those pictures of the dead kids in Mali,” Brock said. “I keep going over the entire incident, and it doesn’t add up. If we were the ones who took the pictures, and they never once left our possession ...” He rubbed his forehead. “How’d they get leaked?”