

WHOLE PIECES

RONIE KENDIG



To my Audience of One, through whom all time is held

*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose
your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?*

MATTHEW 16:26, NLT

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PROLOGUE

A blast of hot wind sailed over the land, swirling dust and sending plumes of heat dancing across the desert terrain lit only by moonlight. Even in the middle of the night, the heat afforded no mercy. Not for plants. Not for animals. Not for the members of the 5th Special Forces Group operational detachment huddled in anonymity behind a half-blown structure dribbling cement and plaster.

Sergeant First Class Haytham “Hawk” Kelley stared through his M4’s holosight. He scanned the flat terrain once again. Around him, he knew his Green Beret brothers did the same.

“It’s been two hours,” Sergeant Brody Jensen said from his position covering the south.

“Just enough time to scramble fighters,” Master Sergeant Greg Stratham muttered.

Hawk stretched his neck, willing the tension knot to loosen. It’d been nothing but pumping adrenaline since they released that kid. Being half Afghan, Hawk had put his Pashto language skills to use and told the boy not to say anything to anyone.

“Movement,” someone barked.

Hawk’s muscles knotted. He swept the sight back and forth. “Nothing.”

"Clear," Stratham said.

Thwat! Thwat!

Cement exploded from the wall. Peppered Hawk's face.

A curse sailed from behind. "He told them!"

Hawk stared down his sight. A dark form loomed seventy yards off—human. A man—in fact, two. "Targets sighted."

"Call it. Get us some support," Stratham ordered their coms guy. "On it."

Hawk eyed the two fallen forms, waiting, anticipating more combatants. In their little nest, dirt and sand crunched as the team shifted, taking up better positions. Hawk stayed eyes out. Heart thrumming, he tried to shake the dark feeling crowding his hope that they'd make it home alive. Two days. They were going home in two days. *God, please . . .*

Stratham dropped beside Hawk. "Waddya got?"

"Two tangos down." And more coming. He could feel it. Something . . . electric. Terrifying. His gaze skipped from the shadows to the moonless sky before searching the debris around him. Then . . . a vibration—steady . . . growing.

His pulse rapid-fired. "Get ready!"

Trucks leapt over the horizon.

Hawk fired. So did Stratham. Again. And again. Though the targets dropped, more replaced them.

We're done. Nobody's going home.

He shook off the thought, pulled a pin, and tossed a grenade. "Frag out!" He dropped and fired again. Seconds ticked off, pounding like a .50-caliber gun, until a bright explosion rent the night.

Stratham grunted. Something clanked.

Hawk snapped a look at the team lead. Slumped over. Head down. Hawk grabbed Stratham's vest at the shoulder. "Hey! You—" Stratham lolled to the side.

“Man down, man down!” He glanced back, but everyone was fully engaged.

Clank . . . clank . . . clank.

Hawk’s gaze struck the source of a noise—a grenade. Heart in his throat, he launched himself backward. “Down, down!”

Bright white light shoved him into unconsciousness.

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THIRTY-TWO YEARS LATER WALTER REED MEDICAL CENTER

Why wouldn't God just let him die?

Hawk stared down the length of his body, hidden beneath a drab gray blanket and white sheet. Crisp and precisely made, the bed reflected the military hospital he'd lain in for the last several months. Two doctors and a nurse hovered over the bed, discussing him as if he weren't even there.

In the brief time between regaining consciousness and opening his eyes, he'd heard the doctors telling his parents it was only a matter of time.

Matter of time.

Time just needed to release his grip on Hawk. Let him slip out of this godforsaken world into the next. Anything to stop reliving that blast, the one that killed every man on ODA 375 . . . except him. He'd make a fist—if he had a hand. But he'd lost that, too, in the blast.

What good was it to stay alive? He had nobody. No meaning in life.

"Hawk?" Though creaky and shaky with age, his mother's voice still held strength. "Don't do this. You have many years ahead of you."

Maybe. But to do what? Remember? Remember that he'd failed his men, failed the very parents who now stood beside his bed. "Just . . . let me . . . go." Sandpaper coated his throat. Breathing hurt. Living more so.

"We have a treat for you, Son." His father's voice boomed from the left, pulling Hawk's eyes to the man whose hair was now gray and his face pale. But sturdiness lurked in those aged blue eyes. He shifted and looked toward the door.

So did Hawk.

An angel walked in.

Hawk's pulse increase beeped through the room, compliments of the heart-rate monitor. Ashley Wilson. He clamped his teeth and dragged his gaze from hers. He would not focus on the fact that she'd only grown more beautiful in the last thirty-something years. That she still held his heart in a vise.

Why? Why had they brought her? Anger seeped through his pores like a disease.

His parents drifted out of sight as Ashley grew larger than life.

"Hi." Her soft voice coiled around his mind and constricted. "Please don't be mad. I had to . . . wanted to come."

He didn't want to see her. Told her that more than twenty years ago. Told her to make a life for herself because waiting for him or wanting him was a mistake.

He locked onto the framed print on the wall directly across from the foot of his bed. Some mass-copied print with George Washington. Now there was a hero. Not here, in this bed. Washington didn't fail. He won. He fought—hard.

Warmth wrapped around his left hand. His only hand. Ashley. How long had it been since he'd felt Ashley's touch?

"Hawk?" The mattress depressed as she eased onto it, breaking into his line of sight. "Come back to us. Please. It's not your fault."

A cauldron of heat splashed his gut as he snapped his gaze to hers. "Go away."

"I love you, Hawk. Always have."

Breathing under water would've been easier. "Go."

"Please—"

"Go!" His head spun from the exertion. He blinked, but the haze of gray sucked him into its emptiness.



The blast shoved him forward. Dirt scraped his cheek. A wave of heat scalded his back. Pain twisted his stomach and made him retch. Hawk pushed off the burnt ground and coughed. He flopped onto his back, choking on the plume of smoke rising from the—

"Stratham!" Hawk lunged forward. Pain spiked through his shoulder and arm. Knocked him dizzy.

He dropped back, blinded by the fiery shards slicing his arm. As his gaze struck the blood pooling on the ground, he saw his arm—chewed off at the wrist.

His cheek stung. Something rested against his shoulder. Pressure at first, then a thump. What, were they going to take his whole arm? He grunted.

Another thump jarred him from the thick fog of sleep. Hawk yawned, shaking off the dregs of the nightmare. Why were they waking him? Just let him . . . go.

"Come on, Haytham. I don't have all day."

Hawk blinked against the brightness, the very effort draining.

A man in a slick suit sat on the bed. "Ah, there. About time." He

smiled, a benign one that grated on Hawk's already-bad mood. "Yes, well, you wouldn't get that pun, now would you?"

"Who—?"

"Constant." The man arched an eyebrow. "Thomas Constant." He patted Hawk's shoulder again.

Hawk groaned. "Stop."

"Just making sure you're awake, Mr. Kelley." He tapped Hawk's temple. "Need all the brain cells operating for this one because I'm afraid I'm going to blow a few."

"Do you mind?" Hawk managed. "Go away."

"If I go away, you'll die. It's as simple as that. And while I know that's exactly what you want, I have an offer for you."

"Not . . . interested."

"Thought you might say that." Mr. Constant produced a silver pocket watch and clicked the stem. "But I think you might want to listen to me." He glanced over his shoulder toward the open door that led to the hall. A nurse strode past.

A cold chill burst into the room, leaving the room in a cold fog of . . . what? What was he feeling? It had a certain taste, a flavor so familiar.

Death.

Hawk's skin crawled. Darkness descended, snapping Hawk's gaze to the fluorescent lights. Odd. Still burning. Then how . . . ? What . . . ?

Out of the darkening, an oppressive and daunting force pushed toward him. Though he saw nothing, his mind screamed that hands with long talons were reaching for his chest. *This isn't happening. It's not real.* He struggled to breathe. The hand drew closer . . . colder . . . sharper.

Dread, pure and virulent, raced through him.

He followed the hand to a wisp of a form. It grew darker. Solid, yet not.

Click!

A chuckle. "I'm sure Mr. D. will not appreciate this one."

Hawk darted a look to Constant. Back to the . . . the . . . thing. "What is that? What are you? What are you doing?" The words tumbled out on top of one another.

"That is Mr. D. As in Death. Yes, really." Another laugh. "And he is here for you, Haytham. Remember, I told you—"

"This is insane!"

"Mm, perhaps. But not particularly. Although I have visited the insane as well. But back to you—I'm giving you a choice, Haytham."

"What . . . what are you?"

"What am I? You should use a better pronoun. It's *who*. Who am I? I'm Time, of course. And I am doing a little experiment." He stood and propped his hands on his cane. "I thought it'd be intriguing to offer you a choice. Go back to any point in your life and relive seven hours, or stay here and I'll give you an . . . extension." He smiled. "But only seven hours. It's all I could convince Death"—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—"to let me have for my experiment."

"Why?"

"Why not?" Constant sat on the bed again. "So, what say you?"

"What do I say?" Hawk marveled that his speech was normal, that he wasn't gasping between words. "I say this is . . ." What was the word? "It's . . ."

Nodding, Constant flashed that smile again. "Yes, yes—insane. You've already said that." He arched an eyebrow. "Really, Haytham, you're disappointing me."

"Get in line."

"I thought you were quicker, smarter."

"Your mistake."

Constant sighed. "Are you seriously going to sit there and tell me there isn't something, some mistake that you'd like to go back and

fix, undo? No devastating incident that—” his eyes drifted to Hawk’s stub— “took a piece of your soul?”

Warmth flooded Hawk. “It’s not possible.” He couldn’t go back. His father’s admonishment sailed through his mind: *Just move on, Son. You can’t change the past.*