

PRAISE FOR THE DISCARDED HEROES SERIES

Nightshade kept me up all night! A tight plot, heartthrob heroes, and description so rich I could hear the jungle noise, feel the heat slide down my back. I'll be clearing out a shelf to make room for Ronie's books!

—Susan May Warren, RITA award-winning
author of *Nothing but Trouble*

Valor, action, romance, heart—*Nightshade* is the perfect blend of everything I like best in a story. I can't recommend it enough!

—John B. Olson, author of *Powers*

Reading a Ronie Kendig novel is like watching a movie—a nail-biting, intense action movie. The words seem to jump off the page and leave you breathless as Colton (*Digitalis*) takes you from one heart-pounding scene to another. Novel Journey and I give it our highest recommendation.

—Ane Mulligan, editor of Novel Rocket

Balancing a story of high action and deep emotions isn't easy, but with *Digitalis*, author Ronie Kendig pulls it off with the casual grace of a truly talented storyteller. I don't know what kept me on the edge of my seat more, the fast-paced military intrigue or the powerful tugs on my heart. Doesn't matter: *This is one pulse-pounding adventure you don't want to miss.*

—Robert Liparulo,
author of *Comes a Horseman, Germ,*
and the Dreamhouse Kings series

Digitalis is a story of skill and purpose woven with love and spine-tingling danger. . .that will live long past the last page. None of us fully realizes the dedication of those who keep our world safe.

—DiAnn Mills, Christy Award-winning
author of *Sworn to Protect*

An action-packed thrill ride from start to finish. If you liked CBS's long-running hit series *The Unit*, you're going to love Ronie Kendig's *Digitalis*. Enjoy the ride and the read. I only have one question—where do I sign up for *Nightshade*?

—Bob Hamer, veteran FBI undercover agent and the author of *Enemies among Us*

Wolfsbane is a fast-paced, military suspense with just the right amount of romance to keep readers flipping pages. Ronie Kendig's smooth writing style, realistic scenes, and vivid characters blend beautifully for a must-read experience. A definite keeper!

—Robin Caroll,
author of *Deliver Us from Evil* and *In the Shadow of Evil*

Ronie Kendig serves up a mix of machine gun-fast action, touching romance, and more twists than a coil of detonator wire. Get a good grip on the edge of your seat before you start reading!

—Rick Acker,
author of *When the Devil Whistles* and *Dead Man's Rule*

Wolfsbane is rapid-fire fast-paced and will leave you breathless. An incredible story with intense characters who face timeless struggles. Another favorite for our shelf from Kendig!

—Kimberly and Kayla R. Woodhouse,
authors of *No Safe Haven* and *Race Against Time*

This type of thriller is hard to write, but if you can pull it off, you've got a potential blockbuster on your hands! Ronie Kendig had done just that. *Firethorn* has many moving parts that synchronize together with the beautiful precision of an expensive Rolex watch!

—Don Brown,
author of the Navy Justice and Pacific Rim series

Firethorn, the stunning conclusion to Ronie Kendig's adrenaline infused Discarded Heroes series packs all the expected emotional punch and accelerated action of a Kendig thriller, and then some! Her ability to tap into her characters' psyches and penchant for palpable heart-pumping action scenes are unparalleled in today's romantic suspense genre. I only wish there were more to come in this unmissable series.

—Rel Mollet, RelzReviewz

RONIE KENDIG

FIRETHORN

DISCARDED HEROES #4



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

OTHER BOOKS BY
RONIE KENDIG

Nightshade (Discarded Heroes #1)
Digitalis (Discarded Heroes #2)
Wolfsbane (Discarded Heroes #3)

© 2011 by Ronie Kendig

ISBN 978-1-60260-785-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted for commercial purposes, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without written permission of the publisher.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

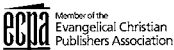
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

For more information about Ronie Kendig, please access the author's website at the following Internet address: www.roniekendig.com

Cover design: Müllerhaus Publishing Arts, Inc., www.Mullerhaus.net

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, OH 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.



Printed in the United States of America.

DEDICATION

*To all American military heroes at home and abroad,
those who have gone before and those serving today—*

THANK YOU!

Because of you, we are free!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to:

My Boots On Ground readers: You guys are amazing! Thank you for falling in love with this series as much as I did, for becoming so invested that you threatened me with bodily harm for not writing faster. Your belief in me and this series is awesome! Thank you!

The Barbour Fiction Team, especially Becky Germany, Mary Burns, Shalyn Sattler, Elizabeth Shrider, Laura Young, and Linda Hang—a hundred thousand thank-yous!

Andrew Kendall: For the amazing Nightshade insignia! You rock!

Agent-Man Steve Laube: If readers hate me after reading this book, it's your fault. Just sayin'. (Besides, you're the one who said, "It's always the agent's fault.")

Julee Schwarzburg: You are so tireless and encouraging, so challenging and supportive. Thank you not only for your editorial prowess but for being a sounding board when I questioned myself. You are a dream. May I keep you, please?

Candace Calvert and Richard L. Mabry, MD: Many thanks for your help with medical elements.

Cara C. Putman: Thanks for your legal help and for that spontaneous call so you could pray for me. You bless me!

To Michelle Stimpson, Michele Stephens, Terri Haynes, and Elizabeth Jackson: Thank you for your help to understand the African-American community on a deeper level, to open my mind to some things that just honestly never came to mind. I hope I have made Griffin and his family authentic. (All mistakes are mine!)

Knees On Ground prayer team: Your prayers have sustained, encouraged, and uplifted me. I pray God will bless you a hundredfold in return!

My arsenal of friends and crit partners: Lynn Dean, Lynne Gentry, Kellie Gilbert, Shannon McNear, Dineen Miller, Robin Miller, Sara Mills, Rel Mollet, John Olson, Jim Rubart, Camy Tang, Lori Twichell, Kimberley Woodhouse, and Rebecca Yauger.

NIGHTSHADE TEAM

Max “Frogman” Jacobs—former U.S. Navy SEAL, team leader

Canyon “Midas” Metcalfe—former Army Special Forces Group

Colton “Cowboy” Neeley—former U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command, sniper

Griffin “Legend” Riddell—former U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command

Marshall “the Kid” Vaughn—former U.S. Army Ranger

John “Squirt” Dighton—former U.S. Navy SEAL

Azzan “Aladdin” Yasir—former Mossad

General Olin Lambert, aka “The Old Man”—Chief of the Army, member of Joint Chiefs of Staff

GLOSSARY OF TERMS/ACRONYMS

- ACUs—Army combat uniforms.
- Beretta M93—Italian-made automatic handgun.
- BUD/S—Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training.
- CamelBak—A portable hydration pack.
- Fast-roping—The art of quickly descending from a hovering helicopter to the ground using a heavy rope.
- Flash-bang—A nonlethal stun grenade that emits the extreme light and sound of an explosion.
- Glock—A semiautomatic handgun.
- HALO jump—High-opening low-altitude free-fall parachute insertion.
- HK 9mm—Heckler & Koch semiautomatic handgun.
- HK USP Compact—Heckler & Koch semiautomatic handgun.
- IED—Improvised explosive device.
- Klicks—Military jargon for *kilometers*.
- M4—An assault rifle that is smaller and lighter than the M16.
- M16—An assault rifle.
- MARSOC—Marine Special Operations Command.
- MI6—British Secret Intelligence Service.
- MIA—Missing in action.
- Mossad—Israeli Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations.
- NVGs—Night vision goggles.
- PTSD—Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- RPG—Rocket-propelled grenade.
- SATINT—Satellite intelligence.
- Sitreps—Military jargon for *situation reports*.
- Tango—Military slang for *target* or *enemy*.
- VFA—Fictitious Venezuelan rebel army: *El Valor de Fuerzas Armadas de Bolivarian*.

RECON CREED

Realizing it is my choice and my choice alone to be a Reconnaissance Marine, I accept all challenges involved with this profession. Forever shall I strive to maintain the tremendous reputation of those who went before me.

Exceeding beyond the limitations set down by others shall be my goal. Sacrificing personal comforts and dedicating myself to the completion of the reconnaissance mission shall be my life. Physical fitness, mental attitude, and high ethics—The title of Recon Marine is my honor.

Conquering all obstacles, both large and small, I shall never quit. To quit, to surrender, to give up is to fail. To be a Recon Marine is to surpass failure; to overcome, to adapt and to do whatever it takes to complete the mission.

On the battlefield, as in all areas of life, I shall stand tall above the competition. Through professional pride, integrity, and teamwork, I shall be the example for all Marines to emulate.

Never shall I forget the principles I accepted to become a Recon Marine. Honor, Perseverance, Spirit, and Heart.

A Recon Marine can speak without saying a word and achieve what others can only imagine.

Swift, Silent, Deadly



THE INVITATION

What did he say?”

Gray haze snaked around the small jazz club. Dim light bathed the occupants in hues of red and blue, save the brightly lit stage where the blues band slunk through a song. Griffin Riddell lifted his bourbon glass and swirled the amber liquid. Sultry music drifted through the crowd and smoothed over his shoulders and mind.

“Look, I did not want to come to this smoke-filled hole, but I came so we could talk.”

He took a sip. Lowered the glass. “I didn’t ask you to come.”

Her brown eyes flamed. “Ten days, Griffin. You came home ten days ago and have been pacing like a cougar, brooding like a grizzly. But you won’t talk.”

Another sip. He dumped the rest into his mouth and let it burn all the way down. Talk. She always wanted to talk. Why couldn’t she just let a man be?

“What happened at the base? Why. . .what has got you so”—she pointed to him—“so like this?”

He leaned forward. “You said I should get out. Maybe it’s time.” That should be enough to get her off his back and out of his business. He poured more bourbon.

She snatched the bottle out of his hand and slammed it down on the table behind them. “Would you lay off that stuff! Your grandmother will whoop you down to the Mississippi if she whiffs liquor on you.”

Irritation carved a long, hard line through his civility. “Trecece, get out of my business.”

“*Your* business?” Her wide nostrils flared. “I’m your wife. I would

RONIE KENDIG

think it was *my* business too, our business.” She planted her hands on her hips as she sat across from him. A lazy tendril of cigar smoke from a nearby table snaked toward her head.

Secretly, for one long minute, Griffin wished it was a noose. Right around her long, giraffe neck.

“We need to work through these things together,” she said, her voice squeaking on his last nerve.

“Is that what you were thinking when you climbed into Darian Parshall’s bed?”

She blinked those fake lashes and widened her eyes.

At her expression, he let loose a laugh. “Yeah. I know.” Nothing like hearing from your brother-in-law that your wife found comfort in another man’s arms while you’re out doing your duty for God and country. The woman violated everything he stood for—*Semper Fi*. Griffin snatched the bottle, refilled his glass, and took a sip.

Her pride—and ample bosom—seemed to shrink before him.

That’s right, woman. I know you been playing me. Just like everyone else. Including that pig-faced colonel who had done nothing but sit on Griffin’s case since his unit returned from Afghanistan last month. That was fine. Griffin could handle pressure. Could handle a man not liking that another held more respect and admiration. And that—that was what ate the very fiber of Colonel Nichols’s puffed-up, medal-heavy chest. When the colonel walked through the mess hall, the guys gave him the obligatory salute. But when they wanted advice, when they needed help, they came to Griffin.

“Fine.” Treece grabbed her purse from the back of the chair. “You sit up in here in this stanky bar—”

“Club.” He sliced a hand through the thick atmosphere. “It’s a club.”

“Same thang.”

“No.” The glass clunked as he slammed it down. “Club—a jazz club. The focus is music to relax the soul and mind.” He pointed to the autographed twenty-by-forty photo of soul legend Ray Charles hanging behind her. “You think he’d sit in a stanky bar?”

She rolled her eyes and neck. “Whatever, Griffin.” She pushed to her feet.

“Ma’am, this Marine giving you a problem?”

That voice! Fingers tightening around the glass, Griffin tensed. *Don’t react. Own this.* Right about now would be a good time to get some religion in him the way Madyar had warned him to. But he wasn’t even sure God could tame the fury roiling in his gut right now.

“Uh. . .” Treece’s brown eyes darted to Griffin. “No. . .my husband just isn’t interested in my company.”

“It seems he’s not interested in his career either.”

Wood groaned against wood as Griffin shoved to his feet. He towered over Colonel Nichols. “Sir.” Why? Why would the man come up in here and start something after what happened a week ago? Wasn’t it enough that he held a fist of control on Griffin’s career? That he wrote him a bad eval and threatened to tank the last twelve-plus years of blood, sweat, and tears?

The colonel’s denture-white teeth gleamed beneath a taunting grin. “Inebriated? And still in uniform?”

“No, sir.” Had he really come straight to the club without changing? Right. . .the club manager had called in sick and needed the night off, so he asked Griffin to cover him. Being the good friend he was, he was there. Duds in the back room, but he’d forgotten them when Treece showed up, demanding his time.

And this is exactly what the colonel had been waiting for—a screwup. “Sir. I am sober. Enjoying a night with my wife.”

Nichols’s muddy eyes shifted to Treece. “Yes, a very beautiful wife. Must be hard to leave her alone here while you’re deployed.” The officer’s stab hit right where the man intended.

Griffin fisted his hands.

Nichols noticed. Grinned more. “But I bet a man like you needs time away from the family.”

Griffin’s left eye twitched. *On the battlefield, as in all areas of life, I shall stand tall above the competition.* He reminded himself of the Recon Creed, of what he vowed to uphold. And that he’d have to answer to Madyar if anything happened here. Pops. . .his ticker wasn’t so good.

There was more to think about than some knee-jerk reaction to a colonel who wanted to save face. He loosened his hands but remained straight and tall. He had to own this.

“Your record is flawless, Gunnery Sergeant Riddell.”

He’d heard this speech when Nichols called him into his office.

“But your failure to report certain events leaves me questioning your integrity.”

This was new. Tension flooded his muscles. “Sir. My field reports are complete and accurate.”

“I’m talking about what you failed to report when you joined.”

Heat swarmed Griffin’s gut. *Oh Lord, no. . .* No way he could have found out.

RONIE KENDIG

Nichols laughed. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”
“Griffin?” Treece’s brown eyes flicked to his.

He gripped her arm. “Go home.” He nudged her toward the door, his eyes still glued to his commanding officer. “Colonel Nichols, you come here knowing I’m enjoying this night with my wife, minding”—he clapped a hand over his chest—“my own business. I don’t know what you’re talking about or why you would do this, but—”

“Lying to an officer now?” The man looked down and shook his head. “Oh Gunny, I am disappointed.”

Though he tried, Griffin groped for a tendril of sanity to stop him from fulfilling the fantasy of ripping the man’s heart out. Heat infused his spine. Crawled up his neck. Throwing a punch, assaulting an officer—it’d end everything.

“I’ve had my eye on you. I knew you were too good to be true.”

“You just had to go and get up in my business.” The words were out before Griffin could stop and yanked the rest out in quick succession. “Why can’t you just respect me, respect that I made a life and did my best, that I fought for my country?”

Nichols faced him, smile and amusement gone. “You really don’t want to do this, Riddell. I filed a complaint.”

Griffin’s lips flattened. His chest drew up. “I did my job,” he hissed. “I did it better than anyone on base, including you!”

Mouth curled, the colonel leaned in. “You lied. And now you’re drunk and threatening an officer.”

“Threatening?” Breathing became a chore. Aches wove through his jaw and head at his fiercely gritted teeth. “I’m Marine Special Operations. I do not threaten. I reconnoiter. I stalk.” Adrenaline fed off the faltering expression on the colonel’s face. Griffin dropped his tone a notch, and it came out in a growl. “I kill those in opposition to the success of my mission.” It wasn’t a threat. It was the way MARSOC conducted operations. But it felt good to see the man crawl.

Nichols took a step back. He gave a shaky, scared laugh. “You’re just like your father.”

Blood whooshed through Griffin’s ears.

“I read the police reports. He strangled your mother with his bare hands, then bludgeoned her to death.”

Demons unleashed. As if in slow motion, as if disembodied, Griffin’s fist slammed into the colonel’s face.

Crack!

Griffin blinked. Breathed. Blinkered again.

Nichols, bent and cupping a hand under his spurting nose, sneered through the blood. “You’re through, Riddell. I knew you were hiding something. Nobody—*nobody*—is that clean. I’m going to take you down. Make sure you—”

Trece reappeared. She got in the man’s face, shaking her finger and head at him. “What did you think would happen, coming up in here, inciting a big black man with more muscle than you got hair? You did this on purpose!” Trece shrieked. “You came up in here taunting him and pushing—”

Nichols shoved her away.

Trece stumbled backward. She tried to catch herself. Her manicured nails slid along the glass-framed print. It slid off the wall. Landed with a resounding crash. She arched her back—lost her balance. Fell on the print. Glass shredded her arms and side. A screech knifed the dead-quiet club.

Griffin started for her, but out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Nichols darting out the door. He dove into the colonel. Tackled him across the threshold. The man squirmed and writhed. Nichols threw a punch.

Griffin caught the hand. Pushed it back, twisted, and pulled until he heard a crack. Nichols screamed. The man lifted a weapon from the side.

Training took over. With the heel of his hand, Griffin drove it hard and straight into the colonel’s face. The man collapsed in a heap.

Fire lit through Griffin’s back a split second after a familiar crack rent the air.

Everything went blank.



Pain unlike anything he had ever experienced punctured his mind and yanked him from the greedy claws of unconsciousness. Griffin groaned and blinked against a flickering light overhead. He squinted and scowled. *Where am I?*

He shifted and looked around, and in a rush, it came back to him. Sounds, smells, laughter, screams. “Oh no. . . .” Griffin slumped back against the bed and smoothed a hand over his face and shaved head.

“Welcome back to this side, Gunny.”

Griffin started. A man stood in a black suit and tie, hands folded in front of him. White hair crowned a stoic face. “I know you?”

“It took two EMTs to revive that stubborn heart of yours.”

The memory of his brain being fried like Madyar’s Saturday morning eggs singed his mind. “That’s what happens when two cops taze a man.”

RONIE KENDIG

“They had reason. You’re not exactly a small man.”

Griffin fell silent. The sound—the sound of Colonel Nichols’s nose being shoved into his cranium—haunted Griffin. “Is he dead?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Griffin closed his eyes.

“His family wants you charged with murder.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose made his head hurt more.

“But there were enough witnesses there who said you were merely defending yourself.”

Griffin sized up the man. Military crew cut. Signet ring. What did the man want with a Marine? “I’m not Army.”

“Point in fact, Mr. Riddell, you are not anything military. Pristine service to the United States Marine Corps. Thirteen years, in fact—a very unlucky number.”

“What’s unlucky is being under the command of Nichols.”

Blue eyes held a hint of amusement. “A man nobody has to be concerned with anymore, thanks to you.”

Guilt pushed Griffin’s gaze away. “I didn’t mean to kill him.” Lame as lame came. But he hadn’t. “He got in my business—personal business. Made a fool of me. Hurt my wife.”

“Indeed.” He came closer, hands tucked in his pockets. “Nichols illegally acquired a police report on the murder-suicide of Reginald and Grace Adams, your parents, then used that to bring down a Marine so respected and admired he was up for promotion to master sergeant. That made Nichols see red.”

Griffin eyed the man.

“Your record is spotless—prior to a week ago. The men under your command say they’d follow you to hell and back.”

“Oorah,” Griffin mumbled, his brain caught on the fact this man checked him out.

“Tell me, what does serving your country mean to you now that your career is over?”

Wariness crowded out Griffin’s relief. What kind of question was that? “What does it mean to me?” He drew in a ragged breath and let it out. “‘Never shall I forget the principles I accepted to become a Recon Marine. Honor, Perseverance, Spirit, and Heart.’”

Tiny lines crinkled against the man’s weathered face as he grinned at the words from the Creed. He tossed a business card on the blanket. “When you can breathe without it feeling like fire, I want you to put together a team.”



CHAPTER 1

The Shack
Four Years Later

It's sad, really." Marshall "the Kid" Vaughn trudged away from the thumping rotors of the helo that had deposited them back at the Shack, his pack almost dragging on the ground. "Ya don't realize how much a person adds until he's gone."

"Legend's not gone." Max "Frogman" Jacobs hoisted his rucksack into a better group, his mind locked on Sydney and their two sons waiting for him at home. Poor woman had to be going out of her mind with two of his Mini-Me's running around.

"Yeah." John "Squirt" Dighton hit the light breaker, then waited for the six-man team to clear the door. "He's just temporarily detained."

Lights sizzled and popped to life. Groaning bounced off the grimy windows as he hauled the door closed, locked it, then started toward the showers.

The Kid grunted. "Forty-years-to-life temporary."

In the locker room, a depressive gloom hung over the team. They'd been on countless missions, hit just about every terrain and environment imaginable, but none had taken the toll the last couple had. And there was one reason—they were down a man. Griffin "Legend" Riddell. If Max could write the playbook, they wouldn't do another mission without the guy. But with the man in federal prison for murdering a congressman, it'd be a long wait.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Max looked around the Spartan room. Walls of lockers, most unused. A few benches. A giant once-white bin for dirty duds. And the team. Six men now. All very skilled. Good men. Even the one missing. Every man here knew Legend had been set up—he didn't murder that congressman. But nobody could prove

RONIE KENDIG

it. The evidence was damning. Justice—*injustice* was more like it—came swiftly. Lambert, ever the puppeteer, couldn't pull the right strings to get Legend off.

"I'm heading up to visit him tomorrow. Anyone game?" Colton "Cowboy" Neeley slumped on a bench and ran a hand over his short dark hair. His blue eyes probed the group.

"Nah man. I've got a date," the Kid said.

Squirt beaned him with a towel. "What girl would go out with you, mate?"

The Kid snapped the terry cloth back at the former Navy SEAL. "Your sister."

Squirt froze. His jaw went slack. Then his eyes darkened.

Laughing, Canyon "Midas" Metcalfe rose to his feet from the corner. "You just proved his point by thinking your sister would actually go out with him."

Squirt swallowed, his face drained of color. "I introduced them at a New Year's party."

Midas laughed harder. "Your mistake, *mate*."

Shuffling closer, Squirt pointed a finger at the Kid. "I swear, you touch her, I'll shove a fistful of witchety grubs down your gullet."

"Give me credit, dude." The Kid raised his hands. "I'm a gentleman."

Max grunted. "Right." As he strode around the lockers to the shower well, he heard more threats and much more laughter from the Kid. Max shook his head. Would the Kid ever grow up, learn when to leave things alone?

As he tossed his oily, grimy duds on the bench, Max paused, thinking maybe he should send his report to Lambert now so he wouldn't have to mess with it tomorrow. The mission had been simple enough, a snatch-n-grab of an Iranian doctor. It'd been nice and clean, in and out. The report wouldn't take long. Then he could shower, bug out, and know he had the whole weekend with Syd and the boys.

Max jogged up the iron stairs, which creaked and groaned beneath his weight. Down the hall to the right. He punched in the code and entered the secure hub, the door hissing shut behind him. The most high-tech part of this dump of a warehouse.

Shouts drew his attention to the blinds. He jabbed two fingers between a couple and spread them to peek down into the main area. Squirt and the Kid raced into the bay and back the way they came. Squirt looked ready to kill. The Kid's face revealed his fear. Max shook

his head again. Man, he wanted Griffin back. The guy seemed to bring balance to the team. Badly needed balance.

Max powered up the computer. Hand propped on the warped wood, he waited for the system to boot.

More shouts. Loud thuds.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Would they never—?

Tat-a-tat! Tat-tat-a-tat!

Instinct drove Max to his knee at the sound of gunfire. He scrambled to the window. Through the slanted blinds, he peered down into the slab of cement. His brain wouldn't assemble what he saw. Gunmen. A dozen or more. Rushing into the Shack from the parking bay. Moving swiftly, as if. . .

They know the layout.

Max darted to the door and jerked it open. He sprinted down the hall toward the stairs. As his boot hit steel, he froze. A shadow emerged. Floated into the hall.

Too late.

Max jerked back. Pressed his spine against the wall.

By the showers, the Kid looked up. Max signaled to him. Then he made his best and loudest Nightshade whistle, hoping it would penetrate the building, give the men warning to take cover.

The Kid threw himself back into the locker room.

Men swarmed the corner. One looked to his left, one right. His weapon slowly rose as he traced the stairs with his M16.

Max leaped backward into the darkness of the office. He closed the door. As the lock clicked, darkness dropped like an anchor over the entire building. Behind him, a glow screamed his location. The monitor!

Max spun. Lunged across the desk. Stabbed the power button. And paused with his hand still near the monitor. If someone was coming after them. . . accessing this computer. . .

On his knees, Max yanked the cords free. With the box, he moved to the window and reassessed the parking bay. Another van with a half dozen men with AK-47s. They streamed into the warehouse.

Max's gut wound into a dozen knots. They were screwed.

Think! Hand on the door, he considered going back downstairs. But that would get him captured. Killed. Yet he'd rather be with his guys than running like a chicken.

No, not running. Considering options, gaining the advantage. Planning. The invasion force was armed to the teeth. They knew who they were coming after. They'd brought weapons. And those guys

RONIE KENDIG

moved with precision. Swift, deadly precision.

Though Nightshade had a stellar ops record, perhaps they had finally met their match. Still. . .two to one? Nightshade had faced worse.

A large black Suburban screeched to a halt in the middle of the parking bay. Two men emerged, both wearing trench coats.

Max cursed his luck to be up here, away from his gear, his weapons. Up here without firepower. Thus, powerless.

Okay, enough. He was going down there. He eased the door open and slid across the hall. Bathed in darkness, he crouched at the edge of the landing, using the wall for cover. A dozen men so far, rushing here and there. Quick, quiet chatter between the men.

A smirk slid into Max's face. His team had taken cover, and these goons couldn't find them. If he could just get a weapon. . .

"Can't find them."

"They're here. I saw them go in," the man nearest the SUV shouted. "Find them! Lights!"

Light rushed through the building as headlamps from the vehicles stabbed the dusty, damp building. Max yanked back, out of sight. He needed to get down there, defend his men. His boot hit the landing.

Shouts erupted. A shot bounced off the steel rafters, taunting as it echoed through the Shack. Stilled, Max waited. More shouts. The sound of a scuffle. The half dozen men waiting by the SUV lifted their weapons to the ready.

The locker room door swung open. A man walked backward, his AK-47 aimed at a large form filling the doorway. Cowboy. Arms raised, dressed only in his jeans, he stalked forward. Someone shoved him from behind, which barely moved the big lug.

Spine pressed against the wood, Max peered down into the bay.

"You move one wrong muscle," the one in front of Cowboy growled, "and so help me God, I'll kill you."

"No you won't." Cowboy lowered his hands. "If you wanted me dead, I wouldn't be out here."

Ride 'em, Cowboy.

From the side entrance to the showers, three men dragged a shouting, cursing Kid into the bay. Max smirked that it took three tangos to wrangle the Kid.

Hand clenched, Max's mind went into overdrive. What could he do? *God. . .I need. . .something.* What could he pray for? Intercepting the team was impossible. Twelve, fifteen armed tangos against one unarmed man?

He latched on to the hope that they'd only found Cowboy and the Kid. No Midas, Squirt, or Aladdin. Good. Maybe they could regroup and—

A man flew through the bay door from the showers and landed with a thud a yard from the others. Midas flipped over, scissored his legs, and swept the thug off his feet. The Kid seized the confusion to attack the men guarding him. And impressively. With a hard right, he dropped the first and used that weapon to disable the second.

Cowboy took a step back and rammed his elbow into the gut of the nearest guard. The gunman bent forward—straight into Cowboy's meaty fist. The big guy pivoted, slapped the interior of the gunman's wrist, effectively seizing the weapon and flipping the muzzle around. He fired at the guy.

Crack!

In the split second it took for Max to realize the sonic boom that rent the air wasn't the report of Cowboy's .45 MEU but of a rifle, Max saw the man in the black trench coat drop to the ground. A circle spread out like a dark halo.

"Sniper!" someone shouted.

The dead guy had fallen backward. Most likely shot from the front. Which meant. . . Max's gaze rose to the rafters. With no light, it'd be the perfect hiding spot. But. . .who? Squirt? Aladdin?

Crack!

The man guarding Colton stumbled forward, then went to his knees before hitting the cement.

The man in the black trench coat nearest the SUV dropped. A pool of blood spilled out.

"There!" One guard swung and fired his fully automatic at the ceiling. Four others followed suit, firing at the bank of grimy windows on the southeast wall of the building. Aladdin!

Max followed their direction and watched. Waited, his breath caught at the back of his throat. Cracks and shattering glass blended with the staccato punches of the guns to create a wild cacophony of noise. Max tuned it out, praying whoever—Aladdin or Squirt—wouldn't be hit.

But then he saw it. A shift of a shadow. Like someone rolling. . .

The gunfire petered out as a body plummeted the eight feet to the ground. *Aladdin!*

The thud seemed to have supernatural powers as it pounded Max's chest and pushed him back. Away from the window but not far

RONIE KENDIG

enough that he lost line of sight.

Silence dropped on the Shack.

“Where’s Max Jacobs?”

As the question streaked through the warehouse, Max registered a red glow in the far corner. Even as he noticed it, he heard a beep. Another. His gaze darted to the source of the noise. Two men were walking the perimeter, their M16s dangling as they raised their arms and pressed something against the supports. Arms lowered and the men stepped back revealing gray bricks with wires.

Explosives.

Gotta stop this. Do something. His gaze collided with Cowboy’s. The big lug gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

Max’s nostrils flared as he wrestled with what to do.

“Where’s Dighton?”

How do they know our names?

“Dead,” someone answered.

Pulled back into the shadows, Max clenched his eyes and bit down on his tongue. Dighton was dead. What about Aladdin—had he survived the fall?

Sirens wailed in the distance.

“Load ’em up.”

“What about Jacobs?”

“Outta time.” The leader left as the gunmen dragged the team out of the building.

Stealthily, Max held on to the box and sprinted the length of the hall to the side of the Shack. In the conference room, he plunged toward the window. Craned his neck to peek out. Three vehicles—twin white vans and a black town car.

The guys were loaded into the van and one into the car.

The leader shifted, held something out, then it wavered.

Detonator.

Max spun around, searching for an out. Doors. Only one way down—the stairs. But they led to the bay, which would be engulfed.

Windows. Overlooked the dock. The canal. It was January. The water would be brutally cold. His split-second assessment told him no matter what route he took, it’d be deadly. Despite his training, if he didn’t find shelter out of the water once he broke surface, he’d die an ice cube. If he stayed, he’d die a fireball.

Good thing SEALs are insulated against cold water.

Max vaulted toward the window, hurtling the computer through

FIRETHORN

the window. The glass shattered as a violent force blasted through the air. It lifted him. Up. . .up. . . Flipped him. Searing pain sliced through his arm. Heat stroked his back and legs. Fire chased him out of the building. Into the night.

Boom!

Another wave slammed into him. Threw him backward. Toward the water.

Something punched his gut. Knocked the breath from his lungs.

Bright white lit the night. Blinded him. Then—almost instantaneously—black. Pure black. And he was falling. . . down. . .down. . . .