

Tom Clancy Executive Power

1

**URASHA APARTMENT COMPLEX, UNIT 3B
SÃO PAULO DISTRICT
LUANDA, ANGOLA
2222 LOCAL TIME**

Kyle Ryan sat in the dark, his face lit by the blue-gray glow of his laptop computer screen.

“Pull Me Under” by Dream Theater played in his headphones as he worked the keyboard with methodical, tenacious effort. His mind was fully immersed in the slipstream of data and the task at hand. In this state, his body felt separated—his consciousness tethered only by a biological umbilicus providing the fuel and oxygen necessary for computation. In this state, his body was nothing but a distraction. Only when hunger, dehydration, bladder pressure, or exhaustion reached an alarming level would he stop to address the constraint.

Bodies were such a bother.

Sometimes he wished he didn’t need one.

He’d argued he could do this work remotely from Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) headquarters in Virginia, but his boss had maintained otherwise and sent him to Angola. As usual, his

boss had been right. The data and communications infrastructure in Angola would never have supported remote configuration. The hardware required for that did not exist in theater. This is why he and the hardware team were building out the infrastructure they needed in situ, including dedicated antennas, multiband transceivers, relays, cameras, and power supplies. And all of this was being done without permission or knowledge of the Angolan government.

Their new stealth communications and surveillance network would operate entirely independently from any existing or future Angola Telecom infrastructure. AT's recent partnership and multimillion-dollar contract with Chinese telecom giant Huawei meant that all traffic living on the state-owned network would be subject to Chinese scraping and interrogation. The DIA certainly couldn't risk or tolerate that. The Chinese were eating America's lunch in a raging cyberwar that no one wanted to admit was happening. Just because the bullets being fired happened to be electrons instead of lead slugs didn't make it any less real or any less important to national security.

And when the DIA put out a call for capable volunteers to fight this war, like the Ryan that he was, Kyle raised his hand.

While he performed device configuration routines and programming, his teammates bickered like little brothers on the comms circuit.

"Dude, what the hell are you doing?" Cockburn said in Kyle's headset. "You're on the wrong roof."

"No, I'm not," Waddle fired back.

"Yes, you are."

"Bro, I'm not. Check yo-self before you wreck yo-self."

"Seriously? That's your go-to—Ice Cube?" Cockburn said.

"I do what I do. You like it, great. You don't, go listen to somebody else. I'm stickin' with the people who stick with me."

"Who said that?"

"Ice Cube, obviously, fire dick."

"You're a toddler, you know that, right?" Cockburn fired back.

"Takes one to know one."

For Kyle, their bickering idiocy was the concentration-wrecking equivalent of being tapped repeatedly on the shoulder by a bony index finger. He sighed, stopped what he was doing, and shifted his gaze from the laptop he was working on to a second laptop, whose screen saver had activated due to inattention. He tapped the space bar to wake the machine, then pressed his thumb on the fingerprint sensor to authenticate. The display refreshed from the log-in screen to a bird's-eye view of the one-square-mile area of Luanda where they were working. On the map, he saw one green dot with the tag COCKBURN and another a block away labeled WADDLE. Kyle wasn't sure which team member's surname was more ridiculous. And though it was something he rarely reflected on, whenever he was in the company of Cockburn and Waddle he was glad to be a Ryan.

"I can settle this debate," Kyle said, looking at the monitor. "Bravo is technically on the correct roof."

"Ha, take that, Hot Willy," Waddle said. "I told you I knew what I was doing."

"I said *technically*, Bravo. You're on the right roof, but you're installing the dish in the wrong place," Kyle said, addressing Waddle by his call sign before either man could chime in with a retort. Despite all the smack talk and clowning around, they were professionals and never used their actual names on comms. "It was supposed to be positioned in the northeast corner; you're on the

southwest corner. So, in one sense, Alpha makes a point—you'd be closer to the correct install location if you were in the same quadrant on the wrong building next door."

Kyle fully expected a snarky celebratory comment from Cockburn, but the hardware tech didn't say anything.

"Well, that's a first—burnt weenie is speechless," Waddle said as Kyle watched Waddle's green dot moving across the roof to the correct corner.

A long, awkward static-filled pause followed.

"I think you hurt his feelings," Kyle said, breaking the silence and cracking a smile.

"Dude, no reason to get all sensitive. You know I'm just messing with you," Waddle said, shedding his wise-guy bravado for the first time all night.

Cockburn didn't answer.

A twinge of uncertainty flared in Kyle's chest as he shifted his attention from Waddle's green dot to Cockburn's position indicator. The field tech had been walking north on Rua Cristiano dos Santos, and his dot had been moving on the map accordingly, but now the icon had gone still.

"Alpha, sitrep. You all right, buddy?" Kyle said, eyes locked on the dot.

No reply came.

"Bravo, this is Omega—comms check," he said, hailing Waddle, just to make sure his transmission was going out.

"I hear you Lima Charlie, Omega," Waddle answered. "I'm going to check on Alpha. I should be able to see him from up here."

"Copy that. Good idea."

Kyle turned back to Waddle's green dot, which had reversed directions and was now moving south on the rooftop toward the

edge of the building. He looked back at Cockburn's position indicator and saw that his dot was now moving in little fits and starts into an alley between two rows of buildings. For this operation, he had neither a satellite nor a drone providing imagery. This was not a spec ops evolution. He and his team were cyber division, not shooters.

"Bravo, it looks like Alpha is on the move," he said, picking up the bottle of fruit punch-flavored Bodyarmor sitting on his desk. "He seems to be ducking down an alley."

"What the—" Waddle said, but his transmission abruptly cut off. At the same time, Kyle also heard what sounded like a gunshot, followed by a thud.

"Bravo, sitrep?" he said, snapping upright in his chair and dropping the bottle without taking a sip. "Bravo, do you copy?"

Waddle didn't answer, and the green dot on the roof had stopped moving.

Fear blossomed in Kyle's chest and the primitive fight-or-flight subroutines he so rarely accessed in the depths of his brain activated and took control. For complex multifactor problems like strategy and programming, the amygdala lacked the processing power to compete with the cerebral cortex. But for situations like this, it had no equal. It cut through analysis paralysis like a blowtorch through butter. The *how*, the *why*, the *what-ifs* . . . none of these things mattered. The amygdala processed the events of the past two minutes and simplified the logic into terms that even an ADHD brainiac like Kyle Ryan could not misunderstand:

His team had been identified and targeted.

Cockburn and Waddle were dead.

All that remained was a simple, binary decision: *Run or die*.

Every fiber in his being wanted to bolt out of the apartment

like a man on fire, but duty compelled him to perform one final task before evacuating. He pressed and held Ctrl + Alt + F1 for three seconds and a pop-up window appeared:

Authenticate to erase all data.

Kyle swiped the pad of his thumb across the fingerprint reader. The window refreshed.

To proceed, press the "Y" key. To abort, press the "N" key.

He tapped the Y key, whirled, and sprinted to the front door, leaving everything in the apartment exactly where it lay. As he grabbed the doorknob, the invisible hand of caution stopped him from turning it. What if a gunman was waiting outside in the hallway for him? Or in the stairwell?

"Shit," he muttered, wishing he'd paid more attention to the layout and details of the apartment building both inside and out.

If his survival came down to a gun battle, then Kyle knew he was already dead. First and foremost, he wasn't armed. And even if he were, he was no match against a professional. Yes, he was a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and had fulfilled all mandatory firearm handling and shooting requirements, but he was no shooter. Unlike his older brother, Jack Junior, Kyle didn't inherit a single strand of Marine Corps DNA from his dad. During plebe summer, a midshipman upperclassman had berated Kyle with the line "*It's obvious there ain't a single ounce of Navy SEAL in that skinny-ass body of yours, Ryan.*"

As it turned out, the jab was true.

A warrior, Kyle was not.

But there was *one* thing he could do better than his big bro and

probably ninety-nine percent of the people on the planet, and that was run very long distances very fast. As a junior, he ran a sub-twenty-four-minute 8K at the Paul Short Run cross-country course at Lehigh University, placing second at the meet. Even now, despite the constraints of his job, he was religious about logging twenty-five miles a week. A sub-six-minute-mile pace for Kyle was child's play.

Too bad he couldn't outrun a bullet.

Despite the ominous feeling that he was destined to cross paths with a hit squad sent to kill him, Kyle had no other viable option but the stairs. A sniper had most certainly whacked Waddle and Cockburn, so going out the window and climbing down the outside of the building was a nonstarter.

To escape, he'd need speed, lots of cover, and luck.

Most of all luck.

With a shaky exhale, he twisted the doorknob and pulled the door inward, opening it just enough to listen. Holding his breath, he heard all the typical sounds of apartment living barely muted by improperly insulated walls and cheap doors: a baby crying, music playing, a television news program . . .

What he did not hear was the pounding of booted feet or the barking of orders from a SWAT team.

Feeling the crush of time, he opened the door wide enough to stick his head out for a glance right and left. Finding the corridor deserted, he exited the apartment and sprinted to the stairwell at the end of the hall. Without pause or hesitation, he plowed into the metal fire door with all his weight, giving the slab a massive shove inward. To his surprise, the door slammed into someone just on the other side, knocking the person backward and sending them tumbling heels over head down the concrete stairs. Kyle gasped, momentarily mortified for injuring some innocent civilian

or building resident, but then his eyes ticked to a pistol the man had dropped on the top landing.

He knelt to pick up the weapon as the would-be assassin came to rest a half flight below. The shooter was dressed in dark civilian clothes and wore a black N95 face mask—the same kind people wore during the pandemic—which concealed his features. The man's head was cocked at an unnatural forty-five-degree angle, and his wide-open eyes were staring unblinking off into the distance.

Kyle looked at the pistol in his hand.

The make and model were unfamiliar to him, but that wasn't surprising because he wasn't a "gun guy." He was experienced enough to know it was a semi-automatic model, looked similar to a Glock, and likely held 9mm bullets. He confirmed the weapon was loaded by pulling the slide back and looking in the ejection port to see a round in the chamber. Then, weapon in hand, he descended the stairs. As he approached the downed assassin, a part of his brain questioned whether the man was really dead. What if he was faking and at the last second reached out and grabbed Kyle's legs? But the logical part of his brain knew this would be an absurd tactic and was nothing more than the product of having watched too many horror movies as a teenager with his sister Katie. Nonetheless, he gave the dead guy a wide berth as he quick-stepped around the body on his descent.

It all felt very surreal, almost make-believe, as he made his way down the switchback staircase—six half flights—to the ground level. He'd never been in a situation even remotely like this before. His coworkers had been murdered, and now the people who'd done it were coming after him. Escaping the building alive was his first objective, but then what? His amygdala had been crystal clear with the order to "*Run*," but light on specifics. Where was he running to? Shockingly, the answer immediately came to

him, his midbrain offering a simple, obvious, uncomplicated solution:

The U.S. embassy.

At the bottom of the stairwell, he paused, forced to make his next blind decision. The landing had two exit doors—the emergency exit leading outside and the regular door leading to the ground-floor hallway. His heart was pounding at what felt like a thousand RPM in his chest—not from exertion but from fear. He wasn't sure what side of the building the exterior door opened out to. He didn't know which cardinal direction he'd be facing when he stepped outside. He'd not paid attention to where Cockburn had parked the rental car, and he doubted he could find his way back to it. And if he abandoned the car and ran to the embassy, he wasn't sure which route to take to get there.

There were so many damn unknowns . . . Too many.

With such imperfect information, how could he possibly execute a good strategy?

"What would Jack do?" he mumbled.

But Kyle already knew the answer to that question. Jack would do exactly what he always did—keep moving and figure it out as he went along. Oh, and God help the poor son of a bitch who tried to get in his way.

"But I'm not Jack," he heard himself say.

He stuffed the pistol into his waistband, hiding it from view with the flaps of his untucked shirt. Hands shaking, he walked to the interior door leading to the ground-floor-level apartments. Pretty sure he was about to die, he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. A middle-aged African male was walking toward him, head down, looking at his mobile phone as he walked. Kyle performed a quick threat assessment—slight build, civilian clothes, no mask, no hat, no visible weapons or conspicuous bulges.

Nothing about the man said operator or assassin, but then again, wasn't the ability to hide in plain sight a hallmark characteristic of great tradecraft?

Kyle moved his right hand into a ready position while drifting to the far side of the hall to give space for the passing. The man looked up from his phone—seemingly just registering Kyle's presence for the first time—and made eye contact. Kyle nodded. He nodded back and returned his attention to his phone as they passed each other, left shoulder to left shoulder. Kyle lengthened his stride and turned his head to keep the man in his peripheral vision as he opened range. The man did not look back and disappeared into the stairwell Kyle had just exited.

A wave of relief washed over Kyle, but the feeling lasted only a split second.

If the man went to the third floor, he would find the body . . .

"Shit."

Just then, a mental screenshot of the map program he'd been using all night popped into his mind's eye—his subconscious apparently finally deciding to join the party. Kyle did not have a photographic memory, but right now it sure felt like he did because he could literally see the map as clearly as if he were sitting at his computer. His internal compass instantly recalibrated as his sense of orientation and direction solidified. As if an app was running in his brain, a route populated on the mental map from the apartment building to the U.S. embassy: *Exit the rear of the apartment building into a mid-block alley, head south, and cut between two other buildings to Rua de Benguela, then sprint one thousand meters west and dogleg to reach the embassy at the corner of Rua Ndunduma.*

For the first time since this nightmare began, Kyle felt a flicker of confidence.

Body on autopilot, he turned right to exit the apartment building via the rear door. On reaching it, he forced himself not to think about or second-guess the decision. He pushed the door open, ducked low, and took off in a sprint. A suppressed gunshot cracked somewhere and a sniper round slammed into the door behind him. The narrow alley was only ten feet wide and he crossed the gap into cover—a narrow slot opening between two adjacent buildings—which he reached before the shooter could get off another shot. He ran the length of the slot and emerged onto Rua de Benguela, which ran perpendicular to the cut-through and parallel to the alley. He turned right and kicked it into high gear. The pistol immediately worked itself loose from his waistband and he grabbed it an instant before it fell. His only option was to grip it in his right hand while he ran, which at this late hour didn't matter because not a soul was out on the street to notice the crazy white American agent running for his life. Powered by fear, adrenaline, and an inexplicable sense of obligation to his family to survive, he pushed his body to the limit. His fastest mile split in cross-country was 4:24. He tried to remember the feel of that pace and find it now.

Parked cars zipped past him on the left in a blur as he streaked down the dimly lit street.

He'd not heard a second sniper shot . . .

Yet.

He hoped and prayed the sniper would need to relocate from his original perch to a different one to achieve a line on the current track. If a supersonic round did punch a hole in his skull, at least he wouldn't feel it. There were worse ways to go out of this world, that was for damn sure.

The squeal of rubber on asphalt cut through the quiet like a falcon shriek.

Risking a fall, he glanced over his left shoulder mid-stride and clocked a pair of headlights approximately four hundred yards behind him. Forget the sniper, he was being hunted. In the movies, they love to show people running away from cars that can barely seem to catch up. A ludicrous proposition because an elite athlete running at a four-minute-mile pace was only traveling at fifteen miles per hour over ground. At sixty miles per hour, a vehicle was doing four times that speed. The hunter would quickly catch up to the hunted.

The engine of the closing SUV roared as the driver accelerated.

Kyle knew he had only one advantage over his enemy.

Size.

He scanned the row of buildings ahead, looking for an alley too narrow for the SUV to follow him into. However, Luanda wasn't a big American city like New York or Boston. Most of the buildings were jammed right up against one another in an architectural hodgepodge of asymmetrical disunity, and so it was with the stretch of storefronts beside him. The businesses were buttoned up tight for the night, with steel bars safeguarding the ground-level windows and roll-down security gates blocking the doors. The next intersection with a north-south cross street was fifty feet ahead. He could make this intersection, but definitely not the next one, which was a full block away. If he turned here, the SUV would be able to follow him easily. If he kept going straight, maybe there'd be an alley or a cut-through he could exploit.

But maybe there wouldn't be.

His mental map was useless when it came to this decision.

As he reached the cross street, he glanced over his shoulder and saw the SUV had only closed the distance between them by half. Maybe he could make the next intersection . . .

"Fuck it," he said between huffs and decided to roll the dice.

Suddenly, he remembered something. When he'd burst out of the apartment into the back alley—that alley, the east-west alley, ran straight through. North-south access between buildings was limited and irregular, but every block was bisected by a parking alley that connected the cross streets.

He changed his mind at the very last moment, turning right and heading north at the intersection. Kyle didn't consider himself a religious person, but he said a silent prayer that he was right about the alley. Halfway down the block, salvation beckoned and he turned hard left down the parking alley. His pursuers could follow him, but not at speed. The narrow alley was packed full of impediments—dumpsters, parked cars, and other junk. On passing a six-foot-tall stack of wooden shipping pallets, he stopped, whirled, and tipped it over, sending the pallets sprawling across the alleyway.

Squealing tires told him the SUV had reached the intersection and made the turn. He sprinted to the closest dumpster and hid behind it. The game had just changed from chase to hide-and-seek. In a straight-up race to the embassy, he'd lose. Now his strategy was to evade and move in bursts. If they didn't spot him on their first pass, they might drive past the alley and turn west in the direction of the embassy, expecting to intercept him on Rua Ndunduma. If they turned down the alley, his life depended on finding a slot alley between buildings before they caught up and gunned him down.

Breathing hard, he resisted the compulsion to peek around the edge of the dumpster to see what was happening. He thought he heard the vehicle drive past the alley, but he couldn't be sure. He held position and waited for a ten count, trying to listen over the huffing sound of his heavy breaths. Feeling the crush of time and the compulsion to move, he glanced around the corner of the

dumpster. To his horror and dismay, the SUV was stopped at the end of the alley—idling with the windows rolled down and the driver and rear gunman passenger scanning for him.

In an epic moment of catastrophic timing and coincidence, Kyle and the driver locked eyes. The driver shouted and pointed at the dumpster, which the gunman strafed with automatic-rifle fire. Had Kyle's reflexes been a millisecond slower, the barrage would have turned his head into pulp. Bullets pummeled the opposite side of the steel dumpster as Kyle crouched in cover, waiting for the barrage to end.

The instant the machine gun went quiet, Kyle took off in a crouching sprint on a vector that kept the dumpster between him and the SUV. Behind him, he heard the roar of an engine and tires on pavement as his pursuers turned and gave chase. Head down, arms and legs churning, Kyle pushed himself harder to eke out a little more speed, but his body was already at the limit. The sound of cracking and splintering wood echoed in the alley as the SUV ran over the pile of pallets he'd tipped over.

He scanned for a cut-through between buildings, but every building was built snug tight against its neighbor. Panic welled inside, and he unleashed a flurry of f-bombs as he ran for his life. The end of the alley where it intersected the next cross street was at least forty yards away. Once they got around the dumpster, he'd be an easy kill.

Then he saw the tree.

The next building had a rear courtyard—with a large tree in the middle—protected by an eight-foot-tall wooden privacy fence. He had no idea what was on the other side of the fence or if the courtyard had a front exit, but this felt like his only shot and so he took it. Behind him, he could hear the SUV barreling down the narrow alley in pursuit, sideswiping parked cars as it did.

"I want to live, damn it," he heard himself say as he ran right at the fence.

On reaching it, he jumped, and with all his might hoisted and rolled his torso up and over the wooden slats with athletic grace and efficiency that took him by surprise as he was doing it. His landing, however, was the opposite because lining the other side of the fence was a row of clay planters growing various flowers and vegetables. Not expecting this, his lead foot landed on the edge of a large pot, tipping it and causing him to tumble. He crashed to the ground, landing in a pile of ceramic shards, dirt, and tomatoes. At the same time, automatic gunfire ripped a line of holes through the fence at chest level.

Grunting in pain he scrambled into a low crouch, the realization not lost on him that he would probably be dead if not for the tumble. Ducking as low as possible, he ran north through the little garden courtyard desperately seeking freedom. The apartment building, or whatever it was, had a separation between it and the neighboring building. The slot alley had an iron gate blocking access to the courtyard from the other side, but once he hopped it, he'd have a straight shot to Rua Ndunduma. On reaching the gate, he spied a padlock on the latch, forcing him to climb yet again. Behind him, he heard yelling and wondered if the shooter in the SUV was going to pursue him. He mounted the fence, rolled over the top, and landed in a deep crouch on the other side of the gate.

Facing backward, his question was answered.

Through the bars, he saw a pair of gloved hands gripping the top of the wooden privacy fence, followed by a head. Kyle raised his right hand to fire at the assassin, but found he was no longer holding the pistol.

"Shit . . ."

He had lost the weapon when he hopped the privacy fence, and somehow it hadn't even registered in his conscious mind.

The masked killer kicked a leg up onto the top of the wooden slats.

Without a second's hesitation, Kyle whirled and sprinted for his life. In the slot alley, there was no cover. Nowhere to hide. Any strafe down the chute would cut him to ribbons because it was simply impossible to miss. With each stride, his right ankle was starting to complain. He must have strained it on the landing, but that's why nature invented adrenaline. He harnessed the pain and pushed himself even harder.

Ten yards to safety.

Seven . . .

Five . . .

He imagined the shooter was over the fence by now, but he didn't dare look back.

Three yards to the gap . . .

Jaw clenched, he dug deep and summoned every ounce of strength and power his body could muster. Three strides later, he exploded out of the alley like a cannonball blast. He immediately juke left around the corner of the building. He expected to hear the staccato crack of gunfire lighting up the alley, but no gunfire came. At first, his brain considered this a win, but a moment later he recalculated the scenario. The shooter had probably stopped climbing the fence and returned to the vehicle . . . which would be tearing down the alley to the next intersection to intercept him on Rua Ndunduma before he reached the embassy.

"With my luck, I'll be gunned down on the street five feet from the embassy."

As the words left his mouth, he realized that he was—both metaphorically and literally—running the race of his life.

A race *for* his life . . .

He had contemplated the nature of death plenty of times, but he'd never feared it. Maybe because of his youth or his pedigree as a Ryan, death had always felt one step removed. For Kyle, death was, and always had been, something that happened to *other* people. But right now, death felt near. Proximal. Tangible. It felt as if the Grim Reaper was running stride for stride beside him. Or maybe, more accurately, a few strides behind . . . like Dillon Harper. Harper had been Kyle's main competition on the Naval Academy's cross-country team, challenging Kyle on every course and forcing every contest to end with a sprint to the finish.

"Ten percent more," he heard himself bark in between breaths. "Just give me ten percent more."

Strangely, his body heeded the order without complaint or question, like a dutiful Marine. He felt his stride lengthen, the muscles in his legs accept the additional burn, and the cadence of his heart rate accelerate beyond what felt safe or even possible. He'd already been running at a pace that felt beyond his personal best, but this felt like a speed that if he kept it up for too long his body would tear itself apart.

A half block ahead he saw the corner of the embassy grounds.
One hundred yards to freedom.

One hundred yards to safety.

The next twelve seconds would determine the rest of his life.

The squeal of tires and the roar of an engine ahead to his left announced the arrival of his adversary. Like the Grim Reaper himself, the entity who'd killed Cockburn and Waddle was faceless, hiding its true identity under a cloak and mask.

And this infuriated Kyle.

For some reason, it mattered. He wanted to know.

He *needed* to know.

The SUV rounded the corner on an intercept course, and based on quick mental math, Kyle predicted they would both arrive at the embassy at the same time.

Fifty yards.

A pair of Marines standing guard at the front gate came into focus. At this hour, the embassy was closed for business. The gate was shut, and the Marines were posted inside the perimeter fence. But their presence sent a message beyond just vigilance. These men were more than mere sentinels.

They were symbols . . . of safety and strength.

"Help," Kyle shouted in between gasps. "I'm an American!"

Despite being winded, his voice projected with a volume that surprised him. He watched both the Marines turn to look at him through the bars.

Forty yards.

"American intelligence officer . . . Open the gate!" he bellowed. "They're trying . . . to kill me!"

Kyle watched the gunman materialize in the rear passenger window of the SUV with a machine gun.

One of the Marines shifted his gaze from Kyle to the intercepting SUV. At the same time, the assassin fired a strafe at Kyle—a strafe that by all rights should have cut him down, but miraculously the bullets ripped past behind him.

Thirty yards.

What happened next, Kyle did not expect and certainly was not protocol. One of the Marines opened fire on the SUV and his shots connected. The vehicle swerved, changing direction toward the gate. This caused the second Marine to raise his rifle and fire. The first Marine fired again and the barrage of bullets blew out the windshield, headlights, and front tires.

The SUV swerved again, this time erratically and farther left.

The rear gunman, who no longer had a line on Kyle, fired a volley at the Marines.

The Marines returned fire with extreme prejudice, emptying their magazines.

Kyle, for his part, was only twenty yards from the gate, but still running straight toward the line of fire. He didn't care. All that mattered was getting on the other side of that gate. The SUV was slowing down, but on a crash course with the embassy's perimeter wall. Both Marines swapped magazines, then one opened the gate, while the other took a knee and covered the SUV. Kyle could no longer see the gunman in the passenger window, but that didn't mean the threat was neutralized.

Time shifted.

Ten yards.

The Marine manning the gate locked eyes with Kyle and waved him in, his arm making circles and his mouth moving to form what looked to be the words *C'mon! C'mon!* but Kyle's mind no longer registered any sound except his own panting breath.

Five yards.

Kyle felt the Grim Reaper gaining on him, challenging him for the finish line.

Three yards.

In his peripheral vision, the masked assassin materialized in the SUV window and, impossibly, Kyle's heartbeat quickened even more.

A muzzle flare flashed in the window just as the covering Marine saw the shooter and unloaded a volley of rifle fire.

Lungs on fire and leaning for the ribbon, Kyle barreled through the gap in the gate, crossing the finish line and stepping onto sovereign American soil. After just another step, his legs gave out entirely, done with his demands, and he stumbled, rolling through

and out of the fall. Time seemed to freeze for a moment, and he felt engulfed in blackness, the only sound his own raspy breathing. When his vision cleared and his wits returned, he stared straight up into the face of a Marine looking down at him.

“State your name,” the Marine said, covering him with his rifle.

“My name is Kyle Ryan . . . I’m an American intelligence officer, and the rest of my team has just been murdered.”