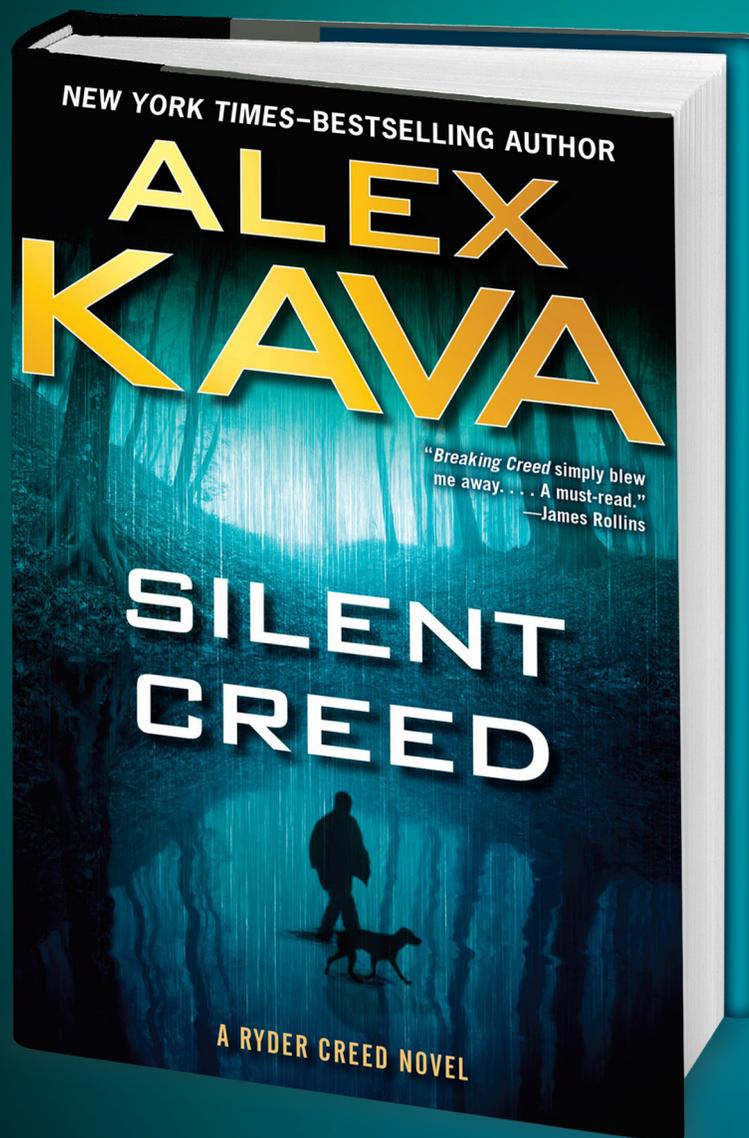


ALEX KAVA

SILENT CREED



ON SALE JULY 28
Available for preorder

AMAZON

BARNES & NOBLE

BOOKS-A-MILLION

iBOOKS

INDIEBOUND

↓ START READING ↓

Chapter 1

Haywood County, North Carolina

Daniel Tate clenched his teeth and looked away just as the needle pierced a vein in his arm. He'd spent two tours of duty in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. He'd been shot at, dodged IEDs, and escaped a grenade. But needles – damn, he hated needles.

“This will help relax you,” Dr. Shaw told him.

When she walked in the door Tate had been relieved to see a woman. But she had barely introduced herself before she pulled out a stainless steel tray with vials and surgical utensils and, of course, several syringes. Her black hair was pulled back tight leaving only long bangs that overlapped heavy-framed glasses. She was younger than he expected, with smooth skin that hadn't yet earned wrinkles at the corners of her mouth or eyes. And she was attractive, but instead of looking at her

now, Tate let his eyes scan the room. He didn't want to even see the needle, so he stared at the walls.

It was a strange room, empty except for the examination table. The drywall looked spongy, like the foam mats you'd find at the basketball court tacked up under the basket for overenthusiastic athletes to bounce off of. Only these mats weren't tacked onto the walls, they *were* the walls – whitewashed and seamless. The term “padded cell” came to mind.

There wasn't a single thing displayed. Didn't medical exam rooms have diplomas or something on the walls? Not that it mattered. Tate's chance of backing out had passed. He knew it as soon as he signed on page seven of that long-ass contract they'd handed him when he first arrived.

He didn't even know where this place was. It had been pouring sheets of rain the entire hour and a half from the airport. That was yesterday, or at least he thought it was. His wristwatch and cellphone were two of the personal items he had to surrender. Other than not knowing the time of day, he didn't mind. But Tate didn't understand why he couldn't wear his own shoes or underwear. The blue scrubs were comfortable, but the paper booties drove him crazy. He felt like he was shuffling, the sound reminding him of the old people in the nursing home where his wife worked.

“After I administer the drug I'll ask you a series of questions,” Dr. Shaw said.

He glanced at her and held back a grimace. She was loading another syringe. Long, slender fingers with blood-red nail polish. A ring on her thumb – that was

strange, but young women did that, right? The ring had tiny little diamonds dancing around the band. All Tate could think was that this served him right for not reading all seven pages. He'd only cared about the three thousand dollars he had been promised, and he had double checked that it was in the contract.

He hated that his wife worked an extra shift once a week just to make ends meet. Their oldest daughter had started waiting tables at the coffee shop. Even Danny Junior had a paper route. But Tate hadn't been able to get a job.

Not true. He hadn't been able to *hold* a job since he'd been back.

The doctors called it post-traumatic stress disorder. But all Tate saw when he looked in the mirror was a perfectly healthy man. Never mind that his brain twisted pieces of information, and insomnia kept him pacing the streets of their small town. He needed to start contributing and helping to take care of his family. Even if it meant a few needle pokes.

This time it didn't matter where he looked. As soon as the metal slipped into his vein he felt the liquid rush into his body. A heat wave crawled up his arm, over his shoulder, and spread throughout his chest. It took his breath away, and he felt his body shudder.

"You may experience a tightness in your chest," he heard Dr. Shaw say. Only now it sounded like she was talking to him from the next room.

He turned his head to look at her and just that movement made him nauseated. He tried to find her eyes through the blur. The small rose tattoo he had noticed earlier on the side of her neck had grown legs and started to inch along her

skin like an insect. Tate blinked hard, trying to focus. Sweat beaded on his forehead and upper lip.

“Nose bleeds are not uncommon,” Dr. Shaw continued in her calm, cool manner. “I’m going to ask you some questions, Daniel.”

Tate, he wanted to tell her everyone called him Tate, but he couldn’t take his mind off the bug digging into her neck. His heart galloped in his chest and it was difficult to breathe.

“Daniel, can you count backward from a hundred for me?”

His mouth had a metallic taste and it took effort to make it move. Teeth and tongue seemed to be in the way of him activating his voice.

“Daniel, can you count backward from a hundred?” she repeated.

Suddenly he heard himself say, “That would be difficult to do because I don’t like rice.”

Even as he said it he knew it wasn’t the correct answer, but already he’d forgotten the question. Nothing mattered except the black insect on her neck. Why couldn’t she feel it digging under her skin?

“Dr. Shaw.” A voice called from the doorway.

Tate’s entire body jerked before he saw the man. His head was shaved and gleamed almost as bright as his long white coat. Tate had to look away. The brightness hurt his eyes. Just as they were starting to focus, the light sent stars and sparks like electrical surges and he knew he couldn’t trust them.

“I’m in the middle of a test,” Dr. Shaw told the man.

“It’s gotten worse.”

“Can you please wait a few minutes, Richard? I’ve just started.”

“For god’s sake, you didn’t give him the serum, did you? It takes seventy-two hours to leave the system. And we need to leave now.”

“Calm down, please.”

Tate couldn’t decide if she was talking to him or the man, because she was staring directly at him.

“They’re talking about landslides. We really must evacuate.”

“I’ve lived through hurricanes, Richard. This is just a rain.”

But now she left Tate and joined the man at the door. Neither bothered to keep their voices down. In fact, they seemed to forget about Tate. They didn’t even notice that he was panting now and wiping erratically at his eyes, sweat pouring down his face.

“The water is almost over the bridge.” Richard sounded panicked. He was loud and gesturing. “If we don’t leave now, we risk being stranded here.”

Dr. Shaw was turned away from him and Tate could no longer see the insect on her neck. He began checking his own hands and arms.

“We can’t just leave behind all of our research material. We’re safe here,” Dr. Shaw was telling the man. “This place is built like a fortress.”

Tate tried to see if there were any bugs on the man. His eyes were finally settling down when he saw a flash of green and black fur behind the doctors. It looked like a small monkey running up the hallway.

“Well, I’m leaving. With or without you.”

“That would be a mistake. Let’s talk about this.” She glanced over her shoulder, and when she called out to Tate it sounded like a bellow echoing across the small room, “I’ll be right back, Daniel. Stay right here.”

She joined the man in the hallway and tried to close the door. When it didn’t seem to fit the frame, she opened it wide.

“See, that’s not a good sign,” Richard told her. “Doors and windows tend to stick right before. It’s bad, I’m telling you. We must leave.”

This time she pulled the door with such force it slammed.

Tate sat listening to the thump-thump of his heart. It was beating inside his head, and he put his hands over his chest to make sure his heart hadn’t moved. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed since the doctors had left. It could have been minutes. It could have been an hour. Then a loud crack jolted him off the table.

It sounded like an artillery shell. Was that possible?

He crawled under the examination table, his body scrambling in twitches and jerks. He listened for more artillery shells. The room started to sway and tilt. Was it the drug? Had it screwed with his equilibrium? His ears popped, and instead of the thumping of his heart, he now heard only a rumble.

He felt it, too. A vibration rattled the doctor’s instruments, shaking them off the tray. The floor tiles lifted and rolled beneath him, and Tate grabbed onto the examination table.

That's when he saw the whitewashed walls crack and buckle. They were actually caving in as if a bulldozer was on the other side shoving them in. Tate felt something coming down from the ceiling. He ducked his head back under the table. He watched, not sure whether to believe his eyes. It was raining dirt and gravel. He could smell the wet earth.

The rumble grew to a roar. Forget the bulldozer, a freight train was headed down on top of him. He covered his head with his arms and curled into a tight ball.

More crashes. Metal shrieked. Light fixtures exploded.

In the darkness Daniel Tate couldn't see. The floor became a rollercoaster. He clawed to hold onto the steel table as the world shattered and roared and collapsed on top of him.

Chapter 2

Florida Panhandle

Ryder Creed had been up for two hours by the time his hired man climbed out of the doublewide trailer. Truth was, Creed didn't sleep much. He'd awakened in the dark and found himself down in the kennel curled up in the middle of his dogs, his head on the belly of his oldest, Rufus.

The kennel was a contemporary warehouse. Creed had a loft apartment above it with all the luxuries and comforts of a retreat. When he designed the place he convinced his business partner, Hannah Washington, that he wanted his living quarters above the kennel so he could keep an eye and ear on the most prized possessions of their business, K9 CrimeScents.

Actually Creed just liked being near the dogs. Sometimes in the dead of night when visions and images haunted his sleep, he found comfort being surrounded by

them. He and Hannah had rescued each and every dog in one fashion or another. But Creed knew they rescued him in a way he could not explain to anyone. Not even Hannah.

Now he watched Jason Seaver wiping the sleep out of his eyes. As he made his way into the kennel, Creed realized how much Jason looked like a young boy. Almost ten years younger than Creed, Jason had seen his world blown up on him before he had reached twenty. The kid was one of Hannah's rescues. She said Jason reminded her of Creed and that was one of the reasons she hired the young man.

Tucked under Jason's arm was his sleepy-eyed, black puppy. In less than a month the Labrador pup Jason had named Scout had almost doubled in size. He brought Scout to play with the dog's mom and siblings while Jason worked. This morning he put the puppy down on the ground before he got to the yard.

"Watch this," he told Creed as he walked three paces back, then kneeled on the ground facing the pup. "Come on Scout. Come give me a kiss."

The puppy wiggled his entire back end, almost losing balance in his excitement. He bounced toward Jason and without hesitation stood up on his hind legs, reaching for Jason's face and planting a big slobber right on the lips.

"That'll come in handy when he's searching for cadavers," Creed said, but he couldn't help smiling.

"I'm thinking chick magnet."

Jason picked up Scout, and when he came inside yard the other dogs ran to greet him. They shoved and nudged each other out of the way for Jason's attention.

None of them noticed or cared that one of the kid's shirt sleeves hung empty below the elbow. When Creed had first met the young veteran he had been belligerent and moody, self-conscious about the amputated arm to the point of daring anyone and everyone to notice it. That the kid was thinking about picking up women—even with the lousy trick of using his puppy—had to be a good sign.

Now if only Creed could make a decent dog handler out of him.

“We're ready to use the real stuff today,” he told Jason and held up a Mason jar with the lid tight over the contents.

“What's inside?”

“Some dirt and a piece of a blanket. Both were underneath a dead body.”

“Cool. How'd you get it?”

“Grace and I helped find the guy. Wasn't a homicide so the detectives let me have a few things for training.”

“Andy claims you have a whole stockpile.”

Andy was one of the first handlers Creed had trained. At the time she'd known more about dogs than Creed, having spent years as a veterinary technician. This was a second career for her. He knew better than to ask a woman's age, but guessed Andy was somewhere in her forties.

“Yeah? Well, don't believe everything Andy tells you. Here, take this.” And he tossed the Mason jar, realizing too late that maybe Jason couldn't do a one-handed catch. But the kid had no problem.

“Take it and hide it good.” Creed pointed to the trail that led into the forest. “Just before you hide it, remove the lid. There’s a cheesecloth stretched across the top. Leave that on.”

“You want me to bury it?”

“Bury it, throw it up in a tree, drop it in the creek, do whatever you want with it. Don’t think about it too much. When you finish, come on back.”

The fifty-acre property was surrounded on three sides by forest. The privacy and seclusion it afforded them was one of the reasons Creed chose this place in the northern part of the Florida Panhandle. It also provided endless training ground.

His cell phone started to vibrate as he watched Jason disappear into the woods. He glanced at the screen to see it was Hannah. Less than an hour ago they’d had coffee and Hannah’s fresh-baked cinnamon rolls in her kitchen.

“Already miss me?”

“I ought to feed you sugar more often in the morning, you gonna be this sweet.” Then without missing a beat she went on to business. “Landslide in North Carolina. Some man from the DoD. We got a request for you specifically.”

“Me or Grace?”

Over the summer there had been a lot of media attention, most of it centered on Grace, their amazing Jack Russell terrier. The scrappy little dog had won the hearts of the nation when she helped make several drug busts and stopped one human trafficking incident, resulting in the rescue of five children.

“Actually you. No specific dog.”

“When did the slide happen? Are we talking rescue or recovery?”

“Late last night into this morning. It’s still raining and from what I understand, there’s still potential for more slides. Possible rescues. Definitely recovery.”

“I’ll need to leave right away. What is that? A five-hour drive? Can you come finish with Jason?”

“Already putting on my dungarees.”

That made Creed smile. Hannah was the only person he knew who referred to blue jeans as dungarees. She’d hate it if he called her a southern belle, though her mannerisms sometimes fit. She would say she was cornbread and black-eyed peas and certainly not a lady who lunched.

“But no need to drive,” she continued. “They’re sending a jet. A Gulfstream 550.”

“They’re sending what?”

“I know I got it right. I wrote it down. Gulfstream 550. That’s one of the pretty ones, isn’t it?”

“Wait a minute. I thought you said the request was from the Department of Defense.”

“That’s right.”

“What interest do they have in a landslide in North Carolina?” Creed didn’t like the sounds of this.

“That is not on my list of questions. Maybe they had some training personnel in the area. The gentleman said he knew you. That you two had worked together years ago.”

“I don’t know anybody at the DoD. And I haven’t worked with a military dog in a long time.”

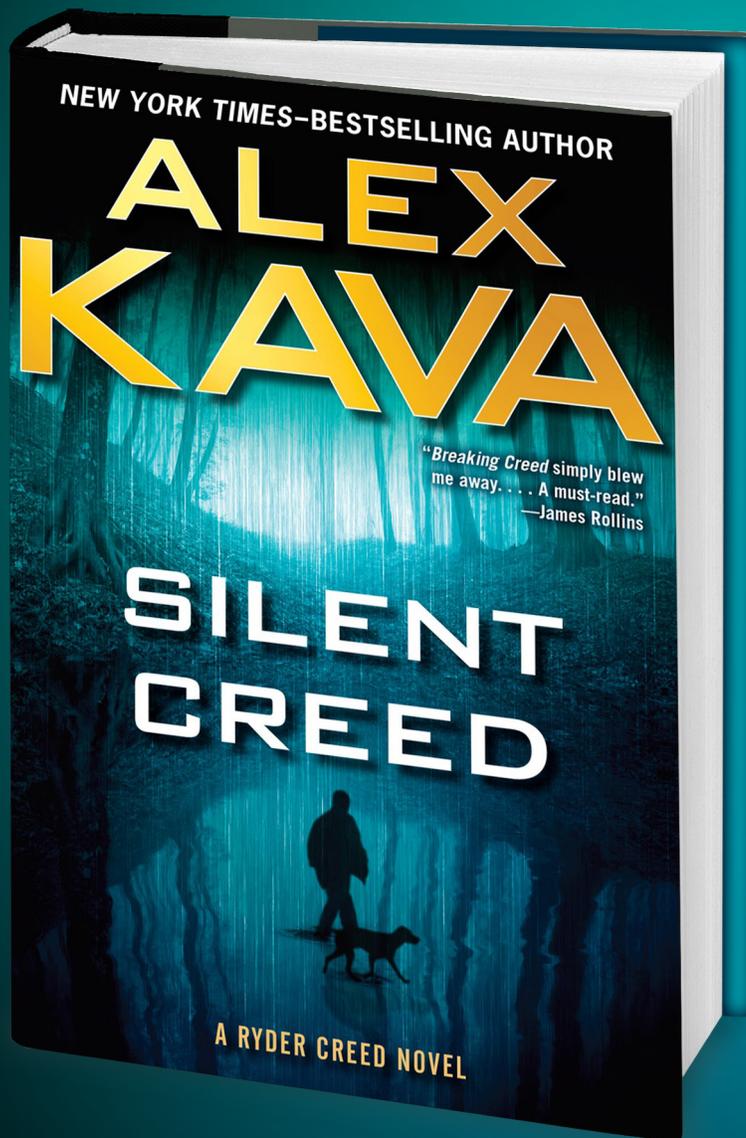
Creed could hear her flipping pages. She kept impeccable records and always got more information than she actually needed before she confirmed an assignment.

“Here it is,” she finally said. “Logan. Lt. Col. Peter Logan.”

Afghanistan. Creed felt like acid had slid into his stomach.

Over seven years ago, and yet just the mention of Peter Logan brought back images and memories he had hoped were long buried.

PREORDER
SILENT CREED



AMAZON

BARNES & NOBLE

BOOKS-A-MILLION

iBOOKS

INDIEBOUND