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In the Zone

Allan Jones

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CHAPTER **ONE**

Zak Archer was about to give up searching for his friend in the old factory building when he heard a scuffling sound from above. He glanced up in time to see something large and heavy plummeting towards him from one of the steel gantries.

He jumped back with a startled yell. The thing hit the concrete floor with a sickening thud. Zak stumbled, his heart thundering.

The thing was Spizz. He lay there, all twisted and wrong; his head at an unnatural angle, his face towards Zak, his eyes open but blank. A trickle of blood ran from his mouth.

Zak scrambled to his feet. His brain had stalled with the

shock, but his body was on automatic. He stared at the contorted body of his dead friend, unable to take it in.

A spray can rolled from Spizz's torn backpack, rattling as it crossed the floor. Zak watched it in a blank daze.

He had come here to check that Spizz was okay. This was where his friend liked to hide out when he was in trouble. He'd guessed that Spizz had been picking pockets again – but he'd chosen his victim badly this time. That big blond-haired guy with the shark eyes Zak had seen chasing him through the crowded Games Arcade had looked dangerous. Vicious, even.

Another sound from above made Zak snap his head upwards.

Two men were hanging over the rail of the lofty gantry. The blond man and another – a man with bushy black hair and a pocked, red-skinned face that looked like day-old pizza.

A cold dread ran through Zak's body.

Had they chucked Spizz over the rail?

You don't kill people for picking your pocket.

The men looked down at him, their faces savage and ferocious.

Do you?

Blondie jabbed a finger at Zak as if he was throwing a dart. "Stay there, kid!" he shouted. The faces disappeared. Zak heard the echoing clang of running feet on the metal walkway. He glanced over to the angled steel stairway that would bring them straight to him.

Pain tightened in Zak's chest and he realized he wasn't breathing. He gasped in some air, his brain still scrambled.

Spizz gazed at him blankly like a broken doll.

Get out of here, you idiot! Haven't you figured it out? They *killed* me – and you're next.

Zak heard the clatter of feet on the stairs. They were coming for him.

Fear kicked in and he lurched away from the dead body, blundering over the rubbish and lumps of scrap metal that were scattered over the floor. He raced between the rusting hulks of big old machines, dodging past the sharp edges – running for his life.

The walls of the abandoned factory were covered in the same spray-painted words – over and over again in a rainbow of different colours.

SPIZZ! SPIZZ! SPIZZ ROOLS! SPIZZ ROCKS! SPIZZ!

Spizz had always liked to leave his mark.

As he ran, Zak glimpsed his reflection in a sheet of steel – beneath the stiff spray of his gelled brown hair, his face was twisted in terror. He should never have come here. He should have minded his own business.

Spizz, you mental case! What have you got me into?

He heard Blondie give a yell. "Don't make me have to chase you, kid!" Zak looked over his shoulder in time to see Blondie leap down the last few steps of the stairway and come running after him. Pizza-face was two paces behind, heavier-built, snorting like a charging bull.

The two men were between Zak and the main entrance – but there was a smaller door in the far wall. He ran for it, leaping over the debris, zigzagging around the big machines.

He hit the door at full speed, barging into it with his shoulder, banging his hands down on the bar that held it shut. He reeled back, gasping in pain. The door was locked or jammed or something.

He was trapped. *Idiot!*

Blondie and Pizza-face slowed to a walk, like jackals with cornered prey. They were only about five metres away now.

"Don't be scared," Blondie called with a smile that cut his face open like a knife-wound. "We're not going to hurt you."

Zak's heart banged against his ribs. His whole body was shaking.

Pizza-face moved away from Blondie, his beefy arms spreading to make it harder for Zak to dodge past them. "We just want to talk to you, kid."

"Talk about what?" Zak shouted, his eyes darting to and fro in search of some other way out. "Talk about why you killed Spizz?"

"You've got it all wrong, kid," said Blondie. And again came the razor blade smile as he moved slowly forwards. "That's not how it happened."

Zak spotted something to his right. The windows all along the wall were divided into steel-framed sections and the lowest part of one window was open. The sill was about two metres from the floor and the gap that would lead to the outside was probably no more than thirty centimetres.

Tricky – but not impossible.

Zak pushed up the sleeves of the tatty and stained old anorak he was wearing. It was several sizes too big for him

and he was only wearing it until he could hand it over to another of his friends.

He darted to the side, sprinting for the window. Pizza-face gave a howl of anger as he lurched after him.

Pushing down the fear, Zak focused on the narrow gap. It was full of blue sky. He would have one chance to get this right. He could hear the men's feet clumping on the concrete. Too close! One mistake, one misstep and they'd have him.

He made two long bounding leaps, gathering momentum – then he came down hard with both feet together and his knees bent. Pointing his arms above his head like a diver, he flexed his legs and aimed for the rectangle of sky.

He snatched hold of the metal sill with his fingers and jack-knifed his arms, boosting himself through the slot. The lower lip of the window frame grazed his thighs and shins as he shot through the gap. His heels clicked on the upper lip and he was through. Tucking himself into a ball, he flipped his legs over and hit the ground rolling.

A couple of moments later he was on his feet again, his lungs pumping air, his heart raging in his tight chest. Blood sang in his ears. His head spun with relief at his break-out. He looked back, and saw two angry faces at the window.

All those solitary hours of free-running had paid off. He'd escaped.

"Yeah! How'd you like that?" he shouted, bouncing on his heels and punching the air. "Let's see you get through there, losers!" He felt angry and scared and defiant.

The faces vanished. They'd have to go all the way around

to the main entrance now – he'd be long gone by the time they got out of there.

Then he saw something hit the window from the inside, smashing the frame, sending splintered glass flying. A broken office chair bounced past him as he threw himself away from the rain of glass fragments.

A moment later, Blondie was perched in the broken window frame. He jumped down. His eyes had become vicious slits and his face was ugly with frustrated rage.

Panicking, Zak spun around, already running, looking desperately for a way out.

A huge building site confronted him. This entire area was being torn down and redeveloped. On any other day, the whole place would have been swarming with workmen – but on a Sunday afternoon, it was quiet and still and empty of life.

Tower cranes made T shapes against the sky. Cement mixers and excavators stood idle. The portacabins were locked. Metal and plastic piping formed triangular heaps. Massed bags of cement rose like the battlements of an old castle.

A real obstacle course.

But Zak was good with obstacle courses.

The earth under his feet was scarred and furrowed by the tracks of heavy vehicles. The ground sloped down to a tall chain-link fence with padlocked gates.

Zak ran for the fence. He glanced over his shoulder. The two men were close behind him – and they had murder in their eyes.

He ran faster, focusing on the rapidly approaching fence.

He heard shouting behind him.

Now he was running full-tilt at the fence, springing high, catching hold of the wire with both hands and the toes of both feet. He used his speed to bound up to the top. He folded his legs under him, balancing for a moment on the unsteady fence before launching himself into the air on the far side.

Bracing himself, he landed well on all fours, propelling himself onward with hands and feet.

He ran on, glancing around. He had expected to see the two men staring at him in amazement through the chain links. But Blondie was already at the top of the fence and even thickset Pizza-face was halfway up the far side.

These guys were in good shape.

Zak jinked to the right and sprang onto a big stack of cement sacks. Grey dust spouted into the air as he ran along the top of the stack and leaped across to a triangular pile of long yellow piping. Spreading his arms for balance, running with one foot directly in front of the other, he sped along the ridge of pipes as they creaked and shifted under him.

But Blondie was no slouch. Zak saw him racing alongside the stack of pipes, keeping pace with him.

A wooden plank led from the far end of the heap of pipes, stretching across to a hump of raw earth. And from there it was just a short run to a brick wall and the buildings beyond.

Zak risked another look back as he hit the plank. Blondie and Pizza-face were still close on his tail, running hard.

Zak sprinted along the plank and went careering down the slope of hard-packed earth, heading for the wall. Two metres? Easy.

He was up and over it in a flash. There was a longer drop on the far side, maybe four metres down into a narrow alleyway that ran between the wall and some kind of tall office building. He hesitated a moment then made the jump. It jarred him, but he knew how to flex his legs to absorb the impact.

Then he realized his mistake. He turned. To the left the alley led to a dead end. A metal door blocked the exit in the other direction. There were no doors in the wall of the building, and the only windows were high out of reach.

There was no way out.

Zak heard a panting grunt. Blondie was on the top of the wall. He was grinning as he jumped down.

"Fast but not too smart, eh, kid?" Blondie said, and suddenly there was a long serrated hunting knife in his fist. He moved forwards, his eyes glittering.

"Let's get this over with."

CHAPTER **TWO**

Zak jumped back, keeping a distance between himself and Blondie. The knife flashed in the sunlight. Pizza-face appeared at the top of the wall, scarlet-cheeked, sweating and blowing. He threw a leg over and lowered himself to the ground.

"Wrong place, wrong time, Speedy Gonzales," he spat, lumbering towards them.

Zak was terrified, but he wasn't finished. These murderers were *not* going to get him, not like they'd got Spizz. He'd seen one slim opportunity to get himself out of that hole. He spun around and raced for a pair of big dumpsters that stood at the blind end of the alley. He sprang onto the nearest dumpster

and jumped up to grab a drainpipe that ran under a small window. The window was divided in two and one side was open.

Quick as an eel, Zak was through the window. Now he found himself in a washroom with big steel sinks and piles of towels and mops and buckets. The door leading out was unlocked. He flung himself into a corridor and slammed the door behind him. He felt a little giddy, as if he'd just stepped off a white-knuckle ride.

The long empty corridor stretched in both directions. There were double swing doors at either end. Now if he could get down to ground level and find an open door, he'd be home free!

He ran along the corridor and pushed through the swing doors. Stairs led up and down. He took the stairs down four at a time. Things were all too raw and terrible for him to feel pleased with himself – but the relief at having escaped stamped a wild, fixed grin on his face.

And then he came to the exit and found it blocked by a steel shutter. The grin vanished. Frustrated, Zak hammered on the shutter with both fists. It rattled and clanged, but it would take more than fists to shift it. Doors led left and right, but they were locked. There was another pair of swing doors and more stairs that went down to the basement – that was no use to him. He wanted out!

He paused, forcing himself to calm down and think for a moment. If he went back up again, he might find an open window on the street-side of the building.

At least he had time to consider his options now he'd left Blondie and Pizza-face stranded in that alley.

A noise from above proved him wrong. Blondie was staring down the stairwell at him. The man gave a yell of frustrated anger as Zak kicked through the swing doors and raced along another corridor, trying every door as he went.

They were all locked.

The boom of doors bursting open echoed along the corridor and Zak spun around to see Blondie again.

Unbelievable!

This guy was like the Terminator.

Panic welled up. Zak felt himself losing control.

He spotted a couple of steel-framed chairs and a small table up against the wall. He snatched at one of the chairs and spun it around, releasing it to go bouncing along the corridor.

Yes!

Blondie was moving too fast to avoid it. He tried to jump, but the chair caught him on the knee and he crashed to the floor.

Zak didn't wait to see how badly he'd hurt the man. He didn't care. He shouldered his way through more swing doors and hit another stairwell. He went up the stairs in great leaps, arms swinging, chest heaving, gulping in air. He came to the landing just as Pizza-face burst through another set of swing doors right behind him.

But Zak had found his rhythm now. It was something that happened when he was running – a moment when the gears

in his brain and body seemed to mesh and he suddenly felt as though he could outrun the wind.

Zak lunged to the side as the big man grabbed for him. He twisted in mid-air, striking his feet off the wall and darting past Pizza-face so that he was halfway up the next flight of stairs as the red-faced man was still grabbing for where he'd been a split second before.

Three flights up, he ran out of floors. A final, narrow concrete set of stairs led to a grey metal door. The roof, maybe?

Zak scrambled up the stairs and yanked down hard on the door handle. It gave suddenly and he tumbled forwards, sprawling on to a wide flat roof under a scorching sun.

He was on his feet again in an instant.

Apart from the brick-built block with the door in it, Zak couldn't see any obvious way off the roof. Maybe there was a fire escape ladder or something?

He ran across the roof. Nothing.

He heard the clang of the steel door being barged open. Blondie and his knife were on the roof. But he was limping now. He must have hurt his leg somehow. Aww! Shame!

Beyond a gulf of empty air, Zak saw the rooftop of another building.

Taking long deep breaths, he sprinted hard, his eyes fixed on the far roof.

He lifted himself. His leading foot came down a final time on the raised edge of the roof. He pushed off into space. There was a deep, yawning trench of nothingness under him. The wind rushed in his ears. The blood pounded in his temples.

He felt exhilarated. Focused.

Zak landed awkwardly on the far roof, twisting his ankle and crashing over and over on the hot tarmac. He came to a bone-jarring halt up against the brick trim of a sloping skylight, gasping for breath, hurting all over, winded and dizzy. But he'd made it.

His ankle was on fire. It wasn't a serious injury – he knew that from past experience – but it would slow him down. Long enough for Blondie to make the same leap with that big knife in his paw.

Zak sat up, resting his back against the brickwork, and looked across to where Blondie stood balancing on the edge of the far rooftop. The knife flashed sunlight. Blondie looked over at Zak, as though weighing up his chances. He was favouring his right leg. Maybe he wouldn't be able to make the jump after all.

A few tense seconds passed. Zak was about to get to his feet when Pizza-face arrived.

"Get over there," Blondie ordered.

Pizza-face leaned over the edge of the roof. He gave Blondie a dubious shrug.

"The kid did it – you can do it," Blondie snapped. "Go!"

Tightening his lips to a thin white line, Pizza-face backed away. Blondie stared at Zak and a slow smile twisted his mouth. He raised the knife towards Zak and made a swift, sideways slashing movement across the air. My knife – your throat. Any minute now.

Zak felt sick.

He watched as Pizza-face came running up to the roof edge and launched himself off.

He's going to make it. I'm dead.

But halfway across the gap, it was obvious Pizza-face wasn't going to make it after all. He lost momentum, his arms and legs flailing, his face twisted with fear and despair. He smacked into the top of the wall, one hand and one elbow catching hold of the raised edge, his expression exploding into agony.

Without thinking, Zak scrambled forwards, reaching out to help him. A crazy thing to do, really – it just felt instinctive to try and save the guy from falling if he could. He'd worry about the consequences later.

But the elbow slipped off the wall and the terrified face vanished. For a moment, Zak saw the white fingers clinging on. Then they were gone.

There was a horrible silence.

Strange. In movies people always yelled when they fell to their deaths.

Arrrrrgggggghhhhhhhhh . . . Splat!

Pizza-face didn't make a sound.

Zak moved to the edge of the wall and peered down. A dark lump stained the grey tarmac below.

Zak didn't feel sorry for him. A bit sick maybe, and pretty disgusted by the gruesome way the man had died. But his horrible death had been payback for what had happened to Spizz. It had served him right.

He looked across to where Blondie was standing. The man's

face was set and hard. Cold blue eyes glittered.

A kind of terrified defiance blazed through Zak. "Come and get me, then!" he shouted. "Any time you're ready."

Blondie looked at him venomously for a moment, then turned and limped back across the rooftop towards the door.

Zak had the feeling that this wasn't over.

Zak made his way along the narrow road that ran beside the railway arches under Waterloo Station. Rubbish was piled up against the black brickwork and scraps of old newspaper rolled and floated in the breeze. The road was sometimes used as a rat-run by taxi drivers, but mostly it was home to a ragged scattering of street people.

His ankle ached still, but the immediate pain had quickly worn off and he wasn't even limping as he entered the shadowy underworld of the forgotten and unwanted people of London.

A skylight and a helpfully open window had been Zak's way out of the office building. But, all the way here, he'd been looking over his shoulder, expecting at any moment to see Blondie again. He felt sick and headachy and he just wanted to be somewhere quiet so he could lie down and recover from his ordeal.

Spizz hadn't been a close mate for some time, but Zak had never seen a dead body before, and thinking about those frozen, open eyes gave him the shakes. And those two guys wanted to do the same to him. What had he stumbled into?

But before he went home, there was someone he needed to see. Someone he could talk to about what had happened.

He found the arch he was looking for and walked into the deep cool darkness under the old Victorian brickwork. Makeshift beds and rusty supermarket trolleys and bags of strange personal stuff lined the walls of the arch. One or two bodies were huddled there, but Zak guessed that most of them were off hunting for food or compassion.

He came to an elaborate construction of hardboard and wooden slats and plastic sheeting. A ragged blanket served as a door. He tapped his fingers on the hardboard roof.

"Dodge? You in there?" he called. His friend had three or four boltholes around the city, but this was kind of his base camp.

A deep gravelly voice responded from within. "Who comes a'calling?"

Zak gave the usual response. "A wayfaring stranger, Dodge."

"Welcome, stranger." The blanket was thrown back. "What have you got for me, Zachary? What exotic cargoes do you bear? Sandalwood and cinnamon and sweet white wine?"

A thin man in a ruinous pin-stripe suit looked out at him, his face half-hidden by a long black beard, his sunken eyes bright with intelligence under bushy brows. The wreckage of boots covered his feet, held together with string and duck tape.

He was the only person in Zak's life who called him Zachary. Zak had known him for a couple of years now, ever since Zak had offered him half a sandwich one chilly winter

afternoon on Waterloo Bridge. The thing about Dodge was that he never made judgements and he never told Zak what to do. Zak could be angry or fed up or frustrated or confused, and Dodge would just listen to him while he talked. There were no other adults in Zak's life who did that. Everyone else had an agenda. Dodge was just a pal.

Zak dropped to his knees and the man moved aside to let him in. It smelled in there, but Zak was used to it. An open tuna tin and another of baked beans were the remnants of Dodge's lunch.

"No poetry today, Dodge," Zak said wearily. "I've got stuff I have to tell you." He looked into Dodge's dark eyes. "Really horrible stuff, Dodge. I don't know how . . . I can't really . . . it was . . ." He paused.

Dodge's hand rested on his shoulder. "Start at the beginning," he said gently. "Carry on till you get to the end, and then stop."

"I was coming to see you," Zak began hesitantly. "Paul from the Home was going to throw this out." He plucked at the big anorak. "I rescued it. I thought it would do you."

"Very nicely." Dodge nodded. "It can be cold under here – even in July."

"I stopped off on the way to play some games at the arcade. I was minding my own business when Spizz came barging into me like an elephant – he nearly knocked me over."

Dodge frowned. "Spizz? The boy with the Michelangelo aspirations?"

Zak stared blankly at him.

"Always painting walls," Dodge explained, miming spraying paint.

"Yes. That's him. He was running away from this big blond guy." Horror filled Zak's eyes as he remembered the look on Blondie's face. "I thought he must have tried picking the guy's pocket. Anyway – Spizz legged it with the other guy running after him. I carried on playing for a bit, then I thought I'd go check if Spizz had got away okay. He usually hides out in an empty factory off Sumner Street." Zak swallowed hard. "I went in there, Dodge . . . and . . . and . . ."

Slowly, piece by dreadful piece, Zak told his friend everything that had happened on that impossible Sunday afternoon.