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Codename Quicksilver: The Tyrant King

Written by

Allan Jones

Published by

Orion Children's Books

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CODENAME QUICKSILVER

The Tyrant King

(((page ii – other titles)))

Look out for the other ***Codename Quicksilver*** *books*

In the Zone
Burning Sky
Killchase
Adrenaline Rush
End Game

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CODENAME QUICKSILVER

The Tyrant King

Allan Jones

With special thanks to Rob Rudderham.

Orion Children's Books logo

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First published in Great Britain in 2012
by Orion Children's Books
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 4440 0546 2

Printed in Great Britain by [details to follow]

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To come

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Chapter 1

Zak Archer was in the zone. Alert. Tireless. Wired.

He had never felt so alive in his life. Which was odd, considering how many people were out to get him.

Dawn had just broken. He was on the outskirts of the town. He had almost reached his objective.

Almost.

He dived for cover then belly-crawled to a low wall, his backpack bouncing on his shoulders.

He crouched behind the wall and checked his Mob.

Things looked good.

So far.

The Mob was a smartphone used by British Intelligence. It was slim, oval and silvery, with an 80GB capacity. Cutting-edge technology. Zak pinched and flicked and the on-screen map expanded, showing the town in more detail.

A blue pulse showed his position. A red dot revealed his target. A yellow line ran along the shortest route between the two points.

Zak tried to stay calm and focused, but his heart was beating fast. It was a cool, overcast morning, but sweat was running down his forehead.

This was all happening too soon. He wasn't ready for it. Colonel Hunter had made a big mistake asking him to undertake this mission. He'd fail – and that would be it.

Done. Finished.

No! Stop thinking like that.

He pulled off his backpack and opened it. He took out the snakescope, a nifty gadget which looked like a conical pair of binoculars with a flexible cable attached to the front. Great for seeing around corners.

He kneeled and fed the cable over the top of the wall, twisting the dials as he looked through the twin eyepieces. A magnified circle roved across the deserted streets.

No sign of life. But it was creepy to know that there were enemies hidden somewhere out there, waiting for the opportunity to get the drop on him.

Zak had undergone eleven weeks of intensive physical training since joining Project 17's fast-track course. It had been gruelling and relentless, and there were plenty of nights when he'd crashed out in his bunk bed, aching in places he never knew existed.

And now he had to make use of every trick he'd learned, or Project 17 would be down one agent and his new life would be over as soon as it had started.

No pressure, then.

He turned and put the snakescope into his backpack. Fitting the pack over his shoulders, he leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing.

Go on four.

One . . . two . . . three . . . GO!

He darted up and over the wall, running hard, arms pumping, feet skimming the tarmac. Part of his training had been about learning to control his ability to get into the zone.

The zone.

The zone had always been there, although it had never had a name till he'd met the young agents who formed the branch of British Secret Services called Project 17.

The zone was a place where the gears between his brain and his muscles meshed. The zone was a place where he could outrun the wind. The zone was the best place in the world.

Zak heard the whine of a bullet and the sharp skip as it ricocheted off the ground at his heels.

They had found him.

Even in the zone, he couldn't outrun a sniper's bullet.

He looked around, seeking new cover.

A window was open – no more than thirty centimetres – but it was enough. He bounded over a low stone wall, across soft earth and, arms pointed like a diver's, through the narrow gap.

He rolled across bare floorboards, limbs tucked in, head down, letting his momentum carry him to the far wall.

Then he sprang up, listening for movement over the hammering of the blood in his temples.

Booted feet. Running fast. Coming closer.

He was out of the door and halfway up a staircase almost before his brain could catch up with him. He raced along a hallway to a back room, pulled the window open and peered down. There was the sloping roof of an outhouse beneath him, then a bare stretch of earth, a fence, and another row of houses.

Zak jumped onto the windowsill and let himself drop, sliding down the roof. He caught the gutter with both hands, boosted himself off, then somersaulted onto hard-packed earth and started running again the moment his feet hit. Up and over the fence and into a narrow alley.

That was when he heard the distant throb of helicopter rotors.

Wow. They really were throwing everything at him.

A black Humvee skidded to a roaring halt at the end of the alley. Blocking his way out.

Zak knew he was almost out of options. But not quite. He ran towards the vehicle, gathering speed, his mind sharp.

He launched himself into the air, kicking out so his feet struck the car door just as it was being opened. There was a yell as the door crashed shut. His momentum lifted him. He landed with both feet on the roof of the Humvee, then sprang forwards, hitting the ground shoulder-first. Rolling. On his feet again and heading away at top speed.

He heard shouting. A bullet zinged, striking sparks off a raised walkway directly ahead.

He snatched at the metal railings and slid through on a cushion of air. Rolling across paving stones. Up again. Running across an open courtyard between tall buildings. People in black were coming at him from all sides now. Five or six of them, only eyes and mouths visible through black masks.

Zak jumped onto the top of the first of a row of concrete bollards, then bounced from one to another along the whole row as his pursuers tried in vain to grab him out of the air.

No chance!

He sprang from the top of the last bollard, using every ounce of muscle-power to boost himself up onto a high wall. He snatched at the top, his feet striking the brickwork, propelling him up and over onto a flat tarred roof.

He raced to another wall and scaled it at speed. But he was running against the skyline now – an easy target. And he could see the black helicopter gliding towards him like a high-tech mosquito.

He had to get off that roof and quickly.

He jumped again, aiming for the wall of an adjacent building. He flexed his legs and bounced backwards and forwards between the walls of the two buildings as he plummeted to the ground.

He landed well, absorbing the impact with bent knees, and continued down the long alley.

Zak took out his Mob and flicked to find the map again.

The blue pulse and the red dot were nearly touching. He had almost hit the target.

Now speed would have to give way to stealth.

He dipped into his backpack and pulled out a Taz – an electronic device designed to deliver an electric shock. It looked like a slim black torch. He flicked a switch and a red spot lit up.

The Taz was fully charged.

He edged along the wall and shot a glance around the corner. There was a single guard at the door.

Zak moved closer, silent as a ghost.

It was no good. The man heard him. He turned, raising his automatic machine gun, eyes fierce through the black ski mask.

Nothing to lose now.

Zak hurled himself forward, gripping the Taz like a knife. He cannoned into the man, aiming the Taz at the man's neck as they both tumbled to the ground.

But he missed his mark. The man was twice his size and weight. He threw Zak off easily and sent him flying so that he landed in a dizzy heap.

He rolled onto his back and saw the man looming over him, silhouetted against the white sky.

"Not this time, kid," he said, aiming the gun.

Zak flung out his arm, flicking the switch on the handle of the Taz. A pair of micro-wires snaked out, the twin barbed electrodes digging into the man's thigh. The Taz hummed and vibrated with power as the man collapsed on the ground.

Then Zak was on his feet He pulled the gun from the man's hands and threw it aside. The man would be up again the moment the electric charge ran out. He had only a few seconds.

He raced up the steps to the entrance of the target building. It was an office block. He ran into a wide, empty foyer.

He saw the thin tripwire a thousandth of a second before his ankle hit it. He stumbled to a halt as the wire snapped.

"Oh, no! *No!*"

There was a loud muffled bang and suddenly the foyer was full of billowing grey smoke. Zak felt the floor fall away beneath his feet.

He went crashing down into darkness.

So close, and right at the end he'd walked into a booby trap.

Idiot!

He landed heavily, and lay gasping as the smoke swirled around him.

A figure emerged at his side. A heavy boot pressed down on his chest.

Eyes glinted through a ski mask. A machine pistol pointed at him.

“Game over,” said a voice.

There was a sharp crack and Zak felt an intense pain in his chest.

[chapter ends]

[new chapter, fresh page]

Chapter 2

"Get off me!" Zak groaned.

The figure lifted its foot and pulled the mask away to reveal a wide, high-cheeked-boned face under slicked-down hair. Agent Jackhammer shouldered his paint gun and reached a hand down to Zak, hauling him to his feet.

Zak rubbed his chest. His fingers were smeared with red paint.

"That hurt," he said. "Aren't you meant to shoot from at least three metres away?"

Jackhammer grinned and nodded.

Zak heard applause from above. He looked up. The smoke was clearing. A group of people in black were standing around the trapdoor through which he'd fallen.

"Well done, Agent Quicksilver," Colonel Hunter called. The applause rose and there were a few whistles and whoops.

"Way to go, Silver!" he heard Switch shout. "You almost made it all the way."

Zak smiled despite the ache in his chest.

Jackhammer turned and walked outside. Zak followed.

By the time he emerged into the open, the helicopter was gone and the SAS soldiers were already piling into their vehicles. Their commander shook Colonel Hunter's hand as the last of them climbed into the armoured personnel carrier. The engine gunned, and there was a screech of rubber as the army vehicle sped along the deserted road.

"Did I pass?" Zak asked the Colonel.

"I'll make a full assessment of your performance in the next few days," the Colonel replied. "But I don't think you have anything to worry about." He turned away, speaking rapidly into his Mob.

Zak grinned. He thought he'd blown it when he hit the tripwire. But he was in! He'd passed Project 17's physical training course. He was on his way to becoming a full agent. The others gathered around him.

Jackhammer slapped Zak on the back, almost knocking him over. "Not bad, kid," he said. "We might make an agent of you yet."

Switch lassoed Zak's neck with his arm and knuckled his head playfully. "You did good, Silver!" he said. "I only got to the plaza when I took the Run. That thing with the bollards – amazing!"

Zak grinned, wriggling free of Switchblade's over-enthusiastic grip.

"It's no big deal," he said jokingly. "I do what I do, you know?"

Colonel Hunter's voice rang out. "We're off, people. Leave the place the way you'd like to find it." He approached Zak. "You'll be dropped off at the Academy," he told him. "Switchblade, Wildcat and Jackhammer – you're in the van with him. After the drop off, head for London. We'll meet at Fortress at seventeen hundred."

Two black transit vans pulled up and the agents of Project 17 scrambled inside. Zak sat in the back with Jackhammer and Switchblade and a female agent called Wildcat. She was a strange one, Zak thought. She spent all her free time working out in the gym or playing brain-fryingly complicated logic games on her Mob. She had an explosion of ash-white hair and she wore black lipstick and thick black eyeliner.

A Goth secret agent. That was new!

Zak looked out of the tinted windows of the van as they drove away from the town and up into the hills.

It wasn't a real town at all – it had been built by the British Army to train for urban warfare. No one had ever lived there. No one ever would. It sat in a remote valley in the countryside and hardly anyone even knew it existed.

"I knew I'd lost it when I hit that tripwire," Zak said. He was still buzzing from the adrenaline rush of the chase. "Has anyone ever got in and out with the information?"

Jackhammer shook his head. "Hardly anyone even gets into the building." Zak liked the new note of respect in his voice. Hammer was hard to impress. "I heard of one guy who got right into the target room before they took him down," he continued, "but that was only once, if it happened at all."

"It was four years ago," Wildcat said. "The guy was codename Slingshot. But he wasn't in Project 17 – he was in another branch of the Secret Services. Everyone in MI5 training has to do the Run at some point." The others looked at her. "What? I read the files in the computer archives," she said. "I like to read."

Zak realized it was crazy, but knowing that just *one* MI5 agent had done better than him on the Run made his competitive hackles rise. Who was this Slingshot, and what was so special about him?

"I've never heard of Slingshot," said Switch. "What happened to him?"

Wildcat shrugged and went back to her Mob. "No idea," she said casually. "Discontinued, maybe."

Zak shivered. He didn't know why. His friend Dodge would have said: "Someone just walked on your grave, Zachary." Not a nice feeling.

Discontinued. What did that mean? Quit? Dead? Zak found he really wanted to know.

The van bounced along the rough track, jolting and jarring its passengers as it crossed the empty hills. Zak leaned his head against the side of the van, thinking about his curious friendship with Dodge – the homeless man who lived under the arches of Waterloo Station in London.

Dodge was his one true adult friend. It had all started with the sharing of a cheese sandwich. Zak had had food, Dodge had looked hungry. That had been more than two years ago now – and since then they had been really tight. Dodge would be proud of him right now, Zak thought. He hadn't seen him for weeks, but he was hoping to get away sometime soon to see Dodge and tell him about his new life. He'd sworn Dodge to secrecy. Dodge would never say a word about Project 17.

Jackhammer poked him in the ribs, jerking Zak out of his thoughts.

"You think it's been hard work so far?" he said with a grin.

"Yes," said Zak, frowning and pushing Hammer's hand away.

"Try sixteen weeks in a classroom," Hammer laughed. "You've got some hardcore brainwork coming up."

Zak already knew that. Before he could become a full agent, he had to undertake a four-month academic course. Desk work. Brain work. What Colonel Hunter called "a steep learning curve".

He'd already had a taste of what was to come. The Colonel had given him a map of London that revealed all the secret tunnels which burrowed under the streets and buildings of the capital. Every tunnel had a code-mark in it, and by learning those codes, a person could move unseen right across subterranean

London and always know exactly where they were. It had been a lot to take in, but Zak had a good memory, and he'd cracked most of it already.

"Do you know how many people flunk the Academy?" Switchblade said.

"No, I don't," Zak replied. "But I bet you're dying to tell me."

"One in three," said Switch.

"I won't flunk," Zak said.

Jackhammer laughed. "Easy to say that now."

"You passed, and you've got the brainpower of a gym sock," Zak retorted. "I think I'll be fine."

Jackhammer winked and made a shooting gesture with his hand. Hammer could be okay, as long as you gave as good as you got.

Switchblade's Mob buzzed. He frowned and put it to his ear.

"Yes, Control?"

Zak heard Colonel Hunter's faint voice. He was in the other van, heading to London.

"Got it." There was a sudden urgency to Switchblade's tone. He called to the driver. "Change of plan – Control wants us back at Fortress as quickly as possible."

"What about Quicksilver?" the driver asked.

"He's with us," said Switchblade. He glanced at Zak. "Looks like the Academy is going to have to wait," he said.

[section break]

The room was very high-tech. White walls. No windows. Lit by halogen strips. A wide plasma screen filled the wall at one end. You wouldn't have known from the inside, but the room was thirty metres below ground level, under Moorgate

Station in London, deep in the heart of the secret underground complex known as Fortress.

Zak, Switch, Jackhammer and Wildcat sat facing the screen, waiting for the show to begin. Bug was there too. Bug spent most of his time in his own little room filled with computers and plasma screens and a collection of toy frogs. As far as computers were concerned, twelve-year-old Bug was the uber-nerd, the King of Geeks.

The door opened and Colonel Hunter entered. "Okay, people," he began immediately. "We've been asked to help out with a situation that's developing in Montevisto." He stepped up to the screen. "Bug – light it up."

Bug tapped at a hand-held electronic device and the screen burst into life.

It showed a satellite image of a curving coastline above blue sea. The picture zoomed in on the long stretch of a seafront town with forested hills behind.

"This is Montevisto," said the Colonel. "It's a sovereign city state, a self-ruling kingdom on the French Riviera. Bug – show and tell, please."

The satellite image morphed into a map. Zak leaned forwards, taking it all in. Wondering where this briefing was going.

A series of photographs popped up along the top of the screen. A middle-aged man, stern and severe, with a neat-trimmed greying beard. A younger woman, blonde, stunningly beautiful. "The Corvetti family has ruled Montevisto for three hundred years. This is King Edgar III and his wife, Sophia."

"Way to go, Edgar," Jackhammer sang out. "Looks like he hooked himself a supermodel."

"Queen Sophia is twenty years younger than the king," Colonel Hunter continued. "And, yes, well spotted Jackhammer, she was a photographers' model before she married the king." A third photo appeared – this time of a rather solemn-looking boy with fair hair and wide blue eyes. "They have one son and heir – the Crown Prince Viktor." A fourth picture showed a young man in his late teens – handsome, wearing what looked like motor racing clothes, grinning into the camera. "This is the King's nephew, Prince Rafe, the son of Edgar's younger sister. Prince Rafe's parents were killed five years ago in a terrorist attack."

The word *terrorist*, Zak noticed, suddenly caught everyone's attention.

"What kind of terrorists do they have?" asked Wildcat.

"They're a group calling themselves MARS," said the Colonel. "Their full title is the Montevisto Anti Royalist Strike-force. Their professed aim is to turn Montevisto into a republic – to get rid of the Monarchy. But the kind of republic they have in mind would not be democratic. From their manifesto, it's certain that they would set up a very unpleasant totalitarian state." The Colonel gestured to some documents set in front of each agent. "After this briefing, you'll need to read those background files. They give a full account of all the trouble MARS has caused in Montevisto over the past fifteen years, as well as documentation detailing the security measures imposed by the security services to try and stamp them out."

Zak flicked quickly through the papers on the desk. Among the closely typed documents, there were newspaper reports of atrocities, photos of burned out cars and wrecked buildings, and bodies covered with sheets.

"As you can see, MARS has caused a lot of trouble in the past, but they've been almost wiped out inside Montevisto, thanks to the work of the King's

security forces, " the Colonel continued. "However, they're down but not out. Although they have very few active followers in Montevisto itself, it is believed that they have sleeper cells in cities in various parts of the world – including one right here in London."

"What's a sleeper cell?" Zak asked, guessing he was the only one in the room who didn't know the answer.

"It's a small group of dedicated fanatics who blend into their surroundings," said the Colonel. "They live in ordinary houses, have ordinary jobs. Walk the dog. Go to the local supermarket. The kind of neighbours you'd say hello to if you saw them in the street."

"But underneath, they're sneaky and evil," said Switch. "Underneath it all, they're just waiting for the word. Then they go to work and bad things happen."

"Which is why Project 17 has been asked to become involved." The Colonel's voice took on a steely edge. "In two days' time, King Edgar, Queen Sophia and the two princes will be coming to London – and we have good reason to believe that a sleeper cell of MARS intends to stage a deadly-force attack while they're here." His eyes narrowed. "We believe they plan to kill the King."

[chapter ends]