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Codename Quicksilver 3 Burning Sky

Written by

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Published by

Orion Childrens

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With special thanks to Rob Rudderham

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 0547 9

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

CHAPTER **ONE**

NEW YORK. 21:30 LOCAL TIME.

Zak Archer twisted on the broad leather seat of the Lincoln MKZ and gave a final wave to the cheering crowds as the limousine slid away from the concert hall and nosed smoothly into the traffic of West 57th Street in New York.

He watched the lights of Carnegie Hall disappear into the distance. It was late evening, but the bright lights of the big city shone all around them and the noise of the traffic was loud and constant. New York never slept,

and Zak felt as though the spirit of the city had got right inside him. He was wide awake and wired as they glided between the tall buildings. So far Operation Mozart was right on target.

The autograph-hunting crowd at the stage door hadn't noticed that the boy handing out signed CDs through the open window of the limo was not the same one who had wowed them at the concert grand piano only fifteen minutes earlier. The switch had gone perfectly.

Zak grinned as he settled back into the plush leather and loosened his bowtie. A huge bunch of red roses lay at his side, the cellophane wrap crackling. A few remaining CDs were scattered on the seat. He picked one of them up.

The front of the booklet showed a boy of about fourteen, dressed very formally in white tie and tailcoat, with a slightly dreamy, faraway look in the brown eyes that gazed out from behind black-rimmed glasses.

Zak read the fancy lettering. *Alexi Roman Plays Selections from the Classics.* He could see his own reflection in the background of the CD cover. He smiled again and pushed up the black-rimmed glasses that had slid down his own nose.

They were clear glass. Zak had perfect vision. The spectacles were just part of the disguise. Along with the

nerdy hair-do and the uncomfortable tuxedo he was wearing. Jeans and a sloppy T-shirt were more Zak's style.

Zak stared at his ghostly reflection alongside Alexi's picture.

"Weird," he said, not for the first time. He still couldn't get over how alike they looked. Zak Archer and Alexi Roman – with just a bad haircut and glasses to help with the illusion, Zak was the boy genius's identical twin!

Which was exactly why Zak had been called in to play the lead role in Project 17's operation.

The limousine came to a sudden juddering halt. Zak peered through the glass screen that separated him from the driver, and out through the windscreen. A bunch of over-excited people were running across the road, disrupting the traffic, laughing and yelling.

The intercom crackled. "Sorry, Mr Roman," came the chauffeur's voice. "It looks like someone's been celebrating a bit too heartily."

"No problem," Zak replied, impersonating Alexi's slightly posh voice. Colonel Hunter had warned him to speak as little as possible, but Zak liked showing off how well he could imitate Alexi's way of talking.

The drunken group wandered off and the traffic started moving again. A couple of turns and a few long

straight streets later they approached the tall oblong of golden lights that formed the front of the Waites Hotel.

The chauffeur spun the wheel and the limousine swung off the main street and cruised towards the sloping road that would take them to the private car park under the hotel.

Zak took his Project 17 issue smartphone out of his pocket. It was a slim silvery oval, cutting-edge touch-screen tech, known among the agents as a Mob. He was about to tap out *arrived Waites safely* when he was blinded by a ferocious blast of red light. It was as if the sun had exploded in his face. Almost instantaneously there came a huge erupting roar and a flash of heat and force. It lifted the limousine off the road and sent it spinning end over end through the flaming air.

20 HOURS EARLIER, THE SAME DAY.
UK TIME 06:30.
Dateline: Fortress.

It was only the lack of windows that suggested there was anything strange about the room, but in fact there was one thing in particular that made this room very unusual indeed. It was thirty metres under the ground, at the heart of the sprawling subterranean complex known

as Fortress – headquarters of the specialist branch of British Intelligence called Project 17.

Great heavy steel girders spanned the ceiling. Halogen lights bathed the white walls and lit up the rows of tables and chairs that faced a huge plasma screen, which was flickering.

The steel girders supported the weight of five metres of reinforced concrete. Another twenty-five metres above the room, the streets of London teemed with life – and only a handful of the seven and a half million people who lived and worked in the city had the slightest inkling of the things that went on far, far below their bustling feet.

Colonel Hunter stood to one side of the plasma screen. Called 'Control' by his agents, he ran the whole of Project 17. He was tall and gaunt with grey hair, a ramrod-straight back and piercing grey eyes that looked as if they could drill through sheet steel. Facing him from behind the desks were Zak and a group of his fellow agents.

They were being briefed on a new mission.

Operation Mozart.

Zak was still a bit bleary-eyed – he'd been wrenched from a deep sleep by an agent named Switchblade, who had grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled

in his ear. "Rise and shine, Silver! Control wants us in the briefing room. Right now." Switch was a big, blond, blue-eyed boy a couple of years older than Zak. A good person to have with you in a tight fix, as Zak had already learned.

Zak had scrambled out of bed and thrown on some clothes. His bedside clock showed 06:12. But these early rises were just one small part of the craziness that came from being on Colonel Hunter's team. And a new mission would mean a welcome diversion from Project 17's schoolroom. Only agents with missions were allowed to skip lessons.

When he had joined Project 17, Zak had been given the codename Quicksilver, but most of the others just called him Silver. Birth names were never used. He had no idea of Switchblade's real name – nor the real identities or backgrounds of any of the other young agents who sat around him in the briefing room. You didn't ask. When someone joined Project 17, a door was closed on their previous life and family. Closed and locked.

At the time, Zak hadn't even known he had a family to lock out. As far as he'd been aware, he'd been orphaned as a baby; and he'd assumed the rest of his life could be found in his Social Services file. There were some foster parents that hadn't worked out, followed by four years

in a children's home. The only part of his life that he felt belonged entirely to him was his friendship with his pal Dodge.

Zak had first encountered Dodge on Waterloo Bridge, two or three years ago. The man was obviously homeless, and Zak had taken pity on him – it was winter and he'd looked cold and hungry. Zak had offered him half a sandwich. They had started chatting, and Zak had been surprised at how well-spoken the man was. He kept quoting from poems and stuff like that, which was odd and intriguing. But what Zak had liked straight away about Dodge was the fact that he listened to what Zak had to say. In Zak's experience, that was pretty unusual in an adult.

They'd quickly become friends. Dodge was the only person Zak had told about Project 17. He knew strictly speaking that he shouldn't have told *anyone* – but Dodge had sworn never to repeat anything Zak told him. And Zak trusted Dodge without reservation.

Everything had changed for Zak shortly after joining Project 17. He'd learned that his mother had been an MI5 field agent and that she and his father had been killed in suspicious circumstances three months after he'd been born, while they were on a mission in Canada. And if that wasn't enough to fry his brain, he'd also been

told he was the subject of a top-secret MI5 file, opened at the time of his birth.

He had the feeling there were a lot more secrets to be unearthed – especially the truth behind the mysterious MI5 agent with the codename Slingshot. Colonel Hunter had said that Slingshot was not his mother – but Zak wasn't so sure, and one day he'd vowed he'd get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Watch this webcam video," Hunter told them. "I'll explain what it means afterwards."

He pressed a remote control and the flickering on the plasma screen resolved itself into an alarming picture. A man's face filled the screen, sweaty and panicking, hugely enlarged, so that every bead of moisture stood out clearly on his forehead and upper lip. As far as Zak could make out, the background was an ordinary, featureless room.

"Peter," the man gasped. "I'm so sorry . . . they forced me . . . I had to do what they said . . . I had no choice." His eyes darted to the side as though he had heard something sinister. He leaned closer, his fear plainly showing. "I know we haven't seen one another for a long time, but you're the one person I can trust with this. And I know you can do what needs to be done." Again the anxious eyes flickered to one side. "There's going to be

a terrorist attack – you have to prevent it."

Zak thought he heard a distant bang, like a door being kicked open.

"The details are in the post to you – but don't try to open it without the key." The man's head snapped around and he got up suddenly so that a filthy and torn shirt filled the screen. His voice was quieter now that he was further from the microphone, but his words were perfectly clear. "Be careful, Peter. You'll destroy it if you try to get in without the key."

A different voice shouted something in the background.

The man bent forwards and his face came back into view. "Protect the boy, Peter . . . you must protect him . . . he's the only one who. . ." The man's voice cut short with a cry. The image swung and tipped over. The screen went blank.

There were a few moments of silence in the briefing room.

Zak was the first to speak. "What was that all about? Who was he?"

"The man's name is Stephen Avon," Colonel Hunter replied.

"The missing electronics genius?" exclaimed Wildcat, an ash-blonde Goth girl agent. She narrowed her sooty black eyes. "Wow – I'd hardly have recognized him. He

looks a total wreck and he's lost a lot of weight since his picture was in the news."

Colonel Hunter pressed the remote and a slideshow of newspaper front pages rolled across the screen. The headlines were all variations on *TOP BOFFIN MISSING* or *ELECTRONICS EXPERT WITH MI5 CONNECTIONS DISAPPEARS.*

The static images changed to a television news report. A well-groomed female newsreader was speaking. There was a photo of a smiling and well-fed Stephen Avon on screen at her back.

"Speculation is growing that Dr Stephen Avon, who went missing from his Berkshire home five days ago, may have been in the pay of a foreign power. Fears have risen about Dr Avon's loyalties since it was revealed by MI5 sources that the laboratory where he worked, and where he kept all the files relevant to his experiments in the field of electro-magnetics, was destroyed in a fire on the night of his disappearance."

Colonel Hunter muted the sound. The newsreader's larger-than-life mouth continued to open and close silently at his side.

"Dr Avon has been missing for five months now," said the Colonel. "An extensive international investigation into his whereabouts is still underway, but there have

been no new developments for some time." He frowned. "There are three possible explanations for what may have happened to him. One: he defected and took all his research with him. Two: he was abducted. And three: he had some kind of mental breakdown. I think this video makes it quite clear that it was option two."

"When did you get the video, Control?" asked Jackhammer, a hefty square-jawed boy with slick brown hair.

"It arrived just after midnight," said Colonel Hunter.

A small, round-faced boy with big eyes and a deep fringe spoke. "It didn't come through me, Control," he said. "I'd have got an alert."

"I received it on my home laptop, Bug," said the Colonel.

Bug was Project 17's slightly odd über-nerd. All things electronic went through him as he sat alone in his little office with its multiple plasma screens and cutting-edge computer technology.

"He sent it to you personally, Control?" asked Wildcat. "Why would he do that?"

The Colonel's sharp eyes scanned the faces in front of him. "I shared a room with Dr Avon at university many years ago," he said. "We were close friends once, although our careers sent us in different directions