

Firestorm Rising

by

John Clewarth

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Front cover artwork

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John dedicates this book to Ann, Ben and Sam.

With love and thanks.

More praise for Firestorm Rising!

“A game of hide ‘n’ seek in a moonlit graveyard turns into a nightmare for Tom and his friends, Jazz and Doc, after a freak fire-storm unleashes an evil from long-dead, ancient, alien bones ... bones of a creature who bends Jazz to her will with a strange pendant that the girl finds in the graveyard. Atmospheric from the start, Firestorm Rising will captivate young readers, and chill their imaginations, in an awesome tale of three children’s struggle against an unearthly force. And just when you think it’s all over and the darkness destroyed ... well, there just has to be a sequel somewhere out there!”

Oliver Eade, author of *Moon Rabbit*, a winner of the WAAYB 2007 New Novel Competition.

“A hair-raising story with a blend of aliens, monsters and kids that will keep you hooked until the very last page!”

Marie Godley, author of *Guardian of the Globe*, *Time Slide*, and the forthcoming teen novel, *Janalya*.

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Prologue

The meteor sizzles through the vastness of space like a giant, blazing phoenix.

Flames trail behind it, ribbons of terrible heat, as it hurtles into Earth's atmosphere.

The sky splits open with the thundery noise – sonic boom, gone mad.

And the sun hides behind a cloud.

* * *

The Caveman runs through the thick roots and leaves of the steaming, prehistoric jungle. His knuckles are white, clutching his long, flint-tipped spear.

Sweating.

Panting.

He has been fishing. He fishes every day. Expert at spiking the big fishes with his deadly weapon. Now, he is the hunted. He had heard the Stegosaurus before he had seen it. Heard the pounding footsteps. Felt the ground shake. Watched the fish dart away as the water broke into huge ripples.

Then it had crashed through the trees.

Now it pursues him, demolishing branches and vegetation. The Caveman dodges, twists and jumps. His heart pounds like a hammer in his chest. The Steg's thick, stumpy legs move remarkably quickly – and it is closing the distance on its prey. The Caveman stumbles on, entering a clearing now, not daring to look back. If he can make it to his cave, he knows he will be safe. He can't see the cave, but he knows it is behind the trees at the far edge of this clearing. He *must* reach it.

The Stegosaurus roars. The Caveman can smell its stinking breath; it is so close behind him. He is only a few strides from safety, when the trees are torn and splintered like matchsticks. His eyes widen, bulging with fear, as he sees the cause of this. The massive Tyrannosaurus Rex tramples over the fallen trunks as if they are grass stalks.

And it sees him.

For an instant, all three stop: Caveman, Steg, T. Rex. Then the two dinosaurs charge - straight at each other. The Caveman is stuck in the middle. He closes his eyes and waits for death. Predatory feet pound. Huge bellows signal even bigger trouble. Terrible gnashing

fangs clatter and clack.

Then – nothing.

The Caveman wonders if he is dead. There is no pain at all. He opens his eyes. And he is puzzled. The giant reptiles have stopped. Both dinosaurs are close enough to reach out their slavering jaws and devour him - but they are still and silent, looking up at the sky, dagger teeth dripping. Their heads are cocked on one side.

The sky cracks, like a pterodactyl shell. The heavens growl.

The end comes fast, as the great burning rock shoots to Earth, swifter than the hunter's spear ever travelled. With a colossal thud, the Caveman and his pursuers are obliterated, as the rock-from-the-sky pummels into the ground. The air is filled with the screeching of thousands of smaller creatures - the lucky ones – as they scatter and flee; some running; some flying, some slithering. If they turn back, they will see the deep, flaming hole in the ground.

They don't. They're too afraid.

The meteor still burns and crackles in the prehistoric soil, spitting and roaring, as if angry at being there. And smoke billows out in a towering column, like a pointing finger that threatens revenge.

Chapter 1

“... 48, 49, 50! Coming, ready or not!”

Tom Allerton uncovered his eyes and peered around him in the gloom. He loved this place, with its crumbling old tombstones, its overgrown, twisting gravel pathways and its knotty, tangled trees. Everything about Raingate Cemetery was *ancient*.

There was a large slice of moon on that late October night but the wind was up; dark clouds scuttled across the sky and sprawling oaks waved their branches like ghostly arms. Tom savoured the delicious spooky feeling in his tummy as he crept along, ankle-deep in grass, avoiding the tell-tale crunchiness of the gravel paths.

The big stone wall surrounding the graveyard cast huge shadows that mingled with the weird shapes of broken plaster angels, mouldy marble crosses and tombs the size of buses.

Tom leaned against the rugged trunk of a tree, whose branches clashed and thrashed like battling ghouls. The light quality was dim and murky tonight and, try as he might, he couldn't see anything clearly. In the distance, the ruins of Sandal Castle, though barely visible, resembled a huge, dark, burial mound. Everything was blackly-blurred round the edges; even the old house at the far end, just beyond the wall. Jazz's house. Tonight it looked like a gigantic vampire, poised and Ready to spring over the cemetery wall.

“Excellent!” he whispered to himself, as the thrill-feeling fluttered through him again. This was the perfect place for hide ‘n’ seek with Jazz and Doc. Jazz was lucky; she was allowed to use the spare room at the very top of the house – the attic – as her den. Two things made this room good: it was huge *and* it overlooked the entire graveyard. They wouldn't have been allowed to play in here otherwise – so he guessed they were all pretty lucky.

Tom tiptoed away from the tree – and almost yelled out loud as an owl screeched nearby. Taking a deep breath and gathering his wits again, he flitted across the ground, dodging past uneven graves, peeping behind each one as he passed, hoping to see his friends crouching there in defeat.

A sound. Off to his right, between the flaking stone cuboids of two long-forgotten tombs. There, the grass was longer - waist high. It was tangled too, with nettles and all manner of other strange weeds, which nodded and squirmed in the dim light. It wasn't the whispering of the weeds that he heard though. It was a scraping sound. A scratching sound.

And was that a grunt? Surely Doc – even Jazz -wouldn't be wacky enough to hide out

in a nest of stinging nettles?

He darted forward and squatted behind an arch-shaped gravestone, big enough to give him complete cover.

He hid. And he listened.

From here, he could clearly see Jazz's house - bulbous and ghoulish – lurking in the gloom. As the wind whipped up anew, he imagined the house was hissing evilly at him. He sometimes wished his imagination would not be so creative!

The clouds overhead parted in the dusk, revealing the faded lettering of the gravestone behind which he hid, in a glimmer of moonlight: Harriet Benson, aged 79. Her light now shines in Heaven.

Then the clouds ganged together again, to shut the moonlight down – and another light appeared, high up and ahead of Tom. An unsettling thought swooped into his brain. *The light. Could it be Harriet Benson? Coming to haunt him... With "her light now shining"...*

A scrabbling sound invaded his thoughts. It was coming from the nettle-infested gap between the tombs. He felt suddenly very scared. His heart started thumping harder. He wanted to finish the game right now.

"Hey, you two!" he half-shouted, half-whispered, staying crouched behind Harriet's stone. "Hey! Come out – I give up, okay?" He sat dead still and strained to hear some sign of them.

There was that grunting sound again. He wanted to say: *Pack it in, you pair of idiots!* But he couldn't make his voice work. The light up ahead caught his attention again. It seemed to be flickering.

Oh God – what's going on ..?

Then he realised, with a great gasping sigh of relief, what it was. As he focused on the light, he saw that it wasn't in the sky. But it *was* high up! It was the attic room light of Jazz's house! And waving from the window, with big silly smiles on their faces, were Jazz and Doc! The pratty pair had sneaked straight out of the graveyard while he'd been counting to fifty!

He should've been mad, but he couldn't help laughing, as they jumped up and down, grinning at their own practical joke. Anyway, he knew he'd think of something to get them back. As he smiled and waved up at them, he called out, "Okay! It's a fair cop!" Though there was no chance they could have heard him.

But... *something heard him...*

A sudden flurry in the nettles; like something had scabbled to its feet, and was now standing stock-still in the darkness. In his mind's-eye, he pictured some shapeless, hideous

beast, with razor-sharp fangs, drooling hungrily. Silently watching him. Ready to pounce.

Sweat trickled down his back, even though the night was chilly. His throat was dry. He couldn't swallow. He knew he must escape. But that would mean leaving the safety of Harriet's tombstone...

He slowly, shakily, got his feet. Silence. Except for the now howling wind that rattled the trees and whined through the cracks in the tombs. He kept his eyes on the swishing nettles between the two big tombs where the scrabbling had come from. He backed quietly away to where he knew the exit must be. About twenty metres away. Each backward step to freedom seemed to take a lifetime. He glanced up again at the attic room window and saw that Jazz and Doc were now standing still.

Did they, too, sense that something was wrong?

Tom took another step back. The damp, twitching grass seemed to be grasping at his ankles. He looked once more at the wildly weaving weeds that hid the *thing* from his view. No sound came from there.

Then –

On his next step back, his trainer-heel hit the gravel path. To Tom, the resulting noise sounded like an earthquake.

He froze.

He held his breath.

And the creature shot out of the nettles like a bat out of Hell.

Chapter 2

Kerra – i – ngg!

The room almost shook with the screaming of Doc's electric guitar. He stood with one foot propped on a low stool, twanging away at the metal strings, with a look on his face like he was sucking a sour lemon. This was his "heavy metal rock star" face.

Doc had always wanted to grow his hair long, so he could look like Marilyn Manson (he said). But every time he tried, it just sort of frizzed out like a dandelion clock. His mum told him it was just his hair-type. So now he kept it short – and it really suited him. Doc's parents had emigrated from Jamaica ten years ago, when he was born, because his dad got an important job at Leeds University.

He was nicknamed "Doc" partly because of that, and partly because of the fact that he was mad-crazy on Dr Who!

Thud – a – thud – a – thud – a! Jazz walloped the drum kit like there was no tomorrow. Her multi-coloured hair stood out at spiked angles and her eyes were closed as she whacked and bashed the skins and cymbals.

Tom tapped his foot and gripped the mike, as he peered out the attic window at the graveyard down below. He grinned as he remembered how the last game of hide 'n' seek had ended. The fox had bolted out from the nettles and away into the night, clearly more scared of Tom than he was of it. At the time, he hadn't known whether to laugh or cry, but he sure did run! He had run out of the cemetery gate and away up the road and he hadn't stopped until he'd arrived, panting and sweating at Jazz's front door. He'd got them back for their little hide 'n' seek prank by, a) nicking the strings off Doc's guitar and b) putting a white sheet over his head and sneaking up behind Jazz before rehearsal one night. She'd said she wasn't scared – but Tom didn't believe her; he'd seen her eyes popping out of her head.

He belted out the lyrics of their song:

Creeping out of an icy tomb,

The zombie's dressed to kill.

I sit and hide, in my bedroom.

Find me there – I know he will!

He was lead singer for the band and he'd written this one himself – *Zombie Rampage*. His dad said he reckoned it might never make number one, but he said he liked it anyway. And that was good enough for Tom.

As he sang, he continued to gaze out of the window at the enormous cemetery. He loved this place; and he loved this band, with his two best friends in it.

Later, when they'd finished, they crashed down on the beanbags, feeling tired but good, as they swigged Coke together.

"Ready for the big night, tomorrow?" Tom asked, his blond hair flopping over one eye.

Jazz smiled, "Yeah. What you guys coming as?"

"Guess!" Tom raised his eyebrows, eyes twinkling.

"Zombie..." Doc drawled, pretending to yawn.

"Yay, you! You're right!" Tom laughed.

Jazz chuckled and queried, "How about you, Doc?"

He put a finger to his chin, in a mock-think. "We-ell. Let's put it this way; it involves loads and loads of bandages." Doc stuck his arms out stiffly in front of him and moaned spookily.

"Mummy!" Jazz and Tom yelled at the same time.

"Jinx!" Jazz hissed, and pointed at Tom, giggling.

"So, how about you?" Doc said to Jazz, who was busy looking smug, while Tom made faces at her.

She grinned, throwing her arms out dramatically: "Ban-shee, bay-bee!!"

The room darkened a little as she spoke these words; like the energy had been drained from the lights. Then everything brightened again. "See – the darkness beckons!" Jazz declared theatrically.

With that, they all raised their cans, as Tom announced: "To Halloween!"

"To Halloween!" the others echoed.

And the trees waved madly in the graveyard, beyond the window, as if in urgent, frantic warning.

Chapter 3

Halloween had dawned dark, damp and blustery. It had stayed dark all day, but the rain had subsided and the wind had eased to nothing more than an icy breeze. When the youngsters had met in the graveyard after their ‘Trick-or-Treating’, complete with pumpkin lanterns, the first thing they did was compare the sweet treats they had gathered on their travels. There were eight of them altogether; three groups, all from Class 6 at Raingate Primary. Tom and Doc had formed their own little group. Most of the kids didn’t think that anything was suspicious by the fact that Jazz was missing. She’d been complaining of a dodgy tummy all day at school, so she was unable to make her favourite night of the year; and it was a Friday too! Tom and Doc, however, shared the occasional secretive smile.

They looked a strange sight – vampires, ghouls, ghosts and all manner of beasties – as they sat in the middle of the cemetery, scoffing chocolate and candy. It was just as well that old Harriet Benson was tucked up mouldily in her cold stone tomb. What ever would she have made of this ..?

They guffawed as they swapped silly jokes and told corny ghost stories; nobody daring to admit that they felt just a tiny bit scared - a tiny bit worried that *something* might be lurking in the thick branches of the skeletal trees, or lying in wait behind the ancient gravestones.

With fingers sticky and indigestion threatening, the eight friends sat down on the cold grass in a circle, for what was to be the high spot of the night. Lying flat on the ground, at the centre of the group, was a weathered gravestone, so old that the lettering was unreadable; and in the middle of this aged stone was placed a carved pumpkin head, whose candle sent flickering shadows dancing spookily around the group, like the ghosts of the dead...

“If anyone wants to leave – if anyone hasn’t the courage to see this through – then now is the time to go,” Tom eerily whispered, resisting the urge to burst out laughing at what he knew was coming. Jazz had dreamed up the best practical joke ever! They were to hold a ‘séance’ - a calling up of the spirits from their misty world, to come and communicate with the living. And at the right time, Jazz would leap out from behind the massive tomb that was just a few metres to the left!

Tom put on his best ‘horror film voice’ and said, “Very well. Then let us join hands and summon the dead!” The schoolfriends reached out and held hands, hearts beating a bit quicker than normal. As if on cue, a chill wind started disturbing the branches of the old oak

overhead, and clouds smothered the moon's light. The friends grasped hands more tightly. A roll of thunder grumbled faintly in the distance.

'This is great!' thought Tom, and Doc's sparkling eyes reflected the thought. *'We couldn't have hoped for anything better than this!'*

As planned, Tom uttered the predictable, but unavoidable words: "Is there anybody there?"

Silence. Followed by a flash of lightning, that seemed to be right over their heads, bathing the scene in a pool of icy light. The looks on the faces of those not in on the joke were really funny; their eyes were shining with terror! Even Tom himself felt a bit apprehensive, as Doc started to moan and roll his eyes up in their sockets as they had plotted, and the thunder – louder this time – complained, uncomfortably nearby.

Doc's body shuddered, and he squeezed harder on the hands of the kids on either side, just for effect. "OOOHH!!" he groaned, to the accompaniment of gasps from the rest of the group.

"What's wrong with him?" squeaked Jenny Naylor, as the pumpkin candle flame twisted wildly in the breeze.

"I am the spirit of Martha Mallory..." Doc intoned in delicious gothic voice. "And I shall drag myself from the grave this night, and walk among you. YOU, who have called me forth!"

This was Jazz's cue to come stumbling out from the gravestones and tombs, screaming the banshee scream, to go with her wicked costume. But what happened next shocked everyone – including the tricksters, Tom and Doc.

And Jazz.

A jagged streak of lightning snaked down from the troubled sky and struck the graveyard about thirty metres from where the group sat. A deafening crack, followed by clouds of dust and showers of falling stone, as if it was raining gravel. Then the thunder came again, like an angry ogre, and the children leapt to their feet and ran – totally forgetting the pumpkin as they belted for the exit gate. They yelped and howled their fear as they stampeded out of the cemetery.

All except one. And even Tom and Doc were unaware that Jazz was nowhere to be seen.