



The  
FIRE  
Maker



GUY  
JONES

Chicken  
House

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*For Mum and Dad*

Also by Guy Jones

*The Ice Garden*



Alex charged down the alley and into The Wick. Shouts rang out behind; savage and hoarse. A metallic tang of blood in the back of his nose and throat.

When he was younger, this place – a broad patch of woodland tucked away amongst the houses – had been Alex’s whole world. His playground. It was pristine jungle he’d been the first to discover. A faraway forest planet on which humans were building a new home. The lair of lions and tigers and dinosaurs, and awful things that didn’t have names because nobody who’d seen one had ever lived to tell the tale. And, often, it had been a war zone, with Alex outwitting imaginary enemy soldiers.

Not so imaginary now, though. The sound of snapping branches and cursing rang behind him.

Days of rain had made the ground slick, but Alex kept his balance, avoiding the patches of sucking mud. He could only hope his classmates weren't so deft. Branches clawed at him, thorn bushes snagged and tore his clothes. Yet the noises were getting further away. Perhaps he was losing them . . .

He sprinted into a small clearing. At its centre was a single, huge tree. It was a strange old thing, with a stocky, S-shaped trunk from which four huge branches emerged like the fingers of a gnarled hand. Thick green moss coated the lower reaches, but the bark itself was black, as if blasted by lightning: burnt and hardened into jet.

Alex didn't pause, sprinting across the open ground and into the bushes on the far side. Soon, another line of boundary fencing loomed up. He'd run into a dead end, it seemed. But Alex knew this place. Knew the secret ways in and out. He fell to his knees and ran his hand across the bottom of the fence; desperately hoping no one had done a repair job in the past year or two. His heart skipped. There it was!

He levered the loose panel aside, creating a hole to the road on the other side. He had to wriggle through, leaving his uniform caked in mud and slime. For a moment Alex worried what his father would say, before remembering how ridiculous that was.

Once he was through, he set about replacing the panel. His pursuers would make their way to the fence and think he'd vanished into thin air. How was that for a magic trick? Job done, he turned his face to the darkening September sky. Fat raindrops began to fall.

A laugh. It came from beside him. Instantly Alex realized his mistake. Because he hadn't played alone in The Wick all those times. It wasn't only him who'd learnt the secret ways in and out. He'd done it all with his best friend. Now former best friend. He turned to find Freddie Taylor standing there, grinning.

'Thought I'd forgotten?' Freddie said, stepping forward. Alex could hear the other two blundering around on the other side but paid them barely any mind.

It was such a familiar face – pale skin spattered with freckles, and flaming hair that tumbled towards green-blue eyes. A kind face. Or at least it had been. Now all the light was gone, shrouded by fury.

'You know what she's going to say,' his ex-friend hissed, so close that Alex felt wet drops of spittle on his face.

He didn't need to be told who 'she' was. Freddie's mother, Agnes Taylor. A huge woman with a volcanic temper. Alex almost felt bad, but what was he meant to have done? He'd kept silent since February; ever since the Incident. He'd said nothing as Freddie and pals had made fun of him. As they pushed him or elbowed him

in the ribs. He was silent when they threw his books away or got him in trouble with the teachers. In short, he'd sucked up every last bit of punishment they'd thrown his way. There were nights that he'd turned his pillow wet with tears of frustration, but never once had he told.

Until today. Today had been too much. He'd told on Freddie, who had been sent straight to the Deputy Head.

And now, this would be revenge.

'He's here!' Freddie shouted, grabbing hold of Alex's blazer so roughly the buttons were pulled loose. 'Come through the fence.'

The sound of scrabbling from the other side. Alex felt his skin run with electricity. But then something disturbed a cat, which leapt down from the fence with a yowl. Freddie's head turned for a second, which was all the invitation Alex needed.

He wrenched free and barrelled past and into the night. The roads blurred around him. Street lamps were reflected and warped by the soaking tarmac. He jagged this way and that through the town centre and into the houses beyond. The streets were narrow here and choked with parked cars. Lights blazed in the windows, and televisions flickered. Alex passed it all like a ghost on the wind, running so smoothly he was almost flowing. But all the time his pursuer's feet splashed along behind.



At last he could run no more and stumbled to a halt, gasping. Stars burst in front of his eyes. How could Freddie still be chasing? How could they *still* be coming after him? Was this how it would always be now? Was this his life? Running, hiding, looking over his shoulder . . . He blinked back the tears pooling in his eyes.

What now; what next? Alex scanned around and found a garden gate in the middle of a tall fence. He lurched across the road and tried the handle, almost punching the air in relief as it turned. He slipped inside, closed it behind him and pressed his ear to the wood. His head filled with the smell of old timber and creosote. A memory came, unbidden, of helping his dad stain their garden fence a few summers before, carefully applying the sticky brown liquid to each panel in turn.

Footsteps approached, passed, and receded into the distance. Alex slumped to the ground, coughing. Safe. For a little while at least, he was safe.

He opened his eyes and pulled himself up. And that was when he saw them.

That was when he saw something extraordinary.