



CHAPTER • 1
UNSLEEP

David crouched on the roof of his best friend's house as the flames that consumed it leaped into the night sky. He couldn't even remember how he'd got there, let alone work out why. But as another chunk of roof collapsed in an eruption of fire and sparks, there was really only one question worth asking: Was Eddie still inside?

And unfortunately, there was only one way to find out.

Scampering up to the chimney stack, David peered through the heat and smoke. The roof at the far side of the house was a great gaping hole with fire towering out of it. He'd never get in that way. So how? *Think!*

Then, as he blinked in the glare, he realized he wasn't alone. A slim figure was calmly watching him from the far edge of the roof, even as flames flickered around him.

"Eddie?" David shouted. "Eddie, is that you?"

A bank of smoke rolled past, obscuring his view. When it cleared, David could see that the figure was a boy of about his own age. But it wasn't Eddie, it was . . .

David stared in astonishment. He was looking at *himself*. Even the clothes were his own.

He rubbed his eyes — this was no time to be seeing things. But then, as he looked again, the details began to change, melting

away as more smoke drifted by, and the figure revealed itself to be a stranger after all: a tall, dark-haired boy in his late teens.

“Who are you?” David yelled. “Where’s Eddie?”

The boy laughed, throwing his head back.

“You’re too late!” The boy’s voice was full of triumph. “If you’re here for Eddie, Davy boy, then you’re far too late.”

“What do you mean?” David couldn’t be sure he’d heard right; the fire was creating a wind of its own that roared in his ears. “*Who are you?*”

But the boy just laughed again. Then he turned and leaped straight off the roof.

David skidded to the edge and looked over. The garden, four stories below, was outlined in firelight. There should have been a broken body down there now — no one could survive a fall like that — but there was nothing. He looked out into the night at the houses beyond the garden, but all he could see was the silhouette of a black cat running along the far roofline. That was when he noticed that Eddie’s place wasn’t the only one burning.

Smudges of amber punctuated the horizon in every direction, picking out the dark shapes of chimney stacks and church towers right across the London roofscape. It looked as if the whole city was ablaze.

And the noise was terrible. Beyond the roar immediately around him, there was a tangle of sirens and crashes, and even sounds that could have been the drone of planes and the *stut-stut* of anti-aircraft guns, if David hadn’t known better.

A neighboring building suddenly collapsed, snapping him into action. Forget the sightseeing, forget the strange boy — he

had to find Eddie. Impossible to get in through the roof, so . . . a window?

As he slid his way toward the dormer window farthest from the fire, David had a brief, dizzying glimpse of the street far below and what might have been firemen. But he was moving fast now and couldn't be sure. With a single fluid motion he found himself crouching in an attic bedroom. Only it wasn't Eddie's.

"Eddie!" David shouted. "Eddie, where are you?"

No reply, just the steady rumble of the fire. He had to go farther into the house. He ran out onto the landing and looked down.

The stairs were burning. A large piece of plaster had fallen from the ceiling, covering the top flight. Everything above that was blazing, but, though it was hard to be sure through the glare, it looked as if the landing outside Eddie's room was still intact. And Eddie's door was closed. But what did that mean?

Farther down, there was only a raging inferno. The whole house had to be just minutes away from collapse.

"Eddie!"

Still nothing.

David hesitated then. He was taking an insane risk coming this far into the house. Surely Eddie must have escaped by now. And if he hadn't, if the fire had already got him . . . *No!* The thought that Eddie might be dead made David sick inside. Somehow he just knew he was still alive, that in some strange way saving Eddie was precisely the reason he was here, no matter how weird that sounded. He looked down again and noticed that the chunk of plaster on the stairs was propped against the

banister, leaving a protected space beneath it just big enough to crawl down.

David swore. “You’re going to owe me for this big-time, Eddie,” he said, bracing himself.

With a shout he ducked under the plaster and slid down to the next floor. It was hot there, hotter than anything he’d ever experienced. Without thinking, he burst free and ran for the door, his eyes firmly shut, desperately willing himself into the safety of Eddie’s room. So desperately, in fact, that he forgot the door was closed. How odd, then, that he should suddenly find himself staggering to a halt inside Eddie’s room anyway, the door still shut behind him.

“Eddie!”

“David?” croaked a voice from the darkness. “David, is that you?”

David squinted. The details of Eddie’s room were hard to see, though light beyond the window picked out the brass of his old-fashioned bedstead. The room wasn’t on fire, but the heat was crushing and the smoky air so oppressive that David was amazed he could still breathe.

There was a movement from the floor near the window. David saw his friend, slumped over, wearing a coat and clutching a satchel.

“Eddie! Why are you still here? And who was that on the roof? No, tell me later — we’ve got to get out, and I mean *now*! The building’s about to come down.”

In reply, Eddie lifted a battered notebook. Despite the gloom, David saw the words *can’t get out* written large across

the page, surrounded by a riot of scribbles and crossings-out. Then Eddie burst into a round of choking coughs.

“I’ll break the window! You need air!” David said, but Eddie waved the notebook at him again in sudden alarm.

Can’t break window – air feeds fire!

“Eddie, this is no time for writing!” David shook his head in disbelief, even though he knew Eddie was right about the air. Eddie was always right about things like that. “Get up! There’s a safe way to the roof, but it won’t last.”

“Yes, but David, you’re . . .”

Eddie broke into another dry coughing fit as he struggled up. He seemed to be seriously ill. David couldn’t understand it — why *was* Eddie in such a bad way when he himself was more or less fine? For a moment he felt that there was something he should have noticed — a feeling he often had with Eddie — but it was gone before he could fix his mind on it. Besides, Eddie had been breathing in smoke for much longer than him. No wonder he could hardly talk. David ran to the door, and Eddie stumbled behind him.

“David . . .” said Eddie, trying to point at something else he’d written, but David interrupted him.

“Later. When we open this door the fire will come into the room, okay? Keep low and follow me, but be quick!”

David grabbed the doorknob.

It wouldn’t turn.

His fingers slipped around it without any grip whatsoever.