From the Chicken House

I first met Thomas Taylor when I asked him to draw the original Harry Potter cover. That was when I made a mistake telling Thomas what to draw and the book went to print with the wrong picture of Dumbledore on it. If Dumbledore has a brown beard on your copy, you're very lucky – they're very collectable!

Now Thomas is scaring the pants off me with his brilliant writing. This is the most unusual ghost story I've read in a long time; it actually reveals what haunting is *really* all about. What is this startling man going to do next?

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

HAUNTERS

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For Penny and Tim

The Three Rules of the
Dreamwalker's Code:

1. BE SEEN, BUT NOT NOTICED.

2. TALK, BUT DON'T TELL.

3. LEAVE NO STONE TURNED.





CHAPTER 1

UNSLEEP

David crouched on the roof of his best friend's house as the flames that consumed it leapt 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 realised 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 leapt straight off the roof.

David skidded to the edge and looked over. The garden, four storeys below, was picked out in firelight. There ought to be 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 neighbouring 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 towards the dormer window furthest 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 further 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?

Further 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!* Thinking about Eddie being 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 in 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 and David saw his friend slumped there, 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 exercise book. Despite the gloom David saw the words Can't get out written large across the page, surrounded by a riot of scribbles and crossing-out. Then Eddie burst into a round of choking coughs.

'I'll break the window. You need air,' David said, but Eddie waved the book 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 in serious trouble. 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. 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 round it without any grip whatsoever. But hadn't he just come through here? He let go and swore, but before he could try again, Eddie had reached out a weak hand and opened the door.

'It's because you aren't . . .' Eddie began, but stopped as a wall of heat burst in, causing him to cry out in pain.

'That way!' shouted David over the roar, and he pointed to the gap under the fallen plaster. '*Go!*'

Eddie cried out again and jumped forward, scrabbling up the stairs in a desperate tangle of arms and legs. David was close behind.

The house gave a sudden groan and a large chunk of ceiling came crashing down into the stairwell behind them. Eddie dragged himself out onto the top landing, sobbing with pain. His hair and coat were smouldering, and his glasses were cracked and smudged with blood and soot. He still had his exercise book rolled tightly in one hand.

'In there!' said David pointing to the attic bedroom.

The house groaned again and shifted as the lower walls began to crumble. In the attic room, Eddie slumped to the floor once more. The window was firmly closed.

'But I just came through here!' cried David. 'How can it be closed?' He grabbed the latch, but as with the doorknob below, he just couldn't turn it.

'Stop pretending!' Eddie gave a desperate shout. 'I know this is what you wanted. You're playing with me . . . waiting to watch me die.'

'What?'

'I hate you,' cried Eddie. 'You've killed me!'

'But . . .' David was shouting himself now. 'I'm trying to save your life, you idiot! *Both* our lives.'

'You knew this would happen . . . somehow. You got me back here to burn!' Eddie raised himself off the ground in fury and waved the crushed exercise book in his fist. 'I thought I could trust you. But Kat warned me – she knew. She said you'd want to make me like you in the end. Why didn't I listen? You're a . . . a *monster* . . .' But the coughing stopped him there.

'Eddie, shut up! Look around you – the window . . . we've got to *get out now*.'

But in reply Eddie snatched up a narrow beam of smouldering wood that had fallen from the ceiling.

'Get away from me!'

David's mouth gaped in astonishment as Eddie swung this crude weapon round at him. He fell back, dizzy, and heard the window shatter.

With a tremendous pulse of heat the fire surged into the room.

Eddie threw himself at the window. He grabbed the sill and dragged himself through it, ignoring the shards of glass. As David struggled to his feet, Eddie turned in the

window and looked right into his eyes.

'I hate you! I never want to see you again!'

Then he was gone.

David stood there in shock. What the hell was Eddie talking about?

There came a dreadful sound from the stairs behind him – the noise of tons of masonry on the move.

David got to his feet, hardly noticing that the floorboards beneath him were shrinking fast. The fire in the room beneath licked up between them, turning the air to light. Time seemed to slow as the groaning of the walls increased.

He had to get out. He tried to run, but his feet felt like lead.

The house gave a shudder and then the floor gave way completely. David just had time to cry out as he was sucked down into the raging heart of the fire.