

PROLOGUE

September, 1666

The month of September had scarcely begun when a new disaster struck an already beleaguered city. London had been savaged without mercy by the Great Plague, frozen to the marrow by a cold winter then blistered in a hot, dry, unrelenting summer which bred drought, discontent and fresh outbreaks of virulent disease. Even the oldest inhabitants of the capital could not recall a more intense period of suffering but they consoled themselves – between weary curses at a malign Fate – with the thought that they had now endured misery enough and that their situation could only improve.

Then came the fire.

It brought Jonathan Bale awake in the middle of the night. He sat bolt upright for a few seconds then clambered unwillingly out of bed.

‘What ails you?’ asked his wife, stirring in the dark.

‘Nothing, Sarah,’ he said.

‘Then why have you got up?’

‘Go back to sleep. I did not mean to wake you.’

‘Are you unwell, Jonathan?’

‘No,’ he said, putting a reassuring hand on her arm. ‘I am in good health – thank God – though it is as much your doing as the Almighty’s. I am blessed in a wife who cooks and cares for me so wondrously well. You have earned your rest, Sarah. Take it. Sleep on.’

‘How can I when you are so disturbed?’

‘I am not disturbed.’

‘Then why did you wake up with such a start?’

‘I must have had a bad dream.’

‘You never have dreams of any kind,’ she said, sitting up in bed and stifling a yawn. ‘I am the dreamer in the family. Every night is filled with them. But not you. Your mind seems to have no fancies. Now tell me what is going on.’

‘Nothing that need upset you,’ he soothed.

‘Tell me.’

‘In the morning, perhaps. Not now.’

‘Stop trying to fob me off.’

‘Sarah—’

‘And I’ll not be Sarah’d into silence,’ she warned with a tired smile. ‘I have not been married to you all these years without learning your ways and your moods. You are a man who sleeps soundly in his bed. Much too soundly at times for I have had to rouse you more than once of a morning. Only something very unusual could have made you wake up of a sudden like that. What was it?’

‘I do not know,’ he said with a shrug, ‘and that is the truth of it, Sarah. I simply do not know.’

Jonathan Bale was a big, solid, serious man whose frame seemed to fill the small bedchamber. Now in his late thirties, he still retained the muscles which he had developed during his years as a shipwright and, despite the excellence of his wife’s cooking, there was not a superfluous ounce of fat on his body. The same could not be said of Sarah. Motherhood had rounded her hips and filled out her thighs, buttocks and breasts. A good appetite helped to complete the transformation of a slim, attractive young woman into a plump but still comely matron. Jonathan had marked no change in her. To his loving eye, she was still the same Sarah Teague whom he had met and married nine years earlier.

He sat on the bed and slipped a comforting arm around her.

‘There is no point in the two of us losing sleep,’ he said.

‘Neither of us need lose it. Come back to bed.’

‘No, Sarah. Not yet. You lie down again.’

‘Not until you tell me what this is all about.’

‘I have told you. I honestly do not know.’

‘When you came awake, you let out a little yell.’

‘Did I?’

‘What provoked it?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Was it fear? Pain? Foreboding?’

‘I wish I knew,’ he sighed. ‘It was almost as if someone shook me awake. There was a sense of alarm. I felt that I was being summoned.’

‘You are not on duty now, Jonathan.’

‘A constable is always on duty.’

‘Even in the middle of the night?’

‘If he is called, Sarah.’

‘But what on earth has called you?’

‘That is what I intend to find out.’

He kissed her gently on the forehead then eased her back down on the pillow before crossing to the window. Opening the shutters, he looked out into the unrelieved blackness of Addle Hill. Familiar smells assaulted his nostrils and the open sewer which ran down the lane was especially pungent on a warm night. Dogs roamed and foraged, cats fought a distant battle over territory. Footsteps dragged laboriously as a drunken reveller tried to stagger home. But there was nothing to be seen beyond the vague outlines of the buildings opposite. All was exactly as he would have expected to find it at such an hour yet Jonathan Bale remained quietly perturbed. Instinct told him that something was amiss. It troubled him that he could not detect what it was. He stayed at the window until his eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness and allowed him to take a fuller inventory of the lane. He could even pick out the inn sign of the White Swan now and the massive bulk of Baynard’s Castle emerged from the gloom like a cliff face.

But nothing untoward came into view. The city was peaceful.

Sarah was torn between fatigue and impatience.

‘Well?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ he said, closing the shutters. ‘I was mistaken.’

‘Good.’

‘It must have been a dream, after all.’

‘Just come back to bed.’

‘I will.’ He climbed in beside her and pulled the bedsheet over him. ‘I am sorry that I woke you,’ he said, giving her an affectionate peck on the cheek. ‘Good night, Sarah.’

‘Good night.’

Nestling into him, she was asleep within minutes but her husband remained wide awake. He had an overwhelming sense of being needed to fight some undisclosed emergency. It made him fretful. London, his birthplace and home, the sovereign city which he loved so much and helped to patrol so conscientiously, was in grave danger yet he was unable to go to its aid. His frustration steadily grew until he had to fight to contain it. London was imperilled. While his wife surrendered once more to the sweetness of her dreams, Jonathan Bale’s fevered mind was restlessly pacing the streets of the capital in search of the latest terror.

CHAPTER ONE

The fire was cunning. It was no more than a dying ember in a Pudding Lane bakehouse when Thomas Farriner, the proprietor, checked his oven and the five other hearths on the premises before retiring to bed at midnight on that first Saturday of the month. Having deceived the practised eye of the baker, the fire rekindled itself with glee and crept stealthily around the ground floor of the house until it had wrapped every stick of furniture in its hot embrace. By the time the occupants caught their first whiff of smoke, it was far too late. Leaping from their beds, they found their descent cut off by a burning staircase so they were forced to escape through an upstairs window and along the gutter to a neighbouring house. Not all of them made the rooftop journey. Frightened at the prospect of a hazardous climb, the maidservant chose to remain in her room and was slowly roasted to death.

The fire tasted flesh. There was no holding it now.

Enlisting the aid of a sharp northeast wind, it sent a shower of sparks across Pudding Lane and into the coach-yard of the Star Inn, setting alight the heaps of hay and straw piled against the wooden galleries. Word was immediately sent to the Lord Mayor. Sir Thomas Bludworth, roused from his slumbers at his home in Maiden Lane, rode irritably to the scene to survey the fire. It caused him no undue tremors. What he saw was nothing more than a typical local blaze which would soon spend itself and leave only limited damage behind. It did not justify any official action from him.

‘Pish!’ he said with contempt. ‘A woman might piss it out.’

And he returned swiftly to his bed with a clear conscience.

But the contents of every chamber pot in England could not have doused the fire now. It mocked the Sabbath with the flames of Hell and turned a day of rest into a continuous ordeal. Wafted by the rising wind, the fire was carried irresistibly across the cobbles of Pudding Lane and down towards the timber sheds and stalls of Fish Street Hill. The littered alleys which led from Thames Street to the river were soon ablaze and the stacks of wood and coal on the wharves made a suicide pact with the bales of goods in the warehouses and with the barrels of tallow oil and spirits in the cellars, flinging themselves onto the flames and turning a troublesome fire into a raging inferno. Houses, tenements, shops, inns, stables and even churches were alight. When the indifferent Lord Mayor was hauled once more from his complacent bed, dozens of buildings had already been destroyed and the fire was spreading relentlessly.

Billingsgate Ward was in a state of utter chaos. The narrow streets and alleys made it a most difficult part of the city in which to fight a fire. Householders were in a complete quandary, not knowing whether to flee with whatever they could carry or try to beat back the flames. The noise was indescribable. The few fire engines which were rushed to the scene proved hopelessly inadequate and the leather buckets of water which were thrown on the blaze produced no more than hisses of derision. Heat and smoke drove the firefighters back with brutal unconcern. They had lost the battle at its very outset. Roaring in triumph, the fire revelled in its invincibility. No part of the city was safe now.

When the alarm was raised, Jonathan Bale was three-quarters of a mile away in Baynard's Castle Ward but he heard it clearly. Bells were rung, drums were beaten and pandemonium was carried freely on the wind. He jumped out of his bed and rushed to the window, flinging back the shutters to look up at a sky which was brightly illumined by the false dawn of a fire. This was the crisis which had brought him so rudely awake earlier on. He groped for his clothes.

'What is it?' murmured his wife, still half asleep.

'A fire,' he said.

'Where?'

'On the other side of the city. I must help to fight it.'

'But it is not in your parish.'

'I am needed, Sarah.'

'Let someone else take care of it.'

'I have to go.'

'Now?'

‘At once.’

‘Why?’

It was a rhetorical question. Jonathan Bale’s sense of duty knew no boundaries. Wherever and whenever an emergency arose, he would lend his assistance without a second thought. Other constables stayed strictly within the bounds of their own parish and few ventured outside their respective wards but Jonathan was different. Imbued with ideals of civic responsibility, he treated the whole of London as his territory. If the city was under threat in any way, he would race to its defence.

When he was dressed, he gave his wife a hurried kiss before letting himself out of the house. Long strides took him around the first corner into Thames Street and he headed eastward. The bending thoroughfare with its tall buildings on both sides obscured the fire from him at first but its glare guided his footsteps. Distant panic gradually increased in volume. Still in night attire, a few people were stumbling out of their houses to ask what was going on. They showed curiosity rather than apprehension, secure in the knowledge that the fire was much too far away to affect them or their property. The further he went, the more people he encountered and Jonathan was soon having to pick his way through a small crowd.

The sky was now lit as if by a noonday sun. He was over halfway there when he heard the full-throated roar of the fire. Eager to reach the scene, Jonathan broke into a trot and dodged the anxious citizens who now poured out of their homes in disarray as they sensed an impending catastrophe. Thames Street was turning into a cauldron of fear and

confusion. Men shouted, women screamed, children cried and animals expressed their own alarm. The noise was deafening and an acrid smell grew fouler with each second. Jonathan ran on through the commotion. He was soon having to buffet a path with his broad shoulders. Fire was an ever-present menace in London and, in his time, he had seen many but none of them compared in scale and ferocity with the blaze which now confronted him.

When he rounded a bend, he saw a sheet of yellow flame advancing slowly towards him, eating its way along Thames Street with a voracious appetite and swallowing everything down to the riverfront. Smoke billowed in the swirling wind. A series of violent explosions went off as the fire found new stocks of combustible material in yards, cellars and warehouses. Jonathan came to an abrupt halt and stared in horror at the grotesque firework display. Expecting a degree of danger, he was instead looking into the jaws of death. This crisis was potentially more threatening than the Great Plague and far more immediate.

The fire was still some distance away but its warm fingers were already bestowing lascivious caresses on his face. Jonathan gritted his teeth and moved on. Thames Street was in turmoil. The panic-stricken families who tumbled out of their houses were met by the first fleeing victims of the fire. Carts, coaches and packhorses bore the most precious possessions of those whose homes were already doomed. People unable to afford transport of any kind simply carried what they could in their arms. Jonathan saw a man bent double under the weight of a heavy sack and an old lady staggering along with a spinning wheel. Two small

children dragged their meagre belongings over the cobbles in a tattered bedsheet. Three men lugged a stout oak table.

When he got closer to the blaze, Jonathan saw the most stark evidence yet of its power. Even the rats were leaving, darting out of their hiding places in wild profusion and joining the general exodus. Three of them scampered uncaringly over the constable's shoes. Cats and dogs bade clamorous farewells as they scuttled away but not all animals were fortunate enough to escape. Crazy horses kicked and neighed in burning stables. A donkey brayed for mercy in the heart of the fire. A goat was trapped in a blazing garden and searched feverishly for an exit. Geese honked in a locked shed. Chickens clucked their noisy requiems. Pigeons too slow to leave their perches found their wings singed as soon as they took to the air and they plummeted to instant death. Creatures who lived in thatch, crevice or timber were extinguished with callous delight. No living thing was spared.

Jonathan paused to assess where he could be most useful. The fire engines were defunct and it was left to chains of men, passing buckets of water along, to continue the fight. Heat was now so fierce that they were pushed further and further back. When water was hurled, it did not even reach the flames in some cases. Braving the pain, Jonathan took his turn at the head of a chain, snatching a leather bucket from the man behind him and flinging its contents at the blazing doorway of a house. His bucket was exchanged for a full one and he emptied that at the same target. It was all to no avail. Whipped up by the wind, the fire was spreading with increased fury. It was clear that buckets of water would never

contain the blaze, still less quell it. There was an additional problem. The dry summer had left water levels very low and there was an unsteady flow from the conduits. Buckets took longer than usual to fill and Jonathan was soon having to wait minutes for a fresh supply of water to be passed along to him. The fire raged on inexorably.

The building suddenly crumbled to the ground in front of them and forced them to jump back. The man beside Jonathan – a tall, thin, wiry individual with rolling eyes – flung up his arms in despair.

‘It is hopeless!’ he wailed.

‘The fire must be checked,’ said Jonathan. ‘They must pull down a row of houses in its path and create a firebreak.’

‘The Lord Mayor has forbidden it.’

‘Why?’

‘He fears the cost involved in rebuilding.’

‘Would he rather lose the entire city?’

‘Sir Thomas would not give the order.’

‘Somebody must,’ insisted Jonathan. ‘Where did the fire start?’

‘Who knows?’ said the man. ‘I was fast asleep when the alarm was raised. By the time I got here, Fish Street Hill was ablaze and the houses at the northern end of the bridge were alight. In the past half-hour, we have been driven back a hundred yards or more. We are powerless.’

‘Fire posts must be set up at once.’

‘Tell that to the Lord Mayor.’

‘More water!’

‘What is the point?’

‘We must fight on!’ urged Jonathan, exhorting the others

in the chain. 'More water there! Keep the buckets coming! We must not give in. Something may yet be saved.'

It was a forlorn hope. Though he tossed gallons of water at the fire, he made no discernible impact. It blazed up defiantly in front of him and encroached on both sides. Hysteria mounted. Many people fled west along the crowded thoroughfare but most scurried towards the river with their belongings, hoping to put the broad back of the Thames between themselves and certain extinction, only to find the myriad boats and lighters already filled with frightened refugees. Quick to take advantage of the situation, watermen doubled and trebled their prices before rowing their passengers to the uncertain safety of Bankside. When they scrambled ashore with their money, their furniture, their musical instruments and anything else they had salvaged, they looked back at a fire which seemed to engulf the whole of the riverfront from London Bridge to Dowgate and beyond. Flames danced madly on the water as the Thames mirrored the calamity.

Jonathan Bale struggled on against impossible odds for well over an hour. His hair was singed, his face was running with perspiration and holes had been burnt in his coat by flying sparks. His whole body ached and smarted but he would not give up. Only when the water supply ceased did he have any respite. He looked down the long line of exhausted bodies between him and the conduit.

'More water!' he ordered, panting from his exertions.

'There is none!' called a voice at the far end. 'It has dried up.'

'How?'

‘Someone must have cut into the pipe further up to fill buckets of their own. There is barely a trickle down here.’

‘We have done all we can, my friend,’ gasped the man next to Jonathan. ‘We must look to our own salvation.’

‘There is too much to do here. That is why I came.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘On Addle Hill.’

‘Near Baynard’s Castle?’

‘Yes.’

The man was surprised. ‘You came all this way to help?’

‘I was needed.’

‘You and a thousand like you are needed, my friend, but there would still not be enough of us to put out this fire. I’ll home to Cornhill. I have done my share here. It is time to worry about my own house. Do likewise.’

‘The fire will never reach Addle Hill,’ said Jonathan.

‘Do not be so sure,’ warned the other. ‘If this wind holds, the blaze will spread all the way to the Palace of Westminster to burn the royal breeches. And so it should,’ he added with bitter reproach, ‘for the King is the true cause of this fire.’

‘That is treasonable talk.’

‘It is the plain truth.’

‘Fires are caused by folly and neglect.’

‘The King’s folly and the King’s neglect.’

‘I will not listen to such nonsense.’

‘Then look around you,’ urged the man, waving an arm. ‘See for yourself. This is no ordinary fire. It is a judgement on us. King Charles and his vile Court have corrupted the whole of London. The fire has been sent to purge the city. We must all suffer for his sins.’ He gave Jonathan a nudge. ‘Go

home, my friend. Return to Addle Hill. Protect your family. Save yourself while you still may. Nothing can stop this blaze now.'

The man staggered off. Jonathan watched him go and reflected on what he had said. His position as a constable obliged him to reprimand the fellow but he had considerable sympathy with the view expressed. England was ruled once more by a Stuart king. A monarchy which Jonathan had been pleased to see ended was now emphatically restored. As a result, London was indeed a wicked city and nobody was better placed to see the extent of its depravity than someone who patrolled the streets in the office of constable. Jonathan was a God-fearing man who always sought guidance from above and he was bound to wonder if the conflagration really was a sign of divine anger. There were Biblical precedents of cities being punished for their corruption.

The problem was that the innocent would suffer along with the guilty. Jonathan thought about his wife and children, still asleep, quite unaware that their blameless lives might be under threat. Their safety came first. He had to get back to them. The fire now raged totally out of control and buildings were crashing to the ground all around him. Smoke stung his eyes and caught in his throat. Scorching heat pushed him back like a giant hand.

Chaos reached a new pitch and he was heavily jostled in the ensuing tumult. Brushing some sparks from the sleeve of his coat, Jonathan pushed his way through the seething mass of bodies and trotted back down Thames Street in a futile attempt to outrun disaster.