

## *Chapter One*

This is a story I want to tell you about London. It's an hour before the dawn and Evie Sangster is on the 47<sup>th</sup> floor of the Pelican Tower on Bishopsgate sipping a Bloody Mary in a fancy all-night restaurant and waiting for the sun to come up on this Monday morning. Evie is thirty-five years' old and she has been in prison twice in her life although she is by no means a bad or even reprehensible person. The last time she was locked up was three years ago when she did five months in Holloway, the year before the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne announced that he was going to close the women's prison down and sell off the land for housing. In 1955, they hanged Ruth Ellis in Holloway, after she was convicted of murdering her lover David Blakeley outside a pub in Hampstead, and now they're still arguing about what houses to build and whether or not to include a Women's Centre

in the redevelopment which, if they do, they will inevitably call the Ruth Ellis Centre.

Evie got five months for encouraging a retired NHS surgeon from Weybury called Mr Abbas to invest his life's savings in a scheme to build water refining units in Malawi, which collapsed without any water being refined anywhere, leaving three and a half million pounds of investment written off. Evie wasn't the only one who had encouraged people to invest their savings in the Malawi water refining project but, thanks to an ill-advised email with her name attached to it, she was the only one the government prosecuting barrister managed to prove had actively encouraged Mr Abbas to invest. Everyone else who promoted the scheme and earned massive commissions from the investments they secured, managed to rinse their online histories in time; Evie was just unlucky.

When she was in Holloway, she got to know an older woman called Joy Franklin who was in for shoplifting. Joy was forty-six and had been caught stealing a tatty piece of evening jewellery from a discount accessories store in Westfield, which she coveted because her daughter Jade was going to be twenty-one and she wanted her to have a birthday present she would remember. The judge said she was sentencing her "with reluctance" but this was the second time she'd been in front of her in a year so she was going to have to go down for six months. Joy lived in a

*Like Fire Unbound*

five-storey council block off Edmonton Green and Evie had spent yesterday evening with her, waiting up for Jade to get back so she could make her parole meeting in the morning. Jade's just come out of Chelmsford where she did another two-month spell for repeated antisocial behaviour and she's already missed one parole meeting since she's come out; if she misses this morning's, they might send her back in. They have to be at the parole office in Tottenham for nine o'clock.

'Stop looking at your phone for a minute, Jade,' Evie says to the girl sitting beside her. 'It's about to happen.'

The girl ignores her and remains crouched over her Samsung on the red leather banquette. She's thin, has a shaved head except for a surprising dyed red Mohican tuft, and blotchy cheeks. She wears stonewashed jeans that are ripped above and below the knees, silver Nike sneakers which are tucked underneath her, and a red gingham shirt.

When Jade had finally turned up at her mother's at one o'clock last night, Joy had been asleep in her bedroom.

'Go to sleep, Joy,' Evie had said to her friend at midnight. 'I'll wait up for her.'

'You don't need to, girl,' Joy had said. 'She's my kid. I can look after her. You're the one wants looking after. State of you.'

'What do you mean, state of me?' Evie had replied.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Yeah, of course you are. Won’t listen, will you? Bloody stubborn.’

‘I’m not –’

‘It’s all right,’ Joy had interrupted, wearily. ‘I’m not having a go at you. But you know I’m right – you can’t just keep trying to sort everyone else out, love. You’ve got to think about yourself. Anyway, wake me when she gets here? I’m the only one who can talk to her.’

But when Jade swaggered through the front door of the flat clutching a half-empty bottle of supermarket vodka, Evie didn’t wake her friend. Instead, she grabbed the bottle off the girl, pushed her into an armchair and leaned her weight on her pathetic frame. She put her face close to the girl’s.

‘If you don’t go to that fucking parole meeting in the morning, I swear I’ll stick a knife in you.’

She has quite a physical presence, Evie. When she was growing up out east on the outskirts of Southend, she hung around with some tough kids which is how she got into a fix the first time. Her dad is a big fellow, runs his own business fitting out shop interiors, drives a Mercedes open top. Evie got her big-shouldered frame from him, and his resilience too. Her mum is retired now but she used to be a social worker for Southend Council and has always felt the pain of not being able to keep her daughter out of harm’s way. Her parents

*Like Fire Unbound*

still live in the rambling old house out on the marshes looking down over the Thames estuary where it dissolves into the North Sea.

Although she's all smart now, with her designer jeans and Manolo Blahnik heels and her carefully layered auburn hair with the touched-up roots, Evie is still pretty strong and she literally took the wind out of Jade by leaning on her last night. Jade is an addict, what she does eat is rubbish and her frame is like a teenager's. She knew when Evie pressed her face into hers that there wasn't any point in trying to get away; all addicts are stupidly cunning and think they can lay low until next time, and Jade just thought she'd have to submit tonight and then after tomorrow's parole meeting she could do what she liked again. Besides, she liked Evie; Evie looked after her mum and Jade wished she could look after her mum but she just never seemed to be able to.

Although Jade is only twenty-four she's already made quite a mess of things and at the moment she's lurching between cheap vodka, weed, Xanax and Diazepam, a combination which makes her unpredictable and often belligerent. Joy has no idea how to help her daughter off all this gear apart from keeping a close eye on her and making sure the front door is always open. Evie though, because she's been around addicts for years but never been one herself – she's much too disciplined for that, Evie, which we'll come

to soon enough – knows how to handle them. Once she got some tea down Jade she just let her talk and Jade blathered on in her mum's front room, drinking tea and making roll-ups and telling Evie funny stories about her mates and Evie laughed with her while Joy carried on sleeping in the bedroom next door. When it got to three-thirty in the morning, Jade was showing no signs of slowing down, so Evie suggested they take the 149 bus down to the City to watch the sun come up from this posh restaurant she knew which was at the top of a skyscraper and stayed open all night. Once they'd done that it wouldn't be long before the parole meeting back in Tottenham so it would kill the time. She left a note for Joy telling her not to worry.

So at four in the morning they were sitting on the top deck of the night bus as it juddered down the A10 High Road through Stamford Hill and Stoke Newington and Shacklewell. Even at that time the bus was two-thirds full with Kurds and Somalis and Turks trying to snatch a bit more sleep on the way in to early-morning cleaning jobs and the shift stacking in the clothes warehouses in Whitechapel. Up here in north London in the middle of the night the street lights flicker because the private company the Council appointed to run them can't be arsed to fix them. There was an ambulance with the back door open and as the bus passed you could see a pair of legs

*Like Fire Unbound*

sticking out the back in the pool of fluorescent light. There were a group of kids outside an all-night fried chicken shop and one of them chucked an empty nitrous oxide cannister at the bus and it bounced off the window. Evie and Jade sat in the front seat and Evie kept the girl talking because she'd started to flag a bit.

'Next weekend why don't you and me take your mum out to Southend and stay with my folks?' she said. 'They'd like you and it would do your mum good to have a bit of sea air.'

'Yeah, sure.'

'Bring your friend Mikey, they won't mind. They like having people there.'

'Maybe. Mikey's, you know...'

'Well ask him anyway.'

'All right.'

'You'll like this place, Jade. It's full on.'

'Why?'

'It just is. It's on the 47<sup>th</sup> floor and we'll go up in a glass lift and the restaurant is open all night with windows all around it so we can get a table and watch the sun come up.'

'I'm not really hungry, Evie.'

'You'll just have some eggs. I'll get them to make you some eggs.'

'I don't like eggs.'

'Toast then. I'll eat your eggs.'

‘Eggs are gross. They’re, like, baby chickens or something.’

‘You don’t have to have any.’

‘I’m vegan anyway. Do they do peanut butter?’

‘Probably but is that vegan?’

‘Course it is. Nuts, isn’t it?’

‘I’ll get my mum to make you a vegan Sunday roast next weekend.’

‘Whatever.’

They got off the bus outside Liverpool Street and started walking up Bishopsgate. Silent passengers headed off towards office blocks and Evie watched as one let herself in to a cavernous, brightly lit foyer where a uniformed man sat unmoving in front of a computer screen at the reception desk. She watched the woman walk past the man without exchanging any words and the last she saw of her she was standing in front of a lift.

Now they’ve been sitting in the restaurant for about half an hour. Jade’s still crouched over her phone, some uneaten toast on a plate in front of her. Every so often she reaches over and takes a drink of Coke from the glass beside it. Evie is lying back against the red leather banquette looking out through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls at the whole of east London suffused in monotone greys which are just beginning to silver here and there as the far horizon visibly lightens minute by minute. The restaurant is the usual stuff:

*Like Fire Unbound*

wooden floors, chrome and glass tables, red leather seats, a long zinc bar edging the open plan kitchen where scarcely-trained chefs from Spain and Romania are turning out the all-night signature dishes. The place is pretty busy, two tables with Chinese business people, a few late-night couples, some suits. A couple of suits at a nearby table have been casting glances at Evie – her clothes are really good these days and her hair is expensive. She has quite a tiny mouth which isn't beautiful but it's cute and just serves to highlight her brown eyes. There's something about those eyes: it's like they're crowded with meaning that is even lost on Evie. The prospect of the younger girl beside her with the shaved head and the tattoos and the broken skin probably puts the suits off from making a play. She'd have given them short shrift anyway, the morning display is about to start.

'Look up Jade, it's coming.' It doesn't matter that Jade isn't interested, at least she's safe here with her.

How many times has Evie been up here to see this over the last few months? Quite a few. It's a mystery to her why she's drawn to it, but she is. She uses this restaurant during the day every so often when she has someone to pitch but she tends to come on her own for the dawn show. She scans the still-grey landscape out in front and now that we're almost at five-thirty it's changed from a pin cushion of street lamps and car headlights to a more obvious layout of roads,

houses, factories; hundreds and thousands of buildings stretching out for miles all around her, heading up north east towards Chelmsford, straight ahead of her a direct line out to Southend and her mum and dad; over to the south east she can just see the outline of the Queen Elizabeth Bridge straddling the Thames estuary, its four white fingers now showing their lines in the first light.

‘Come on,’ she whispers.

Then the first sight of sun, an improbably sudden slim disc of orange which breaks into the pale sky above the urban skyline way out east. It’s so instantaneous you feel like it’s somehow audible, as though it’s crashed into our world with a terrific noise and now at once the world is different and everything is different and life has changed gear, has speeded up, has roared into being. Evie stares at the horizon and the sun visibly grows in front of her and as the disc becomes a burning segment she can sense the explosions and fierce flares on the surface, the flames and shooting eruptions rippling its molten shape. She is gripping the edges of the leather bench and is sure that she can feel the heat of the rays upon her face as they now spill out and race down the roads and streets of east London to turn it into a living landscape where millions of people are still innocently asleep in their beds or maybe looking out from the deck of a warehouse bay at the end of a night shift or parking a Japanese car

*Like Fire Unbound*

outside a terraced house and switching off the Uber driver app. For some it's the end, for others it's another beginning but right now she feels like she's the only one who is bearing witness to this terrible scene as the sun muscles half of its appalling weight into the world and sits for a second as a perfect semi-circle of malevolent fire.

When Evie looks down at Jade, she sees that the girl has fallen asleep, her mobile phone stuck between her thighs and her head resting uncomfortably at an angle on the red leather.