

CHAPTER 1

It wasn't the first dead body that he'd ever seen, and Jack Nightingale was fairly sure it wouldn't be the last. The woman looked as if she was in her late thirties but Nightingale knew she was only thirty-one. She had curly brown hair and neatly plucked eyebrows and pale pink lipstick and her neck was at a funny angle which suggested that the rope around her neck had done more than just strangle her when she'd dropped down the stairwell. She was wearing a purple dress with a black leather belt. One of her shoes had fallen off and was lying at the bottom of the stairs, the other dangled precariously from her left foot and a stream of urine had trickled down her legs and pooled on the stair carpet, turning the rust-coloured pile a dark brown. Death was always accompanied by the evacuation of bowels, Nightingale knew. It was one of the unwritten rules. You died and your bowels opened as surely as night followed day.

He stood looking up at the woman. Her name was Constance Miller and it was the first time he had ever laid eyes on her. From the look of it she'd stood at the top of the stairs, looped a piece of washing line around her neck and tied the other end around the banister, then dropped over, probably head first. The momentum had almost certainly broken her neck and she probably hadn't felt much pain but even so it couldn't have been a pleasant way to go. Nightingale took out his pack of Marlboro and a blue disposable lighter. 'Don't mind if I smoke, do you?' He tapped out a cigarette and slipped it between his lips. 'You look like a smoker, Constance. And I saw the ashtray on the kitchen table so I'm guessing this isn't a non-smoking house.'

He flicked the lighter, lit the cigarette and inhaled. As he blew a loose smoke ring down at the stained carpet, the woman's arms twitched and her eyes flickered open. Nightingale froze, the cigarette half way to his mouth. Her arms flailed and her legs began to tremble and she began to make a wheezing sound through clenched teeth.

Suddenly her eyes opened wide. 'Your sister is going to Hell, Jack Nightingale,' she said, her voice a strangled rasp. Then her eyes closed and her body went still. Nightingale cursed and ran to the kitchen. The back door was open the way he'd left

it. Next to the sink was a pine wooden block with half a dozen plastic-handled knives embedded in it. He grabbed one of the biggest knives and ran back to the hall. He took the stairs two at a time until he was level with her then he reached over and grabbed her around the waist. He grunted as he hefted her against his shoulder and climbed up the stairs to take the weight off the washing line. He held her tight with his left arm as he sawed at the line with the knife. It took half a dozen goes before it parted and her head slumped over his shoulder.

She was the wrong side of the banister and he couldn't pull her over so he let her weight carry him down the stairs until her feet were touching the floor then he lowered her as best he could before letting go. She fell against the wall and slid down it, her hair fanning out as the back of her head scraped across the wallpaper. Nightingale hurried around the bottom of the stairs just as the woman slumped face down against the carpet. He rolled her over. She'd stopped shuddering and her eyes were closed. He felt for a pulse in her neck with his left hand but there was nothing. He sat back on his heels, gasping for breath. Her skirt had ridden up her thighs revealing her soiled underwear and Nightingale pulled it down. 'Get away from her!' bellowed a voice behind him.

As he turned he saw a burly uniformed police sergeant wearing a stab vest pointing a finger at him. Just behind him was a younger PC, tall and thin and holding an extended tactical baton in his gloved hand.

'Drop the knife!' shouted the sergeant, fumbling for his baton in its nylon holster on his belt.

Nightingale stared at the knife in his right hand. He turned back to look at the cops but before he could open his mouth to speak the young PC's baton crashed against his head and Nightingale slumped to the floor, unconscious before he hit the ground.

CHAPTER 2

The Superintendent was in his early fifties, his brown hair flecked with grey, and he studied Nightingale through thick-lensed spectacles. He was in uniform, but he'd undone his jacket buttons when he'd sat down at the table. Next to him was a younger man in a grey suit, a detective who had yet to introduce himself. Nightingale sat opposite them and watched the detective trying to take the plastic wrapping off a cassette tape.

'You've not gone digital then?' asked Nightingale.

The Superintendent nodded at the tape-recorder on the shelf by Nightingale's head. 'Please don't say anything until the tape's running,' he said. He took off his spectacles and methodically wiped the lenses with a pale blue handkerchief.

'That could be a while, the way he's going,' said Nightingale.

The detective put the tape to his mouth and used his teeth to rip away a piece of the plastic, then he used his nails to finish the job. He slotted the cassette into one of the twin slots, then started work on a second tape. Nightingale figured the man was in his mid-twenties and still on probation with the CID. He kept looking nervously at the superintendent, like a puppy that expected to be scolded at any moment.

The custody sergeant who had taken Nightingale from the holding cell had given him a bottle of water and a packet of crisps and they were both on the table in front of Nightingale. He opened the bottle and drank from it, then wiped his mouth on the paper sleeve of the forensic suit that they'd given him to wear when they'd taken away his clothes and shoes. On his feet were paper overshoes with elastic at the top.

The detective finally got the wrapping off the second tape and slotted it into the recorder before nodding at the Superintendent.

‘Switch it on then, lad,’ said the Superintendent. The detective flushed and did as he was told. The recording light glowed red. ‘Right.’ He checked his wristwatch. ‘It is a quarter past three on the afternoon of November the thirtieth. I am Superintendent William Thomas and with me is...’ He nodded at the detective.

‘Detective Constable Simon Jones,’ said the younger man. He began to spell out his surname but the Superintendent cut him short with a wave of his hand.

‘We can all spell, lad,’ said the Superintendent. He looked over at the recorder to check that the tapes were running. ‘We are interviewing Mr Jack Nightingale. Please give us your date of birth, Mr Nightingale.’

Nightingale did as he was asked.

‘So your birthday was three days ago?’ said the Superintendent.

‘And you didn’t get me a present,’ said Nightingale, stretching out his legs and folding his arms. ‘I’m not being charged with anything, am I?’

‘At the moment you’re helping us with our enquiries into a suspicious death.’

‘She killed herself,’ said Nightingale.

‘We’re still waiting for the results of the autopsy.’

‘She was hanging from the upstairs banister when I found her.’

‘You were bent over her with a knife in your hand when two of my officers apprehended you,’ said the Superintendent.

‘Your men beat the crap out of me,’ said Nightingale, gingerly touching the plaster on the side of his head. ‘I used the knife to cut her down.’

‘One blow, necessary force,’ said the Superintendent.

‘I was an innocent bystander,’ said Nightingale. ‘Wrong place, wrong time. They didn’t give me a chance to explain.’

‘Apparently they asked you to drop your weapon and when you didn’t comply they used necessary force to subdue you.’

‘First of all it wasn’t a weapon, it was a knife I’d taken from the kitchen to cut her down. And second of all they hit me before I could open my mouth.’ He pointed at the paper suit he was wearing. ‘And when am I getting my clothes back?’

‘When they’ve been forensically examined,’ said the Superintendent. ‘At the moment you’re a suspect in a possible murder case.’

‘She killed herself,’ said Nightingale. ‘Surely you must have seen that. She tied a rope around her neck and jumped.’

‘That’s not what women normally do,’ said the Superintendent. ‘Female suicides, I mean. They tend to swallow sleeping pills or cut their wrists in a warm bath. Hanging is a very male thing. Like death by car.’

‘I bow to your superior knowledge, but I think I’d rather go now.’

‘You’re not going anywhere until you’ve answered some questions.’

‘Does that mean I’m under arrest?’

‘At the moment you’re helping us with our enquiries,’ said the Superintendent.

‘Then I’m free to go whenever I want?’

‘I would prefer that you answer my questions first. If you’ve done nothing wrong then you shouldn’t have any problems talking to us.’ Thomas leant forward and looked at Nightingale over the top of his spectacles. ‘You’re not one of those Englishmen who think the Welsh are stupid, are you?’

‘What?’

‘You know what I’m talking about,’ said the Superintendent. ‘Us and the Irish, you English do like to take the piss, don’t you? Calling us sheep-shaggers and the like.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about you coming into our small town and causing mayhem,’ said the Superintendent. ‘And acting as if it’s no big thing.’ He linked his fingers and leaned forward. ‘Because it is a big thing, Nightingale. It’s a very big thing.’

‘She was dead when I got there.’

‘So you say.’

‘What does the coroner say?’

‘We’re still waiting on the exact time of death, but it looks as if it’s going to be too close to call.’

‘She was swinging from the banister when I got there.’

‘And her DNA is all over your clothes.’

‘Because I cut her down. Trying to save her.’

‘You said she was dead. Why were you trying to save a dead woman?’

‘I didn’t know she was dead, I just saw her hanging there. Then she moved.’

‘Moved?’

‘She was shaking and she was making sounds.’

‘So she wasn’t dead?’

‘No, she was dead. Some sort of autonomic reaction. I got a knife from the kitchen and cut her down. I checked for life signs and there were none. That’s when your guys arrived.’

‘Which raises two questions, doesn’t it?’ said the superintendent. ‘Why didn’t you call the police? And what were you doing in the house?’

‘I didn’t have time to phone anyone,’ said Nightingale. ‘I’d just finished checking for a pulse when your men stormed in and beat me unconscious.’

‘I’m told that you were resisting arrest,’ said the Superintendent. ‘A neighbour called nine nine nine to say that a stranger had just entered Miss Miller’s house. When they arrived they found you crouched over her, holding a knife.’

‘They didn’t say anything, just clubbed me to the ground.’

‘You shouldn’t have been in the house,’ said the Superintendent. ‘It’s not as if she invited you, is it?’

‘The back door was open,’ said Nightingale.

‘Even so,’ said the Superintendent. ‘You committed trespass at best, and at worst...’

‘What?’

‘A woman is dead, Nightingale. And you still haven’t explained why you were in the house.’

‘I wanted to talk to her.’

‘About?’

‘It’s complicated,’ said Nightingale.

‘There you are again, suggesting that the Welsh are stupid.’ He banged the flat of his hand down hard on the table and Nightingale flinched. ‘Start talking, Nightingale. I’m starting to get fed up with your games.’

Nightingale sighed. ‘I think she’s my sister.’

‘You think?’

‘Like I said, it’s complicated.’

‘Starting with the fact that her name is Miller and yours is Nightingale?’

‘She never married?’

‘Miller is the name she was born with. So how can you be her brother?’

‘Stepbrother. Or half brother. We’ve got the same father.’

‘And would the father’s name be Nightingale or Miller?’

‘Neither. Gosling. Ainsley Gosling.’

‘So you’re telling me that Gosling was your father and hers and yet all three of you have the different names?’

‘I was adopted. So was my sister. We were both adopted at birth.’

‘And so what were you doing at her house today? Surprise visit was it?’

‘I wanted to talk to her.’

‘About what?’

Nightingale bit down on his lower lip. There was no way on earth the Superintendent would believe Nightingale if he answered that question honestly. In the cold light of day, he wasn’t even sure if he believed it himself. ‘I’d just found out that she was my sister. I wanted to meet her.’

‘Did you call her first?’

Nightingale shook his head.

‘For the tape please, Mr Nightingale.’

‘No, I didn’t call her.’

‘You just thought you’d pop round? From London?’

‘I wanted to see her.’

‘So you drove all the way from London for a surprise visit?’

‘I wouldn’t exactly put it that way,’ said Nightingale. ‘It wasn’t about surprising her. I just wanted to....’ He shrugged. ‘It’s difficult to explain.’

‘You see, any normal person would have phoned first. Made contact that way and then arranged a convenient time to meet. Not turn up unannounced.’

‘I’m a very spontaneous person,’ said Nightingale. He wanted a cigarette, badly.

‘And what made you think that Connie Miller is your sister? Or half sister?’

‘I got a tip.’

‘What sort of tip?’

‘I was given her first name. And the name of the town.’

‘And that was enough to find her?’

‘I knew how old she is. Was. She was the only thirty-one-year old woman called Constance in Abersoch.’

‘Is that right?’

‘You can check the electoral role yourself. It’s all computerised these days.’

‘Well, I can tell you for a fact that Connie Miller isn’t related to you. I know her parents. I’ve known them for years. And they’ve just been to identify her body.’

Nightingale rubbed his face with his hands. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I was misinformed.’

‘Yes,’ said the Superintendent. ‘You most definitely were. Connie was born in Bryn Beryl Hospital in Pwllheli and I can assure you that there was no adoption involved.’

‘If that’s true then I was given a bum tip. It happens.’

‘If it wasn’t true then I wouldn’t be saying it,’ said the Superintendent. ‘I’m not in the habit of lying. So you’re based in London?’

Nightingale nodded. The Superintendent pointed at the tape and opened his mouth to speak but Nightingale beat him to it. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That’s right.’

‘And before that you were a policeman?’

‘For my sins, yes.’

‘You were with SO19, right?’

‘CO19. It used to be SO19 but they changed it to C019 a few years back. The firearms unit. Yeah.’

‘You were an inspector?’

It was clear that the Superintendent had already seen his file. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I was an inspector.’

‘Until that incident at Canary Wharf?’

Nightingale smiled sarcastically and nodded again.

‘People have a habit of dying around you, don’t they Nightingale?’

‘She had already hung herself by the time I got there. I had never met the woman, never set eyes on her before today.’

‘Let’s leave Connie where she is for the time being,’ said the Superintendent. ‘For now let’s talk about Simon Underwood.’

‘With respect, that’s out of your jurisdiction,’ said Nightingale. ‘Way out.’

‘Paedophile, wasn’t he? Interfering with his daughter, according to the Press. She killed herself while you were talking to her?’

‘Where are you going with this, Superintendent? I’d hate to think that you were opening old wounds just for the hell of it.’

‘I’m simply pointing out that you have a track record as far as dead bodies are concerned. Simon Underwood went through the window of his office while he was talking to you. Sophie Underwood jumped off a balcony. Your uncle took an axe to his wife and then killed himself not long before you went around to their house. Bodies do have a tendency to pile up around you.’

‘Can I smoke?’ asked Nightingale.

‘Of course you can’t bloody well smoke,’ snapped the Superintendent. ‘Last time I looked Wales was still part of the United Kingdom and in the UK we don’t allow smoking in public buildings or places of work.’

‘Can we take a break then? I need a cigarette.’

The Superintendent leaned back in his chair. ‘You know smoking kills,’ he said.

‘Allegedly,’ said Nightingale. ‘Ten minutes? It’s either that or you’ll have to charge me because I’m not going to continue helping you with your enquiries unless I have a cigarette first.’

CHAPTER 3

A cold wind blew through Nightingale's paper suit and he shivered. 'If I get a cold I'll bloody well sue you,' he muttered. He and the superintendent were standing in the car park at the rear of the police station. A patrol car had just driven in and large blue metal gates were rattling shut behind it. There were two white police vans and half a dozen four-door saloons parked against the high wall that surrounded the car park.

'You're the one that wanted a cigarette,' said the Superintendent. He took a pack of Silk Cut from his jacket pocket, flipped back the top and offered it to Nightingale.

'I'm a Marlboro man, myself,' said Nightingale.

'Your fags are in an evidence bag so if you want a smoke you'll have to make do with one of mine,' said the Superintendent. He took the pack away but Nightingale reached out his hand. The Superintendent smiled and held out the pack again.

'I wouldn't have had you down as a smoker,' said Nightingale. The Superintendent struck a match and Nightingale cupped his hands around the flame as he lit his cigarette.

The Superintendent lit his own cigarette with the same match, then flicked it away. 'I used to be a forty a day man when they allowed us to smoke in the office,' he said. 'These days I'm lucky if I get through six.' He smiled ruefully. 'The wife won't let me smoke in the house either. Tells me that secondary smoke kills. I keep telling her that the fry up she makes me eat every morning is more likely to kill me than tobacco, but what can you do? Wives know best, that's the order of things. The Superintendent took a long drag on his cigarette and blew smoke at the sky. 'What I can't understand,' he said, 'is if the only two people in a room want to smoke, why the hell they just can't get on with it. Do you have any idea how many man hours we lose a year in cigarette breaks?'

Nightingale shrugged. 'A lot?'

‘A hell of a lot. Assuming the average detective smokes ten during his shift, and each cigarette takes five minutes, that’s almost an hour a day. Half a shift a week wasted. And do you know how many of my guys smoke?’

‘Most?’

‘Yeah, most,’ said the Superintendent. He took another long drag. ‘My first boss, back in the day, kept a bottle of Glenlivet in the bottom drawer of his desk and every time we had a result the bottle came out. Do that these days and you’d be out on your ear. Can’t drink on the job, can’t smoke, can’t even eat a sandwich at your desk. What do they think, that we can’t drink and smoke and do police work?’

‘It’s the way of the world,’ agreed Nightingale. ‘The Nanny State.’

‘Another five years and I’m out of it,’ said the Superintendent. ‘I’ll have done my thirty, full pension.’

‘It’s not the job it was,’ said Nightingale.

The Superintendent sighed and nodded. ‘You never said a truer word,’ he said. He blew smoke. ‘Tell me something. Did you throw that kiddy-fiddler through the window? The tapes off, man-to-man, detective to former firearms officer, you threw him out, right?’

Nightingale flicked ash onto the Tarmac. ‘Allegedly,’ he said.

‘Don’t give me that allegedly bullshit,’ said the Superintendent. ‘If you did do it, I’d sympathise. I’ve got three kids, and even though they’re fully grown God help anyone who even thought about causing them grief. What about you, Nightingale? Kids?’

‘Never been married,’ said Nightingale. ‘Never met a woman who could stand me long enough to get pregnant.’

‘Yeah, I could see you’d be an acquired taste.’ He chuckled and inhaled smoke.

‘When can I get my clothes back?’ asked Nightingale. ‘I feel a right twat in this paper suit.’

‘If your clothing is evidence, you’ll never get it back,’ said the Superintendent. He grinned. ‘I don’t see what the problem is, white suits you.’ He jabbed his cigarette at Nightingale’s chest. ‘Wonder if those things are flameproof?’

Nightingale jumped back. ‘That’s not funny,’ he said, brushing off the ash.

The Superintendent dropped what was left of his cigarette onto the floor and squashed it with his foot. ‘This tip about Connie being your sister. Where did that come from?’

‘A friend,’ said Nightingale.

‘How could he have got it so wrong?’

Nightingale shook his head. ‘I’ve been asking myself the same question.’

‘Who is, this friend? Is he in the Job?’

‘Robbie Hoyle. An inspector with the TSG.’

‘One of the heavy mob, yeah?’

‘Yeah. You could say that. But he was a negotiator, too. Same as me.’

‘I’ll need Inspector Hoyle’s number.’

Nightingale’s eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

‘To check out your story,’ said the Superintendent. ‘If he confirms that he sent you here on a wild goose chase, it helps your case.’

‘There is no case,’ said Nightingale. ‘I found her hanging there when I went into the house.’

‘And if Inspector Hoyle says that he sent you to the house, that gives you the reason for being there. Without confirmation from him you’re still in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

Nightingale pulled on his cigarette. ‘I’m not sure that Robbie would back me up.’

‘Abusing the CRO database, was he?’

Nightingale flicked away his cigarette butt. 'Robbie's dead,' he said.

'What happened?'

'RTA,' said Nightingale. 'A stupid, senseless accident. He was on his mobile and he stepped out in front of a taxi.'

'I'm sorry,' said the superintendent. 'Did you tell anyone else that you were coming to Abersoch to see Connie Miller?'

Nightingale nodded. 'My assistant. Jenny McLean.'

'And where is she at the moment?'

'London. Holding the fort.'

'And if I were to telephone this Jenny McLean she would confirm your story, would she?'

'She knew I was coming to Abersoch and why, yes. She helped me track down her address.'

The Superintendent frowned. 'Why would she do that?'

'All I had was a first name. Constance. And the town. Abersoch. Jenny helped me track down the address. She's good with databases.'

'And she'll confirm this, will she?'

'I hope so,' said Nightingale. 'I really, really hope so.'

Thomas gestured at the door. 'Okay, let's get back to it.'