

Nightingale shivered as he stared at the house. It was a neat semi-detached with a low wall around the garden and a wrought iron gate that opened onto a path leading to the front door. There was no garage, but half of the front lawn had been paved over as a parking space for a five-year-old Hyundai. Beyond the car was a path leading to the rear garden, which was how he planned to get into the house. It was after midnight and the streets were deserted. It was a cloudy night with only occasional glimpses of the moon overhead and the lights were off in pretty much all the houses in the street.

Nightingale eased open the gate, slipped inside and closed it behind him, then walked carefully down the path and around the side of the house. He stopped and peered through the kitchen window until he was sure that there was no one there, then walked to the kitchen door. He tried the handle and wasn't surprised to find that it was locked. He'd brought a makeshift burglary kit with him including tape, a glass cutter and a screwdriver but he didn't want to start breaking glass unless he had no choice.

There was a large glass sliding door that led into the sitting room. The curtains were drawn but there was enough of a gap to see that the room was in darkness. He pulled on a pair of grey surgical gloves, checked the lock at the side of the door and smiled to himself as he took out the screwdriver. It took him only seconds to force the screwdriver into the gap between the door and the wall and pop the lock.

He gently slid the door open, pushed the curtain aside and stepped into the room. He stopped and listened for a full minute, then slowly slid the door closed. There was a sofa and an armchair and a glass and chrome coffee table facing a 42-inch LCD television. He went over to the TV and pressed the back of his hand against the screen. It was cold, so the family had been in bed for some time. In his pocket was a small can of starting fluid that he'd bought from a garage in south London. He'd turned up in his MGB and the mechanic who'd sold him the fluid had assumed that Nightingale was having trouble getting the old car started on the cold mornings and suggested he bring it in for a service. Nightingale said he would have a go himself but that if the problem continued he'd book it in. It was premium starting fluid, which meant that it was sixty per cent diethyl ether, perfect for giving a boost to a reluctant engine, but also a very efficient way of putting someone into a deep sleep.

He tiptoed across the sitting room and into the hallway, listened again and then headed up the stairs, keeping close to the wall to minimise any squeaking boards.

When he reached the landing he stopped and listened again. There were four doors. There was one to the rear of the house that he assumed was the little girl's bedroom. The door immediately to his left was open. The bathroom. He guessed that the bedroom facing the street would be the master bedroom where her parents were sleeping. The door was open slightly and Nightingale tiptoed over to it, breathing shallowly.

He pushed it open. The woman was closest to him, sleeping on her side. Her husband was on his back, snoring softly. Nightingale took a handkerchief from his pocket, twisted the top off the can and soaked the material with the fluid. He tiptoed across the carpet and held the ether-soaked handkerchief under the woman's nose for the best part of a minute, then draped it over her face.

He prepared a second handkerchief and did the same to the husband.

When he was satisfied that they were both unconscious, he tiptoed out of the room and pulled the door closed behind him. His heart was racing and he stood where he was for a full minute, composing himself, before soaking a third handkerchief with ether and pushing open the door to the little girl's bedroom.

She was lying on her back, her blonde hair spreading out across the pillow like a golden halo, breathing slowly and evenly. Nightingale closed the door quietly,

wincing as the wood brushed against the carpet. When he turned back to the bed, her eyes were open and she was staring right at him.

‘You’re Jack Nightingale, aren’t you?’ she said.

Nightingale said nothing.

‘You’ve come to kill me, haven’t you?’

CHAPTER 1

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Jack Nightingale woke up, stretched, and lit a Marlboro. As he lay on his back and blew smoke rings up at his ceiling, he ran through what lay ahead of him that day. He had to explain to a middle-aged woman that the father of her two children had a second family up in Birmingham and that on the nights he told her he was away on business he was actually with them. He had to spend the afternoon in a pub, watching a barmaid who a brewery was convinced was ripping them off to the tune of a grand a week by serving sandwiches she had made herself and not the ones the brewery provided, and in the evening he had to follow an unfaithful wife. Nightingale knew the woman was being unfaithful because he'd already followed her to a hotel where she'd spent two hours in a room with a co-worker. The cuckolded husband had read Nightingale's report but now he wanted photographs. So far as Nightingale was concerned photographs would just be rubbing salt into the wound, but if that's what the client wanted Nightingale was happy enough to provide them – at a price.

He finished the cigarette, stubbed it out in a crystal ashtray on his bedside table and looked at his watch. It was just after eight o'clock. He had set his mobile to silent, so he checked the screen to see if he'd received any calls. He hadn't.

He put down the phone and considered lighting another cigarette, but he decided to shave and shower instead. He padded to the bathroom. So far as Nightingale was concerned it was going to be a typical day, business as usual. It was only in the movies that private detectives got involved in car chases and shoot-outs or met steely-eyed blondes packing heat. Most of Nightingale's work involved following sad, lonely and embittered people on behalf of sad, lonely and embittered clients. But it paid the bills and kept him off the streets. Actually that wasn't true – much of what he did involved being in the street, which is why he favoured comfortable Hush Puppies as his footwear and generally wore a raincoat.

He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror as he shaved. He bared his teeth and wondered how much teeth-whitening would cost. Nightingale was a smoker and coffee-drinker and both addictions played havoc with his enamel.

As he climbed into the shower he had no idea that eight children were going to die that day, nor that their deaths were going to change his life for ever. The man who would kill the children was sitting at his kitchen table cleaning his shotgun as Nightingale rinsed the shampoo from his hair. His name was Jimmy McBride and he was a farmer with a smallholding near Berwick-upon-Tweed, the most northern town in England.

McBride had made himself a cup of Nescafé and two slices of toast and he kept breaking off from cleaning the shotgun to drink and eat. McBride had a few hundred cattle, a decent number of chickens and almost fifty acres that supplied new potatoes to the Morrisons supermarket chain. McBride lived alone on the farm. He'd never married, and once he'd reached the age of forty he had resigned himself to living a solitary life. He did most of the work on the farm himself, though when the potatoes needed harvesting he bought in a team of Polish contractors. They worked hard, the Poles, and they never complained about the weather or the long hours.

McBride had owned the gun since he was a teenager and used it to keep the rabbit population down. Like most farmers, McBride hated rabbits. They weren't cuddly cartoon characters, they were parasites that needed to be kept under control, and the best way to do that was a blast from a shotgun followed by several hours in a

casserole with onions, carrots, served with new potatoes pulled straight from the ground.

There was a box of shotgun shells on the table next to his toast. There had originally been 250 in the box but he'd bought them two years previously and there were only about a hundred left. That would be more than enough. On the chair by his side was the canvas bag he always took with him when he went out rabbit-shooting. It was big enough to hold fifty cartridges, a flask of whisky-laced coffee and a pack of sandwiches.

McBride filled the bag with cartridges, let himself out of his farmhouse, and walked across a ploughed field, whistling softly to himself.

It took him less than half an hour to reach the school. There was a large sign at the entrance that said 'Welcome' in a dozen languages. The wrought iron gate was closed but not locked and McBride pushed it open. He already had two cartridges in the breech and as he walked across the playground he snapped the twin barrels into place.

A bald man in a grey suit opened the door that led to the main school offices. The deputy headmaster, Simon Etchells. Etchells frowned as he saw the shotgun in McBride's hands. 'Excuse me, can I help you?' he called.

McBride continued to walk across the playground.

'You can't bring a gun onto school premises!' shouted the deputy headmaster. 'I really must ask you to leave!'

McBride shot the man in the face without breaking stride. The man fell to the ground, his face and chest a bloody mess. Three pigeons that had been sitting on the roof scattered in a flurry of wings.

He walked into the main school building. The administration offices were to the left, and beyond them was the canteen. McBride turned to the right. There were classrooms leading off both sides of the corridor. There were posters and artwork on the walls, including photographs of all the pupils with their names handwritten underneath, and above the doors in multicoloured capital letters were the names of the teachers.

McBride ignored the first two classrooms. He was humming quietly to himself. Mozart. He seized the handle of the door to his left and opened it slowly. As he stepped into the room the teacher turned to look at him. He frowned and lowered the book he was holding. There were thirty-two boys and girls sitting at tables, sharing textbooks. A few of the children were frowning but most of them were more quizzical than worried.

Grace Campbell was sitting at the table on the left of the room, between a red-haired boy and a plump girl with pigtails. McBride swung the gun up and pulled the trigger. Grace took the full force of the blast in her chest and she fell back as blood sprayed across the wall behind her.

The sound was deafening and the air was thick with acrid, choking cordite, but no one said anything. The children stared open-mouthed at McBride, unable to believe what they'd seen. The teacher, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and a greying moustache, backed away, his hands up as if hoping to ward off the next shot.

McBride turned on his heel and walked out of the classroom. As he reloaded and headed across the corridor the screams began.

As McBride opened the door to the second classroom, the teacher was standing facing his class and shouting at them to be quiet. The children were talking among themselves but they immediately fell silent when they saw McBride and his shotgun. The teacher held up a hand, palm outward, as if he was a policeman stopping traffic.

‘You can’t come in here,’ said the teacher firmly, in the voice that he used to keep unruly pupils in order.

McBride brought his gun to bear on a girl sitting by the window. Her name was Ruth Glazebrook and she had arrived at school that day with invitations to her eleventh birthday party. She was only inviting girls because she still thought that boys were yucky and besides, her mother had said that she could only invite six friends because they were going to go to McDonald’s and money was tight. McBride pulled the trigger and Ruth’s face disintegrated and she slammed against the wall.

The teacher staggered backwards and he tripped over a desk and fell to the floor before scrambling on all fours and hiding behind his desk.

The children sitting at Ruth’s table stared at McBride in horror but the rest of the pupils ran to the back of the room. McBride raised the shotgun to his shoulder again, sighted on another girl and pulled the trigger. The girl’s name was Emily Smith and she died clutching the invitation that Ruth had given her just minutes earlier.

McBride walked out of the classroom, ejecting the two spent cartridges. He slotted in two fresh ones as he walked to the next classroom.

