

CHAPTER 1

Jack Nightingale opened his eyes to find the barrel of a police-issue Heckler & Koch MP5 carbine about an inch from the end of his nose.

‘If that’s anything other than your dick in your hand I’m pulling the trigger,’ growled the police marksman holding the weapon. He was wearing a Kevlar helmet and protective goggles.

‘That’s not the official police warning, is it?’ said Nightingale. Two more armed police appeared at the end of the bed and their weapons were also aimed at his head. ‘What the hell’s going on?’

The marksman stared at Nightingale with unblinking grey eyes. ‘Move your hands very slowly from under the quilt,’ he said, saying the words slowly and clearly.

‘I don’t have a gun and I’m stark bollock naked,’ said Nightingale.

‘Just show us your hands, nice and slowly,’ said the marksman.

Nightingale did as he was told, sliding his arms from under the quilt and raising them. A fourth officer appeared and grabbed Nightingale’s wrists, quickly fastening them together with a plastic tie.

‘Are there any weapons in the flat, Nightingale?’ asked a voice from the end of the bed. Nightingale squinted at the man. He was wearing a bulletproof vest over a dark blue suit. It was Superintendent Ronald Chalmers. Tall with greying hair and flecks of dandruff on his shoulders.

‘What the hell’s going on, Chalmers?’

‘We’re going to be searching your flat from top to bottom so you might as well tell us now,’ said the superintendent. ‘Do you have any weapons here?’

‘Of course not.’

Chalmers nodded at the door. ‘Take him through there and start on this room.’

The officer who’d tied Nightingale’s hands pulled him out of the bed.

‘At least let me hide my modesty,’ protested Nightingale.

The superintendent picked up a sheet and threw it at Nightingale. Nightingale caught it and the officer pushed him through the door to the sitting room. Two more armed officers in black overalls and bulletproof vests and helmets stood by his dining table, cradling their weapons.

Nightingale wrapped the sheet around himself and sat down on his sofa. A portly man in dark blue overalls was kneeling next to a plastic toolbox by the front door. ‘Did you pick my lock?’ asked Nightingale.

‘I’m just doing my job,’ said the man. He was in his sixties, his bald head spotted with dark brown liver spots.

‘Yeah, well, I hope they’re paying you overtime,’ said Nightingale, looking at his watch. It was five o’clock in the morning and still dark outside.

Chalmers walked out of the bedroom and glared at Nightingale. ‘Where’s the gun, Nightingale?’

‘What gun?’

‘We’ll tear this place apart, if we have to’ said the superintendent.

‘Yeah? Well, you’d better have a warrant.’

Chalmers reached inside his jacket and pulled out a sheet of paper. He tossed it onto the coffee table.

‘Warrant or not, the Met’s going to be paying for any damage,’ said Nightingale.

A uniformed sergeant appeared at the door. Chalmers turned around to look at him and the sergeant shook his head. ‘Kitchen and bathroom,’ said Chalmers. ‘Then the spare bedroom.’ The sergeant went back into the bedroom to speak to his men. Chalmers pointed at Nightingale. ‘Get some clothes on,’ he said.

‘Are you arresting me?’

‘I will if you don’t get in there and get dressed,’ said the superintendent.

Nightingale held up his hands. ‘How am I supposed to get dressed like this?’

Chalmers sighed and took a Swiss Army knife from his pocket. He pulled out a small blade and cut the plastic tie. It fell to the floor and Nightingale rubbed his wrists. ‘What’s this about, Chalmers?’ he asked.

‘Get dressed. You’ll find out soon enough.’

CHAPTER 2

Nightingale was taken down the stairs to the street handcuffed to a burly constable wearing a bright yellow fluorescent jacket over a bulletproof vest. Nightingale had pulled on black jeans, a blue pullover and a leather jacket but had forgotten to pick up his cigarettes and lighter from the bedside table. ‘Don’t suppose you’ve got a cigarette on you?’ he asked the cop.

‘Filthy habit,’ grinned the man, pulling open the side door of the police van. It was a grey Mercedes Sprinter van with TSG markings. The Territorial Support Group. The Met’s heavy mob. Behind it were two blue saloons. Armed cops were stowing their gear into the boots.

‘Yeah, well, it’s not as disgusting as breaking into people’s homes at the crack of dawn,’ said Nightingale.

The cop climbed into the van and jerked the handcuffs to pull Nightingale inside. There were two armed police officers in black overalls, bulletproof vests and Kevlar helmets sitting at the back, cradling MP5s. Nightingale grinned and waved with his free hand. ‘Expecting trouble, boys?’ he said as he sat down.

The two men stared at him impassively.

More armed officers were piling into the back of a Volvo V70 Armed Response Vehicle as the driver turned on the siren and flashing lights. Curtains and blinds all the way down the street began to twitch.

Nightingale looked at the cop sitting next to him. ‘This isn’t going to win you friends, you know that,’ he said. ‘Most people have got jobs to go to.’

Chalmers walked out of Nightingale’s building and nodded at the driver of the van as he **got** into the back of a black Vauxhall Vectra.

The driver put the van in gear and followed the ARV down the street; Chalmers pulled out behind them. They drove in convoy south to the Thames and over Vauxhall Bridge **towards** Stockwell. Eventually they pulled up in front of the main entrance of Lambeth Hospital.

Chalmers got out of the Vauxhall and went over to talk to the men in the ARV, then the Volvo peeled away from the kerb and sped off back to north London. Chalmers walked over to the van. A stick-thin cop with ginger hair and freckles across his nose and cheeks pulled open the side door. ‘Out you get,’ he growled at Nightingale.

Nightingale and the constable **climbed** out. Nightingale held up his handcuffed wrist. ‘There’s no need for this, Chalmers. I’m hardly likely to do a runner, am I?’

Chalmers said nothing. He turned on his heel and walked inside the hospital. Nightingale and the cop followed him. Heads turned to look at them as they strode across the reception area to a bank of lifts. They rode up in silence to the fourth floor. The Intensive Care Unit. They walked down a corridor lined with glass panels that looked into small rooms where patients, mainly elderly, were attached to machines that were either monitoring them or keeping them alive. The doctors and nurses paid the police no attention and there was a purposeful buzz of conversation overlaid with the beeping of sensors.

‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on, Chalmers?’ asked Nightingale, but

the superintendent ignored him. Nightingale grinned at the cop. 'Maybe his wife's giving birth and he wants me to be the godfather,' he said. The cop scowled but said nothing.

At the far end of the corridor was a young constable sitting on a chair reading a newspaper. He looked up, saw Chalmers approaching and hurriedly got to his feet, hiding the paper behind his back. Chalmers brushed past the man and opened the door to the room. He walked in and jerked his thumb at Nightingale. 'In,' he said.

Nightingale went through first, followed by the cop he was handcuffed to. The man lying on the hospital bed in front of him was Afro-Caribbean and in his late twenties. There were wires leading from his chest to a heart monitor that was beeping softly at the side of the bed. His head was bandaged, covering his skull and one eye. The uncovered eye was shut.

'You know him?' asked Chalmers.

Nightingale shrugged. 'Hard to say, looking like that.'

'Dwayne Robinson,' said Chalmers. 'Gangbanger from Brixton. Someone shot him in the back of the head six months ago; he's been in a coma ever since.'

'And this concerns me how?'

'Where were you on July the twentieth?'

Nightingale laughed. 'Are you serious? How would I know? Who knows what they were doing six months ago?'

'So it could have been you who blew his brains across the pavement?'

Nightingale sneered at the superintendent. 'This is what passes for interrogation these days, is it? Look, Chalmers, I know you're not the sharpest knife in the drawer but what makes you think I had anything to do with this? I'm not generally the first person that Trident calls on to help with their investigations.'

'We don't think this was black on black. There was a white male seen running from the scene.'

'I'm not a great runner, for one,' said Nightingale. 'And I don't often go south of the river, for two. And for three, I don't go around shooting people.'

'But a lot of people around you have been dying lately, haven't they?' said Chalmers. 'Starting with your father.'

'My biological father. And he killed himself, remember?' Nightingale pointed at the man in the bed. 'What's this about? I've never seen him before and I certainly didn't shoot him.'

The door opened and an Indian doctor walked in. He nodded at Chalmers. 'I hope this isn't going to take long, Superintendent. I'm not happy about having this many people in the ICU.'

'A few minutes, Dr Patel. Has there been any change since last night?'

The doctor picked up a clipboard from the bottom of the bed, looked at it, then shook his head.

'Robinson has been in a coma since he was shot,' Chalmers said to Nightingale. 'There's minimal brain activity. He's never going to wake up. That's what they thought, anyway. Until yesterday.' Chalmers stared at the beeping monitor and folded his arms.

‘All right, Chalmers, I’ll bite,’ said Nightingale testily. ‘What happened yesterday?’

‘You’ll see,’ said Chalmers. He looked at the doctor. ‘How often?’ he asked.

‘Still every half hour or so,’ said the doctor. ‘Any moment now.’ He put the chart back on the end of the bed and stood next to Chalmers, his hands deep in the pockets of his white coat.

‘Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?’ said Nightingale. Just as he finished speaking, Robinson’s whole body shuddered as if he was having an epileptic fit. His arms trembled, his heels drummed against the mattress, his back arched and the heart monitor began to beep rapidly.

‘You’re sure he’s okay like this?’ Chalmers asked the doctor.

‘Nothing we do has any effect. We’ve tried anti-convulsion drugs, all the epilepsy treatments, painkillers, muscle relaxants. Nothing works. And it’s a purely physical reaction; his brain activity isn’t affected at all.’

Robinson went suddenly still. Then he took a long, slow, deep breath. ‘Jack,’ he said as he exhaled. Then he took another deep breath. ‘Jack Nightingale.’

Nightingale froze.

Chalmers grinned at him. ‘So you never met the man, huh? Why’s he saying your name?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘He’s identifying the man who shot him, that’s what he’s doing. What we’ve got here is a deathbed statement and that carries a lot of weight in court.’

‘He’s not dead, he’s in a coma,’ said Nightingale.

‘Same thing,’ said Chalmers.

‘How’s it the same thing?’ asked Nightingale. ‘If he knew he was dying and named me as his attacker then that would be a deathbed statement. But he’s in a coma and hasn’t accused me of anything.’

‘I wouldn’t categorise it as a coma,’ said the doctor. ‘With the sort of damage he has experienced, I wouldn’t expect there to be any hope of recovering any brain function. Frankly, under more normal circumstances, we’d have already started looking into the possibility of harvesting his organs. Other than the head wound, Mr Robinson is actually in very good physical condition. He’s breathing without assistance, his heart is strong, all his metabolic signs are positive. He could live for ten or twenty years like this. But it’s not as if he’s in a coma that he might one day recover from.’

Chalmers put up a hand to silence the doctor. ‘I’m talking legally rather than medically,’ he said. ‘Mr Robinson is clearly identifying Nightingale as his attacker.’

‘He’s saying my name, that’s all,’ said Nightingale.

‘And you said that you don’t know him,’ said Chalmers. ‘If that’s true, why is he saying your name?’

Nightingale took a step towards the bed but the cop he was handcuffed to didn’t move.

‘Take the cuffs off,’ said Chalmers.

The cop took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs. Nightingale moved closer to the bed, massaging his right wrist.

‘Jack,’ mumbled the man again. ‘Jack Nightingale.’

Nightingale looked over at the doctor. ‘No brain activity, is that what you said?’

The doctor nodded and pointed at a green monitor. ‘See the flat lines there? That’s the neural activity. There’s some movement occasionally and we can get a reaction with loud noise or light but that’s almost certainly at the autonomic level. He’s lost a big chunk of his brain.’

‘So what’s happening?’ asked Nightingale. ‘Why’s he talking now?’

‘Because he’s telling us who shot him,’ said Chalmers. He leaned over the bed. ‘Mr Robinson, can you hear me? My name is Superintendent Chalmers. Can you tell me what happened the night you were shot?’

‘You’re wasting your time, Superintendent,’ said the doctor. ‘He’s totally non-communicative.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that, if you don’t mind,’ said Chalmers. He wagged his finger at Nightingale. ‘Say something to him,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It might get a reaction. Coma patients sometimes come out of their comas when they hear a voice they recognise.’

‘Superintendent, he isn’t in a—’ began the doctor, but Chalmers silenced him with an icy stare.

‘Fine, have it your own way,’ said the doctor, and he walked out of the room muttering to himself.

‘Say something to him,’ Chalmers said to Nightingale, nodding at the man in the bed.

‘Like what?’

‘Say you’re here. Tell him your name.’

‘This is ridiculous. Didn’t you hear what the doctor said?’

‘Just do it, Nightingale. Unless you’ve got something to hide.’

Nightingale stared at the superintendent with contempt, then turned back to the bed. He bent down over Robinson, close enough to see a rash of small spots across his cheeks and the tufts of hair protruding from his nostrils. ‘I’m Jack Nightingale,’ he whispered.

‘Louder,’ said Chalmers.

Nightingale sighed. ‘This is Jack Nightingale. I’m here.’

Robinson took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Nightingale’s stomach lurched at the fetid stench and he backed away.

‘This is a waste of time,’ said Nightingale. ‘I’ve never seen him before and I certainly had nothing to do with shooting him.’

‘Jack?’ murmured Robinson. ‘Are you there?’

Chalmers waved for Nightingale to get closer to the bed. ‘I’m here,’ said

Nightingale. He frowned. He was sure he didn't know Robinson, and equally sure that Robinson didn't know him.

'Why won't you help me, Jack?' His voice was a hoarse whisper, barely audible.

Nightingale moved closer. 'What?'

'I don't like it here. I want to go home.' Robinson took a long, deep breath and then slowly exhaled.

'What did he say?' asked Chalmers.

Nightingale didn't bother to reply. 'Where are you?' he asked the man in the bed.

Robinson took another long breath. 'I don't know,' he said. His voice was a faint rattle and his lips were barely moving. 'I'm scared.'

Nightingale shivered.

'Please help me, Jack. Don't leave me here.'

Chalmers pushed Nightingale to the side. 'Mr Robinson, can you confirm that it was Mr Nightingale who shot you?'

Robinson's chest rose and fell slowly.

'That's not him talking,' said Nightingale quietly.

'Bollocks,' said Chalmers. 'What do you think, that someone's playing ventriloquist?'

Nightingale held Robinson's left hand. It was warm and dry. 'Sophie, is that you?' he said.

'Who the hell's Sophie?' said Chalmers.

Nightingale ignored Chalmers. He gently squeezed Robinson's hand. 'It's me, Sophie. Jack.'

'Jack?' said Robinson, his voice a dry rasp.

'I'm here, Sophie.'

'I want to go home,' said Robinson. 'Please help me, Jack.'

'I don't know what to do, Sophie. I don't know how to help you.'

Robinson's chest stopped moving. Nightingale looked over at the vital signs monitor. Nothing had changed.

'Sophie?'

Nightingale flinched as Chalmers grabbed his shoulder. 'What are you playing at, Nightingale?'

Nightingale shook the superintendent's hand away. 'Sophie?'

Robinson was lying perfectly still.

Chalmers gestured with his chin at the policeman at the end of the bed. 'Get the doc back here now,' he said. The cop hurried out of the room. 'All right, Nightingale, that's enough of that. Get away from him.'

Nightingale let go of Robinson's hand. Just as his fingers fell onto the mattress, Robinson sat bolt upright. He opened his uncovered eye wide and then

screamed. Chalmers took a step backwards and tripped over a power cord, his arms flailing as he tried to regain his balance. He stumbled against a chair and fell to the floor, cursing.

Nightingale didn't flinch. He looked straight at Robinson, who continued to scream at the top of his voice as he stared ahead. Then, just as suddenly as it started, the scream stopped and Robinson fell back on the bed. The monitors started buzzing and an alarm sounded in the corridor. The doctor burst into the ICU followed by two nurses. 'Get out of here now,' he shouted at Chalmers. 'Where the hell's the crash trolley?'

