

Jack Nightingale didn't intend to kill anyone when he woke up that chilly November morning. He shaved, showered and dressed and made himself coffee and a bacon sandwich, and at no point did he even contemplate the taking of a human life. He had spent the last five years training to do just that. As a serving member of the Metropolitan Police's elite CO19 armed response unit he was more than capable of putting a bullet in a man's head or chest if it was necessary and provided he had been given the necessary authorisation by a senior officer.

His mobile phone rang just as he was pouring the coffee from his cafetiere. It was the Co-ordinator of the Metropolitan Police's negotiating team. 'Jack, I've just had a call from the Duty Officer at Fulham. They have a person in crisis down at Chelsea Harbour. Can you get there?

'No problem,' said Nightingale. After two courses at the Met's Bramshill Officer Training College he was now one of several dozen officers qualified to talk to hostage-takers and potential suicides.

'I'm told it's a jumper on a ledge and that's all I have. I'm trying to get back up for you but we've got four guys tied up with a domestic in Brixton.'

'Give me the address,' said Nightingale, reaching for a pen.

He ate his bacon sandwich as he drove his MGB Roadster to Chelsea Harbour. During the three years he had worked as a negotiator he had been called to more than forty attempted suicides but on only three occasions had he seen someone take their own life. In his experience, people either wanted to kill themselves, or they wanted to talk. They rarely wanted to do both. Suicide was a relatively easy matter. You climbed to the top of a high building or a bridge and you jumped. Or you swallowed a lot of tablets. Or you tied a rope around your neck and stepped off a chair. Or you took a razor blade and made deep cuts in your wrist or throat. If you were lucky enough to have a gun you put it in your mouth or against your temple and pulled the trigger. What you didn't do if you really wanted to kill yourself was say you were going to do it and then wait for a trained police negotiator to arrive. People who did that usually just wanted to talk, to have someone listen to their problems and reassure them that their lives were worth living. Once they'd got whatever was worrying them off their chests they came down from the ledge or put down the gun or lower the knife and everyone cheered and patted Nightingale on the back and told him 'job well done'.

When he reached the address that the Duty Officer had given him, his way was blocked by

a police car and two Community Support Officers in police-type uniforms and yellow fluorescent jackets. One of them pointed the way Nightingale had come and told him to turn around in a tone that suggested his motivation for becoming a CSO had more to do with wielding power than helping his fellow citizens. Nightingale wound down the window and showed them his warrant card. ‘Inspector Nightingale,’ he said. ‘I’m the negotiator.’

‘Sorry, Sir,’ said the CSO, suddenly all sweetness and light. He pointed over at a parked ambulance. ‘You can leave your car there, I’ll keep an eye on it.’

The two CSOs moved to the side to allow him to drive through. He parked behind the ambulance and climbed out, stretching and yawning. If you’d asked Nightingale what he was expecting that chilly November morning, he’d probably have shrugged carelessly and said that jumpers tended to be either men the worse for drink, women the worse for anti-depressants or druggies the worse for their Class A drug of choice, generally cocaine or amphetamines. Nightingale’s drug of choice while working was nicotine and he lit himself a Marlboro and blew smoke up at the cloudless sky.

A uniformed inspector hurried over, holding a transceiver. ‘I’m glad it’s you, Jack,’ he said.

‘And I’m glad it’s you, Colin.’ He’d known Colin Duggan for almost a decade. He was old school - a good, reliable thief-taker who like Nightingale was a smoker. He offered the inspector a Marlboro and lit it for him, even though smoking in uniform was a disciplinary offence.

‘It’s a kid, Jack,’ said Duggan, scratching his fleshy neck.

‘Gang-banger? Drug deal gone wrong?’ Nightingale inhaled and held the smoke deep in his lungs.

‘A kid kid,’ said Duggan. ‘Nine year old girl.’

Nightingale frowned as he blew a tight plume of smoke. Nine year old girls didn’t kill themselves. They played with their Playstations or Wiis or they went rollerblading and sometimes they were kidnapped and raped by paedophiles but they never, ever killed themselves.

Duggan pointed up at a luxury tower block overlooking the Thames. ‘Her name’s Sophie, she’s locked herself on the thirteenth floor balcony and she’s sitting there talking to her doll.’

‘Where are the parents?’ said Nightingale. There was a cold feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach.

‘Father’s at work, mother’s shopping, the girl was left in the care of the au pair.’ Duggan gestured with his cigarette at an anorexic blonde who was sitting on a bench, sobbing, as a uniformed WPC tried to comfort her. ‘Polish girl. She was ironing, then saw Sophie on the

balcony. She banged on the window but Sophie had locked it from the outside.'

'And what makes her think Sophie wants to jump?'

'She's talking to her doll, won't look at anyone. We sent up two WPCs but she won't talk to them.'

'You're supposed to wait for me, Colin,' said Nightingale. He dropped his cigarette onto the floor and crushed it with his heel. 'Amateurs only complicate matters, you know that.'

'She's a kid on a balcony,' said Duggan. 'We couldn't just wait.'

'You're sure she's a potential jumper?'

'She's sitting on the edge, Jack. A gust of wind and she could blow right off. We're trying to get an airbag brought out but no one seems to know where to get one.'

'How close can I get to her?'

'You could talk to her through the balcony window.'

Nightingale shook his head. 'I need to see her face, to see how she's reacting. And I don't want to be shouting.'

'Then there are two possibilities,' said Duggan. 'She's too high to use a ladder, so we can either lower you down from the roof or we can get you into the flat next door.'

'Lower me?'

'We can put you in a harness and the Fire Brigade boys will drop you down.'

'And I talk to her hanging from a string like a bloody puppet? Come on, Colin. I'm a negotiator, not a bloody marionette.'

'The other balcony it is then,' said Duggan. He flicked his butt away. 'Let's get to it, then.' He waved over a uniformed constable and told him to escort Nightingale up to the thirteenth floor. 'Except it isn't the thirteenth, it's the fourteenth,' said Duggan.

'What?'

'It's a superstitious thing. Don't ask me why. It is the thirteenth floor, but the lift says fourteen. It goes from twelve to fourteen. No thirteen.'

'That's ridiculous,' said Nightingale.

'Tell the developer, not me,' said Duggan. 'Besides, you're talking to the wrong person. You won't catch me walking under a ladder or breaking a mirror. I can understand people not wanting to live on the thirteenth floor.' He grinned at Nightingale. 'Break a leg, yeah?'

'Yeah,' said Nightingale. He nodded at the uniformed constable, a lanky specimen whose uniform seemed a couple of sizes too small for him. 'Lead on, McDuff.'

The constable frowned. 'My name's not McDuff,' he said.

Nightingale patted him on the back. 'Let's go,' he said. 'But first I want a word with the au

pair.'

The constable and Nightingale went over to the sobbing girl who was still being comforted by the uniformed WPC. Over fifty people had gathered to stare up at the little girl. There were pensioners, huddled together like penguins on an iceflow, mothers with toddlers in strollers, teenagers chewing gum and sniggering, a girl in Goth clothing with a collie dog who grinned at Nightingale as he walked by, workmen in overalls who were shouting at the police to do something, and a group of waitresses from a nearby pizza restaurant.

'Why aren't you up there, getting her down?' shouted a bald man holding a metal tool box. He pointed at Nightingale and the young constable. 'You should do something instead of pissing about down here.'

'Can't you Taser him?' asked Nightingale.

'We're not issued with Tasers, Sir,' said the constable.

'Use your truncheon then.'

'We're not....' He grimaced as he realised that Nightingale was joking.

They went to the au pair, who was blowing her nose into a large white handkerchief. He nodded at the WPC. 'I'm the negotiator,' he said.

'Yes sir,' she said.

Nightingale smiled at the au pair. 'Hi, what's your name?' he asked.

'Inga,' sniffed the girl, dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief. 'Are you a policeman?'

'I'm Jack Nightingale,' he said, showing her his warrant card. 'I'll be the one who's going to talk to Sophie.'

'Am I in trouble?'

'No, of course you're not,' said Nightingale. 'You did the right thing, calling the police.'

'Her parents will kill me,' said the au pair.

'They won't,' said Nightingale.

'They'll send me back to Poland.'

'They can't do that, Poland is in the EC. You have every right to be here.'

'They'll send me to prison, I know they will.'

Nightingale felt his heart harden. The au pair seemed more concerned about her own future than what was happening thirteen stories up. 'They won't,' he said. 'Tell me, Inga, why isn't Sophie at school today?'

'She said she had a stomach ache. She didn't feel well. Her mother said she could stay home.'

'Her mother's shopping?'

The au pair nodded. 'I phoned her and she's coming back now. Her father's mobile phone is switched off so I left a message on his voicemail.'

'Where does he work?'

'A bank in Canary Wharf.' Still sniffing, she took a wallet out of the back pocket of her jeans and fished out a business card. She gave it to Nightingale. This is him.' Nightingale looked at the card. Simon Underwood was a vice president at a large American bank.

'Inga, has Sophie done anything like his before?'

The au pair shook her head fiercely. 'Never. She's a quiet child. As good as gold.'

'Tell me what happened. How did she come to be on the balcony?'

'I don't know,' said the au pair. 'I was ironing. She was watching a Hannah Montana video. Then when I looked up she was on the balcony and she'd locked the door.'

'You can lock it from the outside?'

'There's only one key and she had it. I shouted at her to open the door but it was like she couldn't hear me. I banged on the window but she didn't look at me. That's when I called the police.'

'And she wasn't sad this morning? Or angry? Or upset at something? Or somebody?'

'She was quiet,' said the au pair. 'She's always quiet.'

'You didn't argue with her? Or fight with her about something?'

The au pair's eyes flashed. 'You're going to blame me, aren't you? You're going to send me to prison?' she began to wail.

'No one's blaming you, Inga.'

The au pair buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed.

Nightingale nodded at the constable. 'Let's go,' he said.

'What will you do?' the constable asked as they walked by the crowd of onlookers.

'Talk to her. See if I can find out what's troubling her, see what it is she wants.'

'She wants something?'

'They always want something. If they didn't want something then they'd just go ahead and do it. The key is to find out what it is they want.'

'Wankers!' shouted the bald man with the tool box.

Nightingale stopped and glared at the man. 'What's your problem, pal?'

'My problem is that there's a little girl up there and you tossers aren't doing anything about it.'

'And what exactly are you doing? Gawping in case she takes a dive off the balcony? Is that what you want? You want to see her slap into the ground, do you? You want to hear her

bones break and her skull smash and see her blood splatter over the concrete? Because that's the only reason you could have for standing there. You're sure as hell not helping by shouting abuse and making a tit of yourself. I'm here to help, you're here on the off chance you might see a child die, so I'd say that makes you the tosser. I'm going up there now to see how I can help her, and if you're still here when I get down I'll shove your tools so far up your arse that you'll be coughing up spanners for months. Are we clear, tosser?'

The bald man looked away, his face reddening. Nightingale sneered at him and started walking to the entrance again. The constable hurried after him.

The reception area was plush with overstuffed sofas and a large coffee table covered with glossy magazines. A doorman in a green uniform was talking to two uniformed PCs. 'Where are the stairs?' asked Nightingale.

The doorman pointed to three lift doors. 'The lifts are there, Sir,' he said.

'I need the stairs,' said Nightingale.

'It's thirteen floors, Sir,' said the constable at his side.

'I know it's thirteen floors, McDuff,' said Nightingale. He jerked his chin at the doorman. 'Stairs?'

The doorman pointed to the left. 'Around the side there, Sir,' he said.

Nightingale hurried towards the stairs, followed by the constable. He pushed through the doors and started up the concrete stairs, taking them two at a time. The number of each floor was painted on the white wall in green letters and by the time they'd reached the tenth floor both men were panting like dogs. 'Why can't we use the lift, Sir?' gasped the constable. 'Is it procedure with jumpers?'

'It's because I hate lifts,' said Nightingale.

'Claustrophobia?'

'Nothing to do with confined spaces,' said Nightingale. 'I just don't like dangling over nothing.'

'So it's fear of heights?'

'It's fear of lifts,' said Nightingale. 'I'm fine with heights. As you're about to find out.'

They reached the twelfth floor. The policeman had taken off his helmet and unbuttoned his tunic. Nightingale had taken off his overcoat and had draped it over his shoulder.

They reached the thirteenth floor though the number stencilled by the door was 14.

Nightingale pulled open the door and went through into the corridor. 'What number is her flat?' he asked.

'Fourteen C,' said the constable. 'We can get into Fourteen D. A Mr and Mrs Jackson live

there and they've agreed to give us access.'

'Okay, when we get in there keep the Jacksons away from the balcony. The girl mustn't see them and she sure as hell mustn't see you. Nothing personal, but the uniform could spook her.'

'Got you,' said the policeman.

'You'll be just fine, McDuff,' said Nightingale. He knocked on the door of Fourteen D. It was opened by a man in his early sixties, grey-haired and slightly stooped. Nightingale flashed his warrant card. 'Mr Jackson, I'm Jack Nightingale. I gather you're happy for me to go out on your balcony.'

'I wouldn't exactly say that I was happy, but we need to get that little girl back inside.'

He opened the door wide and Nightingale walked in, followed by the constable. The man's wife was sitting on a flower-print sofa, her hands in her lap. She was also grey haired and when she stood up to greet Nightingale he saw that she had the same curved spine. 'Please don't get up, Mrs Jackson,' he said.

'What's going to happen?' she said anxiously. Like her husband she was well-spoken, with an accent that would do credit to a Radio Four announcer. They were good, middle-class people, the sort that would rarely cross paths with a policeman and Nightingale could sense their unease at having him and the uniformed constable in their home.

'I'm just going to talk to her, Mrs Jackson, that's all.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked.

Nightingale smiled. More often than not as a member of CO19 he was treated with contempt if not open hostility and the Jacksons were a breath of fresh air.

'You could certainly put the kettle on, Mrs Jackson,' he said. 'Now, do you know Sophie?'

'We say hello to her, but she's a shy little thing, wouldn't say boo to a goose.'

'A happy girl?'

'I wouldn't say happy,' said Mrs Jackson.

'She cries sometimes,' said her husband quietly. 'At night.'

'What sort of crying?' asked Nightingale. 'Screaming?'

'Sobbing,' said Mr Jackson. 'Her bedroom is next to our bathroom, and sometimes when I'm getting ready for bed I can hear her sobbing.'

'We've both heard her,' agreed Mrs Jackson. Her husband walked over to her and put his arm around her and for a brief moment Nightingale flashed back to his own parents. His father had been equally protective with his mother, never scared to hold her hand in public or to demonstrate his affection in other ways. His last memory of them was the two of them

standing at the door of their house in Manchester, his arm around her shoulders, as they waved him off to start his second year at university. His mother had looked up at Nightingale's father with the same adoration that he saw in Mrs Jackson's eyes.

'Any idea why she'd be unhappy?' asked Nightingale. 'Did you see her with her parents?'

'Rarely,' said Mr Jackson. 'They've been here what, five years?' he asked, looking at his wife.

'Six,' she said.

'Six years, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I've seen her with her mother or father. It's always an au pair she's with, and they seem to change them every six months or so.' He looked at his wife and she nodded imperceptibly. 'The thing is,' he continued, 'one doesn't like to talk out of school but they didn't seem to be the most attentive of parents.'

'I understand,' he said. He took his cigarette lighter and cigarettes from the pocket of his overcoat and gave the coat to the constable. 'Why don't you just take a seat while I go out and talk to her,' he said to the Jacksons.

Mr Jackson helped his wife onto the sofa while Nightingale went over to the glass door that led on to the balcony. The balcony was actually a terrace, with terracotta tiles and space for a small circular white metal table and four chairs, and several pots of flowering shrubs. The terrace was surrounded by a waist-high wall which was topped by a metal railing.

The door slid to the side and Nightingale could hear traffic off in the distance and the crackle of police radios. He stepped slowly onto the terrace, and then looked to the right.

The girl was sitting on the wall of the balcony next door, her legs under the metal rail, her arms on top of it. She was holding a Barbie doll and seemed to be whispering to it. She was wearing a white sweatshirt with a blue cotton skirt and silver trainers with blue stars on them. She had porcelain-white skin and shoulder length blonde hair that she'd tucked behind her ears.

There was a gap of about six feet between the terrace where he was and the one where the girl was sitting. Nightingale figured that he could just about jump across but that would be a last resort. If the girl was startled and lost her grip she would slip under the rail and over the side. He walked slowly over to the side of the terrace and stood next to a tall thin conifer. In the distance he could see the River Thames and far off to his left was the London Eye. The girl didn't seem to have noticed him, but Nightingale knew that she must have heard the door slide open. 'Hi,' he said.

Sophie looked across at Nightingale but didn't say anything. Nightingale stared out over the



Thames as he slid a cigarette between his lips and flicked his lighter.

‘Cigarettes are bad for you,’ said Sophie.

‘I know,’ said Nightingale. He lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

‘You can get cancer,’ said Sophie.

Nightingale tilted his head back and blew two perfect rings of smoke. ‘I know that too,’ he said.

‘How do you do that?’ she asked.

‘Do what?’

‘Blow smoke rings.’

Nightingale shrugged. ‘You just blow and stick your tongue out a bit,’ he said. He grinned amiably and held out the cigarette. ‘Do you want to try?’

She shook her head solemnly. ‘I’m a child and children can’t smoke, and even if I could smoke I wouldn’t because it gives you cancer.’

Nightingale shrugged again and took another drag on the cigarette. ‘It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?’ he said, looking out over the river again.

‘Who are you?’ Sophie asked.

‘My name’s Jack.’

‘Like Jack and the beanstalk?’

‘Yeah, but I don’t have my beanstalk with me today. I had to use the stairs.’

‘Why didn’t you use the lift?’

‘I don’t like lifts.’

Sophie put the doll to her ear and frowned as if she was listening intently. Then she nodded. ‘Jessica doesn’t like lifts, either.’

‘That’s a nice name, Jessica.’

‘Jessica Lovely, that’s her full name. What’s your full name?’

‘Nightingale. Jack Nightingale.’

‘Like the bird?’

‘That’s right. Like the bird.’

‘I wish I was a bird.’ She cuddled the doll as she stared across the river with unseeing eyes. ‘I wish I could fly.’

Nightingale blew two more smoke rings. This time they held together for less than a second before the wind whipped them apart. ‘It’s not so much fun, being a bird. They can’t watch TV, they can’t play video games or play with dolls, and they have to eat off the floor.’

Down below a siren kicked into life and Sophie flinched as if she’d been struck. ‘It’s okay,’

said Nightingale. 'It's a fire engine.'

'I thought it was the police.'

'The police siren sounds different.' Nightingale made the woo-woo-woo sound of a police siren and Sophie giggled. Nightingale leant against the rail surrounding the balcony. He had set his phone to vibrate and he felt it judder in his inside pocket. He took it out and looked at the screen. It was Robbie Hoyle, one of his negotiator colleagues. He'd known Hoyle for more than a decade. He was a sergeant with the Territorial Support Group, the force's heavy mob who went in with riot shields, truncheons and Tasers when necessary. Hoyle was a big man, well over six feet tall with the build of a rugby player, but he had a soft voice and was one of the Met's most able negotiators. 'I'm going to have to take this call, Sophie, I'm sorry,' he said. He pressed the green button. 'Hi Robbie.'

'I've just arrived, do you want me up there?'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea,' said Nightingale. Whenever possible the negotiators preferred to act in teams of three, one doing the talking, one actively listening and one gathering intelligence, but Nightingale figured that too many men on the balcony would only spook the little girl.

'How's it going?' asked Hoyle.

'Calm,' said Nightingale. 'I'll get back to you, okay. Try to get rid of the onlookers, but softly softly.' He ended the call and put the phone away.

'You're a policeman, aren't you?' said Sophie.

Nightingale smiled. 'How did you know?'

Sophie pointed down at Colin Duggan, who was staring up at them, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. Robbie Hoyle was standing next to him. 'That policeman there spoke to you when you got out of your car.'

'You saw me arrive, yeah?'

'I like sports cars,' she said. 'It's an MGB, right?'

'That's right,' said Nightingale. 'It's an old one. How old are you?'

'Nine,' she said.

'Well my car is twenty-six years old, how about that?'

'That's old,' she said. 'That's very old.'

'There's another thing that birds can't do,' said Nightingale. 'When was the last time you saw a bird driving a car? They can't do it. No hands.'

Sophie pressed the doll next to her ear as if she was listening to it, then took it away and looked across at Nightingale. 'Am I in trouble?' she said.

Nightingale shook his head. 'No, you're not in trouble, Sophie. We just want to be sure that you're okay.'

Sophie shuddered as if a cold wind had blown across her spine.

'The girl who looks after you, what's her name?' asked Nightingale.

'Inga. She's from Poland.'

'She's worried about you.'

'She's stupid.'

'Why do you say that?'

'She can't even use the microwave properly.'

Nightingale shrugged. 'I have trouble getting my video recorder to work.'

'Videoplus,' said Sophie.

'What?'

'Videoplus. You just put in the number from the newspaper. The machine does it for you. Everyone knows that.'

'I didn't.' A gust of wind blew across from the river and Sophie put a hand onto her skirt to stop it billowing around her leg. Nightingale caught a glimpse of a dark bruise above her knee. 'What happened to your leg?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she said quickly. Too quickly, Nightingale realised. He blew smoke and avoided looking at the girl. 'Why didn't you go to school today?'

'Mummy said I didn't have to.'

'Are you poorly?'

'Not really.' She bit down on her lower lip and cuddled her doll. 'I am in trouble, aren't I?'

'No, you're not,' said Nightingale. He made the sign of the cross over his heart. 'Cross my heart, you're not.'

Sophie forced a smile. 'Do you have children?'

Nightingale dropped the butt of his cigarette and ground it with his heel. 'I'm not married.'

'You don't have to be married to have children.' Tears began to run down her cheeks and she turned her face away.

'What's wrong, Sophie?'

'Nothing.' She sniffed and wiped her eyes with her doll.

'Sophie, let's go inside. It's cold out here.'

She sniffed again but didn't look at him. Nightingale started to pull himself up onto the balcony wall but his foot scraped against the concrete and she flinched. 'Don't come near me,' she said.

‘I just wanted to sit like you,’ said Nightingale. ‘I’m tired of standing.’

She glared at him. ‘You were going to jump over,’ she said. ‘You were going to try to grab me.’

‘I wasn’t, I swear,’ lied Nightingale. He sat down, swinging his legs as if he didn’t have a care in the world but in fact his heart was pounding and his stomach churning. ‘Sophie, whatever’s wrong, maybe I can help you.’

Sophie sniffed. ‘No one can help me.’

‘I can try.’

‘He said I mustn’t tell anyone.’

‘Why? Why can’t you tell anyone?’

‘He said they’d take me away. Put me in a home.’

‘Your father?’

Sophie pressed her doll to her face. ‘He said they’d blame me. He said they’d take me away and make me live in a home and that everyone would say it was my fault.’

The wind whipped up her skirt again. The bruise was a good six inches long. ‘Did he do that?’ said Nightingale, nodding at the mark.

Sophie pushed her skirt down, and nodded as she sniffed.

‘Let’s go inside, Sophie, we can talk to your mummy.’

Sophie closed her eyes. ‘She already knows.’

Nightingale’s stomach lurched. He had his hands palms down, his fingers gripping into the concrete, but he felt as if something was pushing him in the small of his back.

‘I can help you, Sophie. Just come inside and we’ll talk about it. I can help you, honestly I can. Cross my heart.’

‘You can’t help me,’ she said, her voice a dull monotone. ‘No one can help me.’ She lifted her doll, kissed it gently on the top of its head, and then slid off the balcony without making a sound.

Nightingale stared in horror as the little girl dropped, her skirt billowing up around her waist. He leaned forward and reached out with his right hand even though he knew there was nothing he could do. ‘Sophie!’ he screamed. Her golden hair was whipping around in the wind as she dropped straight down, her arms still hugging the doll. ‘Sophie!’ he screamed again. He closed his eyes at the last second but he couldn’t blot out the sound she made as she hit the ground, a dull wet thud as if a wall had been slapped with a wet blanket. Nightingale turned and slid down the balcony wall. He lit a cigarette with trembling hands and smoked it as he crouched on the balcony, his back against the concrete, his legs drawn up against his

stomach.

The uniformed constable who had escorted Nightingale up the stairs appeared at the balcony door. 'Are you okay, Sir?'

Nightingale ignored him.

'Sir, are you okay?' The constable's radio crackled and a female voice asked him for a situation report.

Nightingale stood up and pushed him out of the way.

'Sir, your coat!' the constable called after him.

The elderly couple were standing in the middle of the living room, holding each other. They looked at Nightingale expectantly but he said nothing to them as he rushed by them. He took the stairs three at a time, his fingers brushing the hand rail as he hurtled down the stairwell, his footsteps echoing off the concrete walls.

There were a two paramedics and half a dozen uniformed officers in the reception area, all talking into the radios. Duggan was there and he opened his mouth to speak but Nightingale silenced him with a pointed finger and walked right by him.

Two female paramedics were crouched over the little girl's body. The younger of the two was crying. Four firemen in bulky fluorescent jackets were standing behind the paramedics. One of them was wiping tears from his eyes with the back of one of his gloves. Nightingale knew there was nothing any of them could do. No one survived a fall from thirteen floors. Nightingale saw glistening blood pooling around the body and he turned away.

Hoyle was standing next to a uniformed PC, frowning as he spoke into his mobile. He put the phone away as Nightingale walked out of the building. 'Superintendent Chalmers wants you in his office, Jack,' said Hoyle. 'Now.'

Nightingale said nothing. He brushed past Hoyle and headed for his MGB.

'Now, Jack. He wants to see you now.'

'I'm busy,' said Nightingale.

'He'll want you to see the shrink, too,' said Hoyle, hurrying after him. It was standard procedure when there was a death.

'I don't need to see the shrink,' said Nightingale.

Hoyle put a hand on Nightingale's shoulder. 'It wasn't your fault, Jack. It's natural to feel guilty, to feel that you've failed.'

Nightingale glared at him. 'Don't try to empathise with me and don't sympathise, I don't need it, Robbie. I don't need any of it.'

'And what do I tell Chalmers?'

'Tell him whatever you want,' said Nightingale, twisting out of Hoyle's grip. He climbed into his MGB and drove off.