

Part One

The Borderlands

*In th'olde days of the Kyng Arthour.
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
'The Wife of Bath's Tale', Geoffrey Chaucer*

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Due Diligence

I was just passing the Hoover Centre when I heard Mr Punch scream his rage behind me. Or it might have been someone's brakes or a distant siren or an Airbus on final approach to Heathrow.

I'd been hearing him off and on since stepping from the top of a tower block in Elephant and Castle. Not a real sound, you understand – an impression, an expression through the city itself – what we might call a *super-vestigia* if Nightingale wasn't so dead set against me making up my own terminology.

Sometimes he's in a threatening mood, sometimes I hear him as a thin wail of despair in amongst the wind moaning around a tube train. Or else he's pleading and wheedling in the growl of late-night traffic beyond my bedroom window. He's a mercurial figure, our Mr Punch. As changeable and as dangerous as an away crowd on a Saturday night.

This time it was rage and petulance and resentment. I couldn't understand why, though – it wasn't him who was driving out of London.

As an institution, the BBC is just over ninety years old. Which means that Nightingale feels comfortable

enough around the wireless to have a digital radio in his bathroom. On this he listens to Radio Four while he's shaving. Presumably he assumes that the presenters are still safely attired in evening dress while they tear strips off whatever politician has been offered up as early morning sacrifice on the *Today* programme. Which is why he heard about the kids going missing before I did – this surprised him.

'I was under the impression you quite enjoyed the wireless first thing in the morning,' he said over breakfast after I'd told him it was news to me.

'I was doing my practice,' I said. In the weeks following the demolition of Skygarden Tower – with me on top of it – I'd been a key witness in three separate investigations, in addition to one by the Department of Professional Standards. I'd spent a great deal of each working day in interview rooms in various nicks around London including the notorious twenty-third floor of the Empress State Building where the serious investigations branch of the DPS keeps its racks and thumbscrews.

This meant that I'd gotten into the habit of getting up early to do my practice and get in some time in the gym before heading off to answer the same bloody question five different ways. It was just as well, since I hadn't exactly been sleeping well since Lesley had tasered me in the back. By the start of August the interviews had dried up, but the habit – and the insomnia – had stuck.

'Has there been a request for assistance?' I asked.

'With regard to the formal investigation, no,' said

Nightingale. ‘But where children are concerned we have certain responsibilities.’

There were two of them, both girls, both aged eleven, both missing from two separate family homes in the same village in North Herefordshire. The first 999 call had been at just after nine o’clock the previous morning and it first hit media attention in the evening when the girls’ mobile phones were found at a local war memorial over a thousand metres from their homes. Overnight it went from local to national and, according to the *Today* programme, large-scale searches were due to commence that morning.

I knew the Folly had national responsibilities in a sort of *de facto* under-the-table way that nobody liked to talk about. But I couldn’t see how that related to missing kids.

‘Regrettably, in the past,’ said Nightingale, ‘children were occasionally used in the practice of . . .’ he groped around for the right term, ‘unethical types of magic. It’s always been our policy to keep an eye on missing child cases and, where necessary, check to make sure that certain individuals in the proximity are not involved.’

‘Certain individuals?’ I asked.

‘Hedge wizards and the like,’ he said.

In Folly parlance a ‘hedge wizard’ was any magical practitioner who had either picked up their skills *ad hoc* from outside the Folly or who had retired to seclusion in the countryside – what Nightingale called ‘rusticated’. We both looked over to where Varvara Sidorovna Tamonina, formerly of the 365th Special Regiment of

the Red Army, was sitting at her table on the other side of the breakfast room, drinking black coffee and reading *Cosmopolitan*. Varvara Sidorovna, trained by the Red Army, definitely fell into the ‘and the like’ category. But since she’d been lodging with us while awaiting trial for the last two months she, at least, was unlikely to be involved.

Amazingly, Varvara had appeared for breakfast before me, looking bright eyed for a woman I’d seen put away the best part of two bottles of Stoli the night before. Me and Nightingale had been trying to get her drunk in the hope of prising more information on the Faceless Man out of her, but we got nothing except some really disgusting jokes – many of which didn’t translate very well. Still, the vodka had knocked me out handily and I’d got most of a night’s sleep.

‘So, like ViSOR,’ I said.

‘Is that the list of sex offenders?’ asked Nightingale, who wisely never bothered to memorise an acronym until it had lasted at least ten years. I told him that it was, and he considered the question while pouring another cup of tea.

‘Better to think of ours as a register of vulnerable people,’ he said. ‘Our task in this instance is to ensure they haven’t become entangled in something they may later regret.’

‘Do you think it’s likely in this case?’ I asked.

‘Not terribly likely, no,’ said Nightingale. ‘But it’s always better to err on the side of caution in these matters. And besides,’ he smiled, ‘it will do you good to get out of the city for a couple of days.’

‘Because nothing cheers me up like a good child abduction,’ I said.

‘Quite,’ said Nightingale.

So, after breakfast I spent an hour in the tech cave pulling background off the network and making sure my laptop was properly charged up. I’d just re-qualified for my level 1 public order certificate and I threw my PSU bag into the back of the Asbo Mark 2 along with an overnight bag. I didn’t think my flame-retardant overall would be necessary, but my chunky PSU boots were a better bet than my street shoes. I’ve been to the countryside before, and I learn from my mistakes.

I popped back to the Folly proper and met Nightingale in the main library where he handed me a manila folder tied up with faded red ribbons. Inside were about thirty pages of tissue-thin paper covered in densely typed text and what was obviously a photostat of an identity document of some sort.

‘Hugh Oswald,’ said Nightingale. ‘Fought at Antwerp and Ettersberg.’

‘He survived Ettersberg?’

Nightingale looked away. ‘He made it back to England,’ he said. ‘But he suffered from what I’m told is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. Still lives on a medical pension – took up beekeeping.’

‘How strong is he?’

‘Well, you wouldn’t want to test him,’ said Nightingale. ‘But I suspect he’s out of practice.’

‘And if I suspect something?’

‘Keep it to yourself, make a discreet withdrawal and telephone me at the first opportunity,’ he said.

Before I could make it out the back door Molly came gliding out of her kitchen domain and intercepted me. She gave me a thin smile and tilted her head to one side in inquiry.

‘I thought I’d stop on the way up,’ I said.

The pale skin between her thin black eyebrows furrowed.

‘I didn’t want to put you to any trouble,’ I said.

Molly held up an orange Sainsbury’s bag in one long-fingered hand. I took it. It was surprisingly heavy.

‘What’s in it?’ I asked but Molly merely smiled, showing too many teeth, turned and drifted away.

I hefted the bag gingerly – there’d been less offal of late, but Molly could still be pretty eccentric in her culinary combinations. I made a point of stowing the bag in the shaded footwell of the back seat. Whatever was in the sandwiches, you didn’t want them getting too warm and going off, or starting to smell, or spontaneously mutating into a new life form.

It was a brilliant London day as I set out – the sky was blue, the tourists were blocking the pavements along the Euston Road, and the commuters panted out of their open windows and stared longingly as the fit young people strolled past in shorts and summer dresses. Pausing to tank up at a garage I know near Warwick Avenue, I tangled with the temporary one-way system around Paddington, climbed aboard the A40, bid farewell to the Art Deco magnificence of the Hoover Building and set course for what Londoners like to think of as ‘everywhere else’.

Once Mr Punch and the M25 were behind me, I

tuned the car radio to Five Live, which was doing its best to build a twenty-four-hour news cycle out of about half an hour of news. The children were still missing, the parents had made an ‘emotional’ appeal and police and volunteers were searching the area.

We were barely into day two and already the radio presenters were beginning to get the desperate tone of people who were running out of questions to ask the reporters on the spot. They hadn’t reached the *What do you think is going through their minds right now?* stage yet, but it was only a matter of time.

They were making comparisons with Soham, although nobody had been tactless enough to point out that both girls in that case had been dead even before the parents had dialled 999. Time was said to be running out, and the police and volunteers were conducting intensive search operations in the surrounding countryside. There was speculation as to whether the families would make a media appeal that evening or whether they would wait until the next day. Because this was the one area they knew anything about, they got a whole ten minutes out of discussing the family’s media strategy before being interrupted with the news that their journalist on the spot had actually managed to interview a local. This proved to be a woman with an old-fashioned BBC accent who said naturally everyone was very shocked and that you don’t expect that sort of thing to happen in a place like Rushpool.

The news cycle reset at the top of the hour and I learnt that the tiny village of Rushpool in sleepy rural Herefordshire was the centre of a massive police

search operation for two eleven-year-old girls, best friends, Nicole Lacey and Hannah Marstowe, who had been missing for over forty-eight hours. Neighbours were said to be shocked and time was running out.

I turned the radio off.

Nightingale had suggested getting off at Oxford Services and going via Chipping Norton and Worcester, but I had the satnav switched to fastest route and that meant hooking round via Bromsgrove on the M42 and M5 and only bailing at Droitwich. Suddenly I was driving on a series of narrow A-roads that twisted through valleys and over grey-stone humpbacked bridges before expiring west of the River Teme. From then on it was even twistier B-roads through a country so photogenically rural that I half expected to meet Bilbo Baggins around the next corner – providing he'd taken to driving a Nissan Micra.

A lot of the roads had hedgerows taller than I was and thick enough to occasionally brush the side of the car. You could probably pass within half a metre of a missing child and never know she was there – especially if she were lying still and quiet.

My satnav led me gently as a lamb through a switch-back turn up onto a wooded ridge and then up a steep climb called Kill Horse Lane. At the top of the hill it guided me off the tarmac and onto an unpaved lane that took me further up while taking dainty little bites out of the underside of my car. I turned around a bend to find that the lane ran past a cottage and, beyond that, a round tower – three storeys high with an oval dome roof that

gave it a weirdly baroque profile. The satnav informed me that I'd arrived at my destination, so I stopped the car and got out for a look.

The air was warm and still and smelt of chalk. The late morning sun was hot enough to create heat ripples along the dusty white track. I could hear birds squawking away in the nearby trees and a steady, rhythmic thwacking sound from just over the fence. I rolled up my sleeves and went to see what it was.

Beyond the fence the ground sloped away into a hollow where a two-storey brick cottage sat amongst a garden laid out in an untidy patchwork of vegetable plots, miniature polytunnels, and what I took to be chicken coops, roofed over with wire mesh to keep out predators. Despite being quite a recent build there was something wonky about the line of the cottage's roof and the way the windows were aligned. A side door was open, revealing a hallway cluttered with muddy black Wellington boots, coats and other bits of outdoor stuff. It was messy, but it wasn't neglected.

In front of the cottage was open space where two white guys were watching a third split logs into firewood. All three were dressed in khaki shorts and naked from the waist up. One of them, an older man than the others and wearing an army green bush hat, spotted me and said something. The others turned to look, shading their eyes. The older one waved and set off up the slope of the garden towards me.

'Good morning,' he said. He had an Australian accent and was much older than I'd first thought, in his sixties or possibly even older, with a lean body that appeared

to be covered with wrinkled leather. I wondered if this was my guy.

‘I’m looking for Hugh Oswald,’ I said.

‘You’ve got the wrong house,’ said the man and nodded at the strange tower. ‘He lives in that bloody thing.’

One of the younger men strolled up to join us. Tattoos boiled from under his shorts and ran up over his shoulders and down his arms. I’d never seen a design like it before, interlaced vines, plants and flowers but drawn with an absolute precision – like the nineteenth-century botanical texts I’d seen in the Folly’s library. They were recent enough for the red, blues and greens to still be vivid and sharp. He nodded when he reached us.

‘All right?’ he asked – not an Aussie. His accent was English, regional, but not one I recognised.

Down by the cottage the third man hefted his axe and started whacking away again.

‘He’s here to see Oswald,’ said the older man.

‘Oh,’ said the younger. ‘Right.’

They both had the same eyes, a pale washed-out blue like faded denim, and there were similarities in the line of the jaw and the cheekbones. Close relatives for certain – father and son at a guess.

‘You look hot,’ said the older man. ‘Do you want a glass of water or something?’

I thanked them politely but refused.

‘Do you know if he’s in?’ I asked.

The older and younger men exchanged a look. Downslope the third man brought down his axe and – crack – split another log.

‘I expect so,’ said the older man. ‘This time of the year.’

‘I’d better get on then,’ I said.

‘Feel free to pop in on your way back,’ he said. ‘We don’t get that many people up here.’

I smiled and nodded and moved on. There was even a viewing platform enclosed by railings on top of the dome. It was the house of an eccentric professor from an Edwardian children’s book – C.S. Lewis would have loved it.

A copper awning over what I took to be the front door provided a nice bit of shade and I was just about to ring the disappointingly mundane electric doorbell, complete with unfilled-in nametag, when I heard the swarm. I looked back across the track and saw it, a cloud of yellow bees under the branches of one of the trees that lined the track. Their buzzing was insistent, but I noticed that they kept to a very particular volume of space – as if marking it out.

‘Can I help you?’ asked a voice from behind me.

I turned to find that a white woman in her early thirties had opened the door – she must have seen me through the window. She was short, wearing black cycling shorts and a matching yellow and black Lycra tank top. Her hair was a peroxide yellow fuzz, her eyes were dark, almost black, and her mouth extraordinarily small and shaped like a rosebud. She smiled to reveal tiny white teeth.

I identified myself and flashed my warrant card.

‘I’m looking for Hugh Oswald,’ I said.

‘You’re not the local police,’ she said. ‘You’re up from London.’

I was impressed. Most people don't even register whether the photo on your warrant card matches your face – let alone notice the difference in the crest.

'And who are you?' I asked.

'I'm his granddaughter,' she said, and squared her stance in the doorway.

'What's your name?' I asked.

If you're a professional criminal this is where you lie smoothly and give a false name. If you're just an amateur then you either hesitate before lying or tell me that I have no right to ask. If you're just a bog-standard member of the public then you'll probably tell me your name unless you're feeling guilty, stropky or terminally posh. I saw her thinking seriously about telling me to piss off, but in the end common sense prevailed.

'Mellissa,' she said. 'Mellissa Oswald.'

'Is Mr Oswald here?' I asked

'He's resting,' she said, and made no move to let me in.

'I'd still better come in and see him,' I said.

'Have you got a warrant?' she asked.

'I don't need one,' I said. 'Your granddad swore an oath.'

She stared at me in amazement and then her tiny mouth spread into a wide smile.

'Oh my god,' she said. 'You're one of them – aren't you?'

'May I come in?' I asked.

'Yeah, yeah,' she said. 'Fuck me – the Folly.'

She was still shaking her head as she ushered me into a stone-paved entrance hall – dim and cool after the

summer sun – then into a half-oval sitting room smelling of potpourri and warm dust and back out via the middle of three French windows.

The window opened onto a series of landscaped terraces that descended down towards more woods. The garden was informal to the point of being chaotic, with no organised beds. Instead, clumps of flowers and flowering bushes were scattered in random patches of purple and yellow across the terraces.

Mellissa led me down a flight of steps to a lower terrace where a white enamelled wrought-iron garden table supported a bedraggled mint-green parasol shading matching white chairs, one of which was occupied by a thin grey-haired man. He sat with his hands folded in his lap, staring out over the garden.

Anyone can do magic, just like anyone can play the violin. All it takes is patience, hard graft and somebody to teach you. The reason more people don't practise the forms and wisdoms, as Nightingale calls them, these days is because there are damn few teachers left in the country. The reason you need a teacher, beyond helping you identify *vestigium* – which is a whole different thing – is because if you're not taught well you can easily give yourself a stroke or a fatal aneurism. Dr Walid, our crypto-pathologist and unofficial chief medical officer has a couple of brains in a jar he can whip out and show you if you're sceptical.

So, like the violin, it is possible to learn magic by trial and error. Only unlike potential fiddlers, who merely risk alienating their neighbours, potential wizards tend to drop dead before they get very far. Knowing your

limits is not an aspiration in magic – it's a survival strategy.

As Mellissa called her granddad's name I realised that this was the first officially sanctioned wizard, apart from Nightingale, I'd ever met.

'The police are here to see you,' Mellissa told him.

'The police?' asked Hugh Oswald without taking his eyes off the view. 'Whatever for?'

'He's up from London,' she said. 'Especially to see you.' Stressing the *especially*.

'London?' said Hugh, twisting in his chair to look at us. 'From the Folly?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

He climbed to his feet. He'd never been a big man, I guessed, but age had pared him down so that even his modern check shirt and slacks couldn't disguise how thin his arms and legs were. His face was narrow, pinched around the mouth, and his eyes were sunken and a dark blue.

'Hugh Oswald,' he said holding out his hand.

'PC Peter Grant.' I shook his hand but although his grip was firm, his hand trembled. When I sat down he sank gratefully into his own chair, his breathing short. Mellissa hovered nearby, obviously concerned.

'Nightingale's starling,' he said. 'Flown all the way up from London.'

'Starling?' I asked.

'You are his new apprentice?' he asked. 'The first in . . .' He glanced around the garden as if looking for clues. 'Forty, fifty years.'

'Over seventy years,' I said, and I was the first *official*

apprentice since World War Two. There had been other unofficial apprentices since then – one of whom had tried to kill me quite recently.

‘Well, god help you then,’ he said and turned to his granddaughter. ‘Let’s have tea and some of those . . .’ he paused, frowning, ‘bread things with the spongy tops, you know what I mean.’ He waved her off.

I watched her heading back towards the tower – her waist was disturbingly narrow and the flare of her hips almost cartoonishly erotic.

‘Pikelets,’ said Hugh suddenly. ‘That’s what they’re called. Or are they crumpets? Never mind. I’m sure Mellissa will be able to enlighten us.’

I nodded sagely and waited.

‘How is Thomas?’ asked Hugh. ‘I heard he managed to get himself shot again.’

I wasn’t sure how much Nightingale wanted Hugh to know about what we police call ‘operational matters’, a.k.a. stuff we don’t want people to know, but I was curious about how Hugh had found out. Nothing concerning that particular incident had made it into the media – of that I was certain.

‘How did you hear about that?’ I asked. That’s the beauty of being police – you’re not getting paid for tact. Hugh gave me a thin smile.

‘Oh, there’s enough of us left to still form a workable grapevine,’ he said. ‘Even if the fruit is beginning to wither. And since Thomas is the only one of us who actually does anything of note, he’s become our principal source of gossip.’

I made a mental note to wheedle the list of old codgers

out of Nightingale and get it properly sorted into a database. Hugh's 'grapevine' might be a useful source of information. If I'd been about four ranks higher up the hierarchy I'd have regarded it as an opportunity to realise additional intelligence assets through enhanced stakeholder engagement. But I'm just a constable so I didn't.

Mellissa returned with tea and things that I would certainly call crumpets. She poured from a squat round teapot that was hidden underneath a red and green crocheted tea cosy in the shape of a rooster. Her father and I got the delicate willow pattern china cups while she used an 'I'm Proud of the BBC' mug.

'Help yourself to sugar,' she said, then perched herself on one of the chairs and started spreading honey on the crumpets. The honey came from a round little pot with 'Hunny' written on the side.

'Do have some,' she said as she placed a crumpet in front of her granddad. 'It's from our own bees.'

I hesitated with my cup of tea halfway to my lips. I lowered the cup back into its saucer and glanced at Hugh, who looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled.

'Of course,' he said. 'Where are my manners? Please eat and drink freely with no obligation etcetera etcetera.'

'Thank you,' I said and picked up my teacup again.

'You guys really do that?' Mellissa asked her granddad. 'I thought you made all that stuff up.' She turned to me. 'What exactly are you worried would happen?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'But I'm not in a hurry to find out.'

I sipped the tea. It was proper builder's tea, thank god. I'm all for delicate flavour, but after a stint on the motorway you want something with a bit more bite than Earl Grey.

'So, tell me, Peter,' said Hugh. 'What brings the starling so far from the Smoke?'

I wondered just when I'd become 'the starling' and why everyone who was anyone in the supernatural community had such a problem with proper nouns.

'Do you listen to the news?' I asked.

'Ah,' said Hugh and nodded. 'The missing children.'

'What's that got to do with us?' asked Mellissa.

I sighed – policing would be so much easier if people didn't have concerned relatives. The murder rate would be much lower, for one thing.

'It's just a routine check,' I said.

'On granddad?' asked Mellissa. I could see her beginning to get angry. 'What are you saying?'

Hugh smiled at her. 'It's quite flattering really – they obviously regard me as strong enough to be a public menace.'

'But children?' said Mellissa, and glared at me.

I shrugged. 'It really is just routine,' I said. Just the same way we routinely put a victim's nearest and dearest on the suspects list or grow suspicious of relatives who get all defensive when we make our legitimate inquiries. Is it fair? No. Is it warranted? Who knows. Is it policing? Ask a stupid question.

Lesley always said that I wasn't suspicious enough to do the job properly, and tasered me in the back to drive the point home. So, yeah, I stay suspicious these days

– even when I’m having tea with likable old buffers.

I did have a crumpet, though, because you can take professional paranoia too far.

‘You didn’t notice anything unusual in the last week or so?’ I asked.

‘I can’t say I have, but I’m not as perceptive as I once was,’ said Hugh. ‘Or rather, I should say, I am not as *reliably* perceptive as I was in my prime.’ He looked at his granddaughter. ‘How about you, my dear?’

‘It’s been unusually hot,’ she said. ‘But that could just be global warming.’

Hugh smiled weakly.

‘There you have it, I’m afraid,’ he said, and asked Mellissa if he might be permitted to have a second crumpet.

‘Of course,’ she said and placed one in front of him. Hugh reached out with a trembling hand and, after a few false starts, seized the crumpet with a triumphant wheeze. Mellissa watched with concern as he lifted it to his mouth, took a large bite and chewed with obvious satisfaction.

I realised I was staring, so I drank my tea – concentrating on the cup.

‘Ha,’ said Hugh once he’d finished chewing. ‘That wasn’t so difficult.’

And then he fell asleep – his eyes closing and his chin dropping onto his chest. It was so fast I started out of my chair, but Mellissa waved me back down.

‘Now you’ve worn him out,’ she said and despite the heat she retrieved a tartan blanket from the back of her granddad’s chair and covered him up to his chin.

‘I think it must be obvious even to you that he didn’t

have anything to do with those kids going missing,' she said.

I stood up.

'Do *you* have something to do with it?' I asked.

She gave me a poisonous look and I got a flash of it then, sharp and incontrovertible, the click-click of legs and mandibles, the flicker of wings and the hot communal breath of the hive.

'What would I want with children?' she asked.

'How should I know?' I said. 'Maybe you're planning to sacrifice them at the next full moon.'

Mellissa cocked her head to one side.

'Are you trying to be funny?' she asked.

Anyone can do magic, I thought, *but not everyone is magical*. There are people who have been touched by, let's call it for the sake of argument, magic to the point where they're no longer entirely people even under human rights legislation. Nightingale calls them the fae but that's a catch-all term like the way the Greeks used the word 'barbarian' or the *Daily Mail* uses 'Europe'. I'd found at least three different classification systems in the Folly's library, all with elaborate Latin tags and, I figured, all the scientific rigour of phrenology. You've got to be careful when applying concepts like speciation to human beings, or before you know what's happening you end up with forced sterilisations, Belsen and the Middle Passage.

'Nah,' I said. 'I've given up funny.'

'Why don't you search our house, just to be on the safe side?' she said.

'Thank you very much – I will,' I said, proving once

again that a little sarcasm is a dangerous thing.

‘What?’ Mellissa took a step backwards and stared at me. ‘I was joking.’

But I wasn’t. The first rule of policing is that you never take anyone’s word for anything – you always check for yourself. Missing children have been found hiding under beds or in garden sheds on properties where the parents have sworn they’ve searched everywhere and why are you wasting time when you should be out there looking? For god’s sake it’s a disgrace the way ordinary decent people are treated as criminals, we’re the victims here and, no, there’s nothing in there. Just the freezer, there’s no point looking in there, why would they be in the freezer, you have no right . . . oh god look I’m sorry, she just slipped, I didn’t mean to hurt her, she just slipped and I panicked.

‘Always best to be thorough,’ I said.

‘I’m fairly certain you’re violating our human rights here,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said with the absolute certainty of a man who’d taken a moment to look up the relevant legislation before leaving home. ‘Your granddad took an oath and signed a contract that allows accredited individuals, i.e. me, access on demand.’

‘But I thought he was retired?’

‘Not from this contract,’ I said. It had actually said *until death release you from this oath*. The Folly – putting the old-fashioned back into good policing.

‘Why don’t you show me round?’ I said. And then I’ll know you’re not off somewhere stuffing body parts into the wood-chipper.

Number one Moomin House may have looked like a Victorian folly, but was in fact that rarest of all architectural beasts – a modern building in the classical style. Designed by the famous Raymond Erith, who didn't so much invoke the spirit of the enlightenment as nick its floor plans. Apparently he'd built it in 1968 as a favour to Hugh Oswald who was a family friend, and it was beautiful and sad at the same time.

We started with the two little wings, one of which had been extended to house an additional bedroom and a properly-sized kitchen. As an architect Erith might have been a progressive classicist, but he shared with his contemporaries the same failure to understand that you need to be able to open the oven door without having to leave the kitchen first. An additional bedroom had been added, the no-nonsense brass bedstead augmented with a handrail, the floor covered in a thick soft carpet and any sharp corners on the antique oak dresser and wardrobe fitted with rounded plastic guards. It smelt of clean linen, potpourri and Dettol.

'Granddad moved down to this room a couple of years ago,' said Mellissa and showed me the brand new ensuite bathroom with an adapted hip bath, lever taps and hand rails. She snorted when I popped back into the bedroom to check under the bed, but her humour evaporated when she realised I really was going to check the broom cupboards and the wood store.

A circular staircase with bare timber treads twisted up to the first floor, leading me to what had obviously been Hugh's study before he shifted to downstairs. I'd expected oak bookshelves but instead half the

circumference of the room was filled with pine shelves mounted on bare metal brackets. I recognised many of the books from the Folly's own non-magical library, including an incredibly tatty volume of *Histoire Insolite et Secrète des Ponts de Paris* by Barbey d'Aureville. There were too many books to be contained by the shelves and they had spilled out into piles on the gate-leg table that had obviously served as a desk, on the worn stuffed leather sofa, and any spare space on the floor. Many of these looked like local history, beekeeping guides and modern fiction. There were no magic books. In fact, nothing in Latin but the very old hardback editions of Virgil, Tacitus and Pliny. I recognised the Tacitus. It was the same edition Nightingale had given me.

It was all a bit short on missing children, so I had Mellissa show me up the stairs to her bedroom, which took up the whole of the top floor. There was a Victorian vanity and a Habitat bed and wardrobes and chests of drawers that were made from compressed and laminated chipboard. It was quite amazingly messy; every single drawer was open and from every single open drawer hung at least two items of clothing. Just the loose knickers would have caused my mum to do her nut, although she would have had some sympathy for the drifts of shoes piling up at the end of the bed.

'If I'd known the police were coming,' said Mellissa, 'I'd have had a bit of a tidy.'

Even with all the windows open it was warm enough to pop beads of sweat on my back and forehead. There was also a sickly sweet smell, not horrible, not decay, but all-pervading. I saw that there was a ladder built into

the wall and a hatch above it. Mellissa saw me looking and smiled.

‘Want to have a poke in the attic?’ she asked.

I was just about to say ‘of course’ when I became aware that the deep thrumming sound that hovered on the edge of audibility throughout the rest of the house was louder here and, predictably, coming from the attic.

I told her that, yes, I would like a quick look if it was all the same to her, and she handed me a wide-brimmed hat with a veil – a beekeeper’s hat.

‘You’re kidding me,’ I said, but she shook her head so I put it on and let her secure the ribbons under my chin. After a bit of rummaging in the drawers of the vanity Mellissa found a heavy torch with a vulcanised rubber sheath – she tested it, although in the sunlight it was hard to tell whether the old-fashioned incandescent bulb came on or not.

When I climbed up, a wave of sticky heat rolled out. I waited a moment, listening to the now much louder thrumming noise, but there was no threatening roar or sinister increase in pitch – it stayed as steady as before. I asked Mellissa what was causing it.

‘Drones,’ she said. ‘They basically have two jobs – banging the queen and keeping the hive at a constant temperature. Just move slowly and you’ll be fine.’

I climbed up into the warm gloom. The occasional bee flashed through the beam of my torch, but not the swarms that I’d feared. I turned my torch on the far end of the attic and saw the hive for the first time. It was huge, a mass of fluted columns and sculpted ridges that filled half the space. It was a wonder of nature – and as

creepy as shit. And I personally stuck around just long enough to ensure there weren't any colonists cemented into the walls – or children – and ducked out of there.

Mellissa trailed after me down the spiral stairs with a smug look on her face and followed me outside, more to make sure I was going than out of politeness. When I reached my car I realised that the cloud of bees had contracted down to a solid mass under one of the main branches. To my surprise, it was an ovoid shape that appeared to hang from the tree by a single narrow thread – just like the cartoon beehives that regularly got dropped on characters' heads.

I asked Mellissa if it would stay on the tree.

'It's the queen,' said Mellissa, and sniffed. 'She's just showing off. She'll be back – if she knows what's good for her.'

'Do you know anything about these girls?' I asked.

I thought I heard a pulse of noise from the house behind her – a deep thrumming sound that swelled and then faded into the background.

'Not unless they bought some honey,' she said.

'You don't keep the honey for yourself?' I asked.

The afternoon sunlight caught the downy blond hair on her arms and shoulders.

'Don't be silly,' she said. 'What would I do with that much honey?'

I didn't leave immediately. Instead I leant against the back of the Asbo, where there was some shade, and wrote up my notes. It's always a good idea to do this immediately after an interview because your memory

is fresh and also because panicked suspects have been known to assume that the police have long gone and exit their front door carrying all sorts of incriminating stuff. Including, in one famous case, parts of a body. Before I started, though, I looked up the West Mercia channels and switched my Airwave handset over so I could listen in to the operation while I finished up.

A lot of journalists have access to an Airwave, or access to someone who has one, so in a high profile case the cop-speak and jargon can get very dense. Nobody wants to see their 'inappropriate' humour decorating the front page on a slow news day – that sort of thing can be a career killer. I could hear the operation going critical even as I finished up my notes. ACPO don't chat over the Airwave, but it was clear that requests for assistance were now being routed through the Police National Information Coordination Centre (PNICC), commonly pronounced 'panic' – particularly if you've reached the stage of having to call it.

It wasn't my operation, and if I was to travel any further off my manor they'd be speaking a different language, probably Welsh. And if West Mercia Police wanted my help then it would be co-ordinated through the PNICC and I wasn't even sure what kind of mutual aid I'd be providing.

But you can't walk away, can you? Not when it's kids.

I called Nightingale and explained what I wanted to do. He thought it was a 'capital idea' and agreed to make the necessary arrangements.

Then I climbed into my boiling hot car and set my satnav to Leominster Police Station.

For a moment I thought I heard an angry cry come floating over the hills towards me, but it was probably something rural – a bird of some kind.

Yeah, definitely a bird, I told myself.