

**Dave Hutchinson**  
**DISCREET PHENOMENA**

1

The little blue car was moving so slowly that it barely made it over the top of the hill. I saw it edge up over the crest and half-expected it to stop and then roll backward out of view, like a sight-gag from a silent movie.

But it didn't stop. Somehow, it kept moving.

I was outside, topping up Jim Dawes's Jeep Cherokee up with unleaded. Jim was standing beside me, recounting the last grouse shoot he'd been to, but I wasn't really listening. I was watching the little blue car. Finally Jim fell silent and watched it with me.

"That'll be another one, then," he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

I removed the nozzle from the Cherokee's tank, closed the filler cap, hung up the hose, and went back to stand beside Jim. The car had made it over the crest of the hill and was starting to gain speed down the long gentle slope. Its right-side indicator was winking.

Domino came out of the office and stood beside us. "Another one?" he asked.

"Looks like it," said Jim.

"How many's that?"

Jim shrugged. "Six?"

"Five," I said. "This is the fifth."

The car reached the bottom of the hill and rolled sedately past us with only the sound of its tyres on the road. There was no one in the driver's seat. Or in the passenger seat. Or in the back seat.

"Well," said Domino, and he set off at a quick jog.

"New lad?" asked Jim as we watched Domino running after the empty car.

"He's been here about a fortnight," I said.

"Never seen him before."

"He's not local."

"Student, is he? Summer job?"

"I suppose so. Something like that."

Jim thought about it for a minute or so, while Domino caught up with the empty car, ran beside it, and in one graceful motion opened the driver's door and hopped inside.

"Good runner, for a hunchback," Jim said finally. He was one of those big bluff Yorkshiremen who think that a reputation for plain-speaking gives them carte blanche to be rude.

The little blue car stopped, performed a neat three-point turn, and came back to us. Domino steered it around behind Jim's Cherokee and stopped it with the handbrake. The indicator was still blinking.

"Same thing," Domino told us as he got out of the car. He held up one of those little cardboard Christmas trees that are supposed to smell like pine forests. He reached back inside and pulled the bonnet catch.

I lifted the bonnet. The engine compartment was empty.

"How do they do that?" Jim said, shaking his head.

Jim shook his head over the car for another twenty minutes or so, then he paid for his petrol and drove off. Domino and I pushed the blue car out of the way behind the office. I phoned Nigel, but he was out on a job, so I left Domino working on the accounts and went back outside and sat on my stool beside the pumps.

It was one of those extraordinary days you get on Salisbury Plain in summer, when the sky goes a kind of blue-white colour and seems to hum with the heat. We had only had two cars in all morning, not counting the little blue one.

I lifted the lid from the blue-and-white cooler-box beside my stool, took out a bottle of Budweiser, and levered the cap off with my Swiss Army penknife.

Across the road, in the window of Mavis Burton's knitwear shop, the headless, armless torso of her one and only mannequin was wearing the same green tank-top it had been wearing the first time I had seen it, almost six years ago, when I decided to buy the garage. I'd sat here so many hours over the years, looking at that mannequin, that I occasionally considered buying the tank-top myself, just to change the view, but I always caught myself just in time.

I slurped beer, scratched my armpit, looked at my watch.

Eventually, a little police car came along the road from the centre of the village and parked outside Mavis's shop. An enormous man shrink-wrapped in a uniform a size too small for him got out and stretched. Even from across the road I could hear seams popping. I checked my watch.

Nigel finished his calisthenics, put on his cap, looked both ways along the road, and crossed over to where I was sitting.

"I make that an hour and forty minutes," I told him. "I'm going to write to the *Daily Mail* and make a complaint about the standard of rural policing."

"Afternoon, Geoff," said Nigel, touching the brim of his cap and smiling.

I got down off the stool. "It's back here."

On the way past the office, I called through the open window and told Domino to keep an eye on the pumps.

"So," said Nigel, looking at the little blue car and scratching his head. "How many's this, then? Six?"

"Five."

He opened the bonnet and regarded the empty engine space with the same kind of gravity he would have accorded a murder or a lost kitten. "Well," he said finally, "if nobody claims them in six months, I suppose they're yours." He looked at me and smiled sunnily. "Make yourself a fortune, I expect."

The first engineless car had rolled past the garage about a fortnight before, a couple of days after Domino turned up. It had come to a stop, that one indicator flashing, a few yards down the road, completely innocent of driver, passengers or motive power, and we had pushed it back into the yard and called the police. Nobody wanted to drive it, and Nigel was leery about towing it, so we cleared out one of the sheds at the back of the yard and put it in there.

The next day, Nigel returned with the news that the car seemed not to exist. Its vehicle identification number wasn't on record anywhere, and its numberplates weren't registered to any known vehicle. Nigel had a feeling that something not quite legal was going on, but he admitted to not having a clue what it was, and in lieu of further evidence he decided to leave the car with me for the time being.

Three days later, the next one arrived. We put that one in the shed too. And the next. And the next. Now, every time I went out to the pumps to serve a customer, I found myself glancing up the road, just in case I saw another slow-moving vehicle cresting the hill.

Nigel watched Domino and me push the blue car into one of the sheds. Then he watched me padlock the door, just in case someone decided to steal it.

Walking back to his car, Nigel looked through the window of one of the other sheds and said, "I don't remember this one."

I stopped beside him and looked into the shed. "It's my car," I told him.

"Thought you drove a VW."

We stood side by side looking at my Peugeot on the other side of the glass. I said, "The Volkswagen's Karen's car. We don't have off-road parking, and Laura Gibbs complained when we parked both the cars outside the house."

"Laura lives on your street?"

I nodded.

Nigel shook his head. "She always was a cow, even at school. Never understood it, pretty girl like that." He looked at me. "Want me to have a word with her?"

"No," I said, suddenly alarmed. "Jesus, Nigel. I'm a big enough laughing-stock around here without you fighting my fights for me."

"You're not a laughing-stock, Geoff," he said.

"No?"

He shook his head again. "But you are the subject of a lot of intense gossip, I will admit that."

"Thank you, Nigel," I said. "Thanks a lot."

After Nigel drove off, I left Domino in charge of the garage and I walked back down the High Street into the village.

Seldon comprised about three dozen houses, one pub, two newsagents, a butcher, a greengrocer, Mavis's knitwear shop, Baxter's Garage, a shoe shop, Vickers & Sons Estate Agents and a sort of pocket branch of Argos, all of them baking slowly in the afternoon heat. The village's population, including toddlers, couldn't have been more than six hundred, but just recently the place had started to look like the car-park of an out-of-town superstore.

The big green BBC Outside Broadcast van was still parked outside The Black Bull. Beside it were cars with foreign number plates and Press stickers on the insides of their windscreens. In the field behind the pub

were a couple more vans. One of them had a huge satellite dish mounted on its roof. Beside it was a ragged collection of tents, teepees and benders.

I carried on past the Bull. On the opposite pavement, Jane Wallace was being vox-popped by a CNN news team who looked as if they had all been die-cast from the same perfect mould. Jane was answering their questions with the easy professional grace of someone who has given many many interviews and has already made inquiries about getting an agent.

Outside Argos, the lone representative of a Ukrainian news service was standing, wild-eyed and festooned with cameras, looking for someone to interview. I crossed the road to avoid him, turned left up the next street, walked up my garden path, opened my door, closed it behind me, locked it, bolted it, put the chain on.

I went into the living room, closed the curtains, half-filled a glass with vodka, and lay down on the settee.

"Another one?" asked Karen from the shadows around the armchair.

I nodded and took a big swallow of vodka.

"That's six now, yes?"

I closed my eyes.

That night, it rained frogs.

## 2

"You look awful," said Domino.

"That's the effect I was aiming for." I sorted through the papers on my desk. "So, how does it look?"

He watched me a moment longer, then he looked down at the company books and said, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Let's work on the assumption that I only want to hear good news today."

"There isn't any," he said. "You'll be bankrupt by this time next year."

"You gave me a *choice*," I protested. "Good news or bad news. Give me my good news."

He shook his head. "Grow up, Geoff."

I sat back in the threadbare swivel chair I'd rescued from a fire-damage sale the year I'd bought the business.

"Would you like to hear my opinion?" Domino asked.

"No, thank you."

"Whoever sold this place to you must have walked away jumping into the air, clicking their heels together and shouting yippee."

I looked at him. He had a fresh, unworried, open face and long ash-blond hair. If he hadn't been so tall and hunched-over, he could easily have been taken for a young teenager. I rubbed my eyes.

"It's a petrol station outside a village two miles from a major A-road," he went on. "Be honest with me; how many people charging down the A303 pull off and stop here for petrol?"

There were signs on the Seldon turnoff that pointed to "Local Services"-me, in other words-but most drivers expect their services to be at the end of a fairly short slip-road. People turning off the A303 just sort of drove around for a couple of minutes looking puzzled before getting back onto the main road and going in search of a real service station. I'd put up a sign of my own that read "Seldon Services-2 miles" but the Highways Agency had told me to take it down.

"Your prices are too high, too," Domino went on. "The last few weeks should have quadrupled your takings, at least, but everybody's going to the big service station up the road."

"I can't afford to cut prices," I said.

"It's not your fault." He looked at me with what appeared to be a real expression of sympathy. "This place was dying on its feet years before you came along." He looked at the books again. "I give you another six months. A year, perhaps."

"Do you want a drink?" I asked.

The lounge bar of The Black Bull was full of journalists and technicians and support staff and scientists. We looked into the snug, and it was more of the same. We went into the public bar, and found a couple of locals neatly corralled along with the fruit machines and the pool table and the Space Invaders machine.

I sat at a corner table, thinking about Domino's assessment of my business future, while he went to buy drinks. I remembered Andy Hayward's little smile when we finalised the sale of the garage. I wondered what I was going to do, and I discovered that I didn't care very much.

Seven years ago, Karen and I had been living on the top floor of an Islington townhouse that had been converted, not very expertly, into three flats. The couple immediately below us had been going through the world's noisiest divorce, and the ground floor flat belonged to a young woman who had mentioned, just in passing, that she was a practicing Satanist. I was working late shifts at Reuter's, and Karen was just making

a name for herself illustrating childrens' books. We saw each other, if we were lucky, one evening in four.

And one Bank Holiday we drove down to Exeter to visit some friends of Karen's, and on the way back she noticed we were getting a bit light on petrol, so she pulled off the A303 and followed the "Local Services" sign, and eventually we found ourselves pulling into a little garage with a *For Sale* notice in the office window.

And while Andy Hayward topped up the car I got out to stretch my legs and was confronted by one of the most peaceful, idyllic village scenes I had ever encountered.

And I lost my mind.

"I hate to see a man drink alone," said Harvey, standing at the other side of the table and grinning down at me.

"I'm not drinking yet."

"I hate to see a man not drinking yet alone," he said.

I smiled. "Everyone says that about you." I watched him pull up a chair and sprawl into it. "How are you?"

"Wonderful," he said with some irony, searching his pockets and finally coming up with a lighter and a tin of small cigars. "I spent this morning shovelling frogs."

"You too?" My part of the village had only caught the edge of the squall, but I'd still had to hose the front path clear of burst little bodies.

He lit a cigar and sat back in his chair. "Still, beats snow, I guess." Harvey was from a little town outside Oshkosh, in Northern Wisconsin, and if he'd had enough beer to get nostalgic he would wax lyrical about his late father having to use a snow-blower just to reach his garage during the winter.

"Or cats and dogs," I reminded him

His eyes widened. "Yeah," he said. "That was bad, wasn't it?"

"It was an unusual couple of days," I admitted.

"Had that guy on the roof again last night, too," he told me.

I shrugged. Springheel Jack was, quite frankly, getting boring. By now most of the village had experienced the joy of being woken abruptly by the sound of long fingernails rattling on their slates in the wee small hours.

"At least he's harmless," I said. "People have started leaving a bottle of beer and a plate of sandwiches out for him at night."

"Yes. Right." Harvey pulled a sour face. "That's *just* what this place needs. A drunken paranormal phenomenon scrambling around on the rooftops scarfing down cheese and pickle sandwiches. That's *really* going to do wonders for property prices."

"Property prices are going through the roof," I told him. "I was talking to Barry Vickers the other day; he says people are queueing up to buy property here."

"Yes, but those people all believe that the Mayans colonised Mars and that aliens are abducting loggers in the Pacific Northwest and sticking silicon chips up their noses. I don't want people like that for neighbours, no thank you."

"Barry reckons he could get a half a million quid for my house."

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I couldn't believe he hadn't heard any of this.

"Something's going on," Domino said, coming back from the bar empty-handed. "Hello, Harvey."

"Hi," Harvey said.

"Where's my drink?" I asked.

"The journalists are leaving," said Domino.

Harvey and I looked at each other. Now Domino mentioned it, I could hear cars and vans starting up outside. Harvey raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no," I groaned. "It's much too nice a day."

He leaned forward and plucked at my sleeve. "C'mon, Geoffrey. You look like a man who needs an adventure."

"I have all the adventure I need in my front room."

He pulled my sleeve again, grinning. "C'mon."

The convoy wound its way slowly out of the village and into the sweltering countryside, a line of about fifteen vehicles headed by a converted double-decker bus spray-painted with huge dahlias.

"Who the hell are *they*?" Harvey asked, pointing up ahead at the bus.

"Druids," said Domino.

Harvey glanced in the rearview mirror to see if Domino was keeping a straight face.

"They've been coming over here from Stonehenge since last Wednesday," I said. "The fields between here and there are full of them."

Harvey looked bemused. "My goodness," he said. "Has there been any action at Stonehenge?"

"Not a peep," Domino said.

I closed my eyes and leaned back until my head was against the seat's rest. "Imagine their disappointment."

"It's a very localised phenomenon," said Domino.

"It's starting to get on my tits," Harvey said. "You know, this morning, while we were clearing frogs, this Space Cruiser pulled up with all these guys with video cameras in it."

I nodded. Space Cruisers containing guys with video cameras had become about as unusual in Seldon as Springheel Jack.

"None of them spoke more than a couple of words of English," Harvey went on. "Turned out they were Uzbeks. *Uzbeks*. I mean, do Uzbeks even *have* television?"

"Of course they do," said Domino.

"Yeah, other *people's* television. I meant television of their own."

"Uzbekistan has quite a muscular little press association these days, actually," Domino told him.

I opened my eyes. In front of us, the thirteen-strong Polish television contingent had somehow crammed themselves and all their equipment into their rented Espace. Through their rear window, I could see what appeared to be a heated argument going on.

"They wanted rooms," Harvey said, voice rising indignantly. "They thought the House was a hotel. Imagine that."

There was a brief silence in the Range Rover, while we all imagined it. Finally, Domino said, "It does look a *little* like an hotel, you have to admit."

"Yeah," Harvey grumped. "Well." He honked the horn a couple of times, and the Poles in the back seat of the Espace turned round and flipped us the finger. Harvey shook his head. "That's the Polacks, right?" Harvey had inherited, from the Czech side of his family, a congenital dislike of Poles.

At Three-Mile Post we left Seldon territory and briefly found ourselves driving across Jim Dawes's land. On either side of the road Jim's cornfields dipped and rose towards a shimmering tree-and-hedge-lined horizon arched over by a white-hot sky.

At the crest of Sefton Hill a small riot of people was spilling out across the road. Harvey drove us past the dozens of parked vehicles and down the other side of the hill until there was space to park. Then we walked back up to the crowd.

Sefton Hill was said to command the most aesthetic vista in the area, a great even expanse of gently rolling fields and hills that vanished into an uncertain and vaguely mystical heat-distorted distance peppered with tumuli and standing stones and the occasional long barrow. It was so popular with tourists that every summer Jim Dawes strategically positioned a little van in the layby selling strawberries and pots of honey.

"I love this," said Harvey when we reached the top of the hill, looking at the view he had inherited from the English side of his family.

All around us, the World's Press were aiming their cameras into the middle distance. In the middle of one of Jim's cornfields the crop had been crushed down to form a complex geometrical shape, like a deformed star.

"It wasn't here last night," I heard one of the CNN team say behind us. "We were out here till ten, eleven o'clock shooting the Evening Show, and I swear it wasn't there then."

Harvey was looking at the star-shape and shaking his head. "That's amazing, you have to admit," he said.

"It's a fake," someone said beside me.

I turned my head and saw that, without my noticing, a short young woman with very long brown hair had moved in between Domino and me. "Beg pardon?"

"It's a hoax," she said. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a baggy washed-out Harlequins rugby shirt. She wasn't a villager because I'd never seen her before, which these days would have suggested she was either a journalist or a sightseer, but she didn't seem to be carrying any journalistic equipment and she didn't have the blissed-out look of so many sightseers. "Some students from the London School of Economics came down here last night and did it with some bits of wood and a couple of lengths of clothesline."

Domino looked down at her and frowned. "Why would they do that?" he asked politely.

"Because I paid them to," she said without looking at either of us.

"That's very interesting," Domino said gravely.

She nodded. "Any idiot can make those things." She looked up at me. "I'm Pauline Niven. You're Karen Baxter's husband, aren't you."

"I wanted to prove that you can't believe everything you see," she said. "You can't look at a crop circle and just assume it was made by little green men."

"We have Green Men here too," Domino put in. I nudged him to be quiet.

I said to Pauline, "Unless you really *want* to be lynched by a couple of hundred journalists and scientists and assorted sightseers, I wouldn't mention this to anybody else."

"That's the problem, you see?" she asked. "Everybody's just gone completely crazy over this place."

Crop circles-real and fake-were two a penny around Seldon; we had left Sefton Hill before the press pack got bored and caused a mini rush-hour, and Harvey had driven us back to The Black Bull, where we had been able to get a table and something to eat in the snug. Pauline was sitting opposite me, virtually vibrating with nervous energy, a glass of orange juice clasped in her fist.

"The food in here's getting real strange," Harvey commented, returning from the food counter and sitting down at our table. He put down his plate of chicken tikka and wild rice and poked it suspiciously with his fork. "When I first came here, the only thing Betty served was steak sandwiches and fries-sorry," he added for our benefit. "*Chips*." He thought about it for a moment. "And fried onion rings." He looked at us. "You know, I miss fried onion rings." I glanced at Pauline. She was staring at Harvey with a bemused expression on her face.

"It's the journalists," Domino said. "Betty thinks she should have something a bit more exotic than chips and steak sandwiches and onion rings for her new clientele."

Harvey nodded sadly. "These do not appear to be people who would be impressed by a Ploughman's Lunch, it is true. And your apology is accepted," he added to me.

"What apology?"

"Your apology for not introducing me to your friend while I drove you all back here."

Oh, for heaven's sake... "Harvey Menzel, Pauline Niven. Pauline Niven, Harvey Menzel, Baronet, Fourteenth Earl Seldon."

Pauline raised her eyebrows. Harvey leaned across the table, delicately lifted her hand, kissed it, and said, "Enchanted," in his best Donald Sinden voice.

Synchronicity does some pretty weird things. Six years ago, on the very afternoon that I was signing my life away in return for the world's most unprofitable garage, some miles to the East Sir James Dawson-Fairleigh, Thirteenth Earl Seldon, was riding to hounds.

At a little after two o'clock that afternoon, Sir James's horse abruptly refused to jump a hedge, hurling Sir James into the air, over the hedge, and piledriving him headfirst into the field on the other side. Alex Saxon, the local GP, was riding in the same hunt, so he was on the scene immediately, but Sir James was dead the moment he hit the ground. One drunken evening a couple of years later, Alex confided to me that the Thirteenth Earl's head had been driven so far down between his shoulders that he looked as if he had been killed by a single catastrophic shrug.

Five months after the accident, on the same day that Karen and I were moving into our new home in Seldon, a student named Harvey Menzel was called out of his class at Harvard Medical School and told that, as the only living-if astonishingly remote-relative of Sir James Dawson-Fairleigh, he had inherited a large house and a small village in Wiltshire.

"So I had to ask myself," Harvey said, "did I want a career in medicine, saving lives and that kind of thing? Or did I want to spend the rest of my life as a feudal warlord with the power of life and death over my tenants?"

Pauline was sitting with her chin propped up on her fist, her eyes wide. "So which did you choose?" she asked innocently, and I decided I liked her.

Harvey looked crestfallen. It was rare to see the famous Menzel charm-inherited, according to Harvey, from his great-great grandfather, who was a full-blood Menominee-fail. But to give him his due, he recovered quickly and fought his way across the now-crowded snug to get us some more drinks.

"He's got a good heart," I said when he was out of earshot.

Pauline raised an eyebrow.

"He's very lonely," I told her. "Most of what you see is just a front. How do you think you'd react if you were suddenly told you'd inherited Kodak or Chase Manhattan?"

She made a rude noise. "I'd turn cartwheels."

"Well, Harvey's different. He wasn't entirely kidding about the power of life and death, you know. The whole village belongs to him, and ultimately the responsibility for it ends with him. That must have been pretty scary for a twenty-four-year-old medical student."

"I thought the National Trust owned this place."

"Only the Gardens. They were laid out by the Seventh Earl, but he was the only Dawson-Fairleigh who was remotely interested in them. The rest were only interested in making money. The Twelfth Earl turned them over to the Trust in the Sixties in his will. Everything else belongs to the family. To Harvey."

She looked across the snug. "What does he think of this... invasion?"

"I think he's quite tickled by it, to be honest. He hangs out with the CNN and NBC people quite a lot. I think he likes having people around he can talk to about the Superbowl."

Pauline turned back to look at me. "Tell me about your wife."

I sighed. "It's private, Pauline."

"How does your wife feel about it?"

"She feels the same way."

"Does she?"

By this time, we were leaning slightly across the table towards each other. "Yes, she does."

"Are you sure about that, Geoff?"

"Yes."

"Have you asked her?"

"No," I admitted. "I haven't."

She sat back, a self-satisfied look on her face. "Well," she said. "There you are, then."

"There's what?" Harvey asked, returning with our drinks.

"Geoff won't let me talk to his wife," said Pauline.

He looked at me. "Why not?"

"Because it's *private*," I said wearily, wondering why apparently intelligent people were unable to understand what I was talking about.

"Oh, hell," Harvey said to me, while beaming his best smile at Pauline. "It's no big thing, is it?"

"It is to me," I said.

Harvey sat down. "Surely what Karen wants is more important, yes?"

I glared at him. He was only taking Pauline's side because he wanted to get her into bed, and under normal circumstances I would have let it pass. But these were not normal circumstances.

"No," I told them both.

"Ask Karen," Harvey suggested. "How can it hurt?"

"How can it hurt?" I shouted at him. "Are you *insane*?"

"Hey," he said mildly. "Get a grip." He took a swallow of beer and shook his head. "Good grief."

"Do you think I'm over-reacting?" I demanded. "Is that it?"

"You just think about it," he told me in that lazy-eyed I'm-the-Lord-of-the-Manor way he adopted when handing down judgements his tenants didn't like.

"No way," I said, shaking my head. "Absolutely not."

In the wee small hours of the next morning, I was woken by a thump and a desperate scrabbling noise on the tiles above my head. There was a moment of absolute silence, then the sound of a large object sliding down the slope of the roof, at first quite slowly, then with increasing speed. A tiny little voice, pitched inhumanly high, pronounced a couple of syllables, then there was a bump, followed by a sort of thrashing thud on the front lawn.

I got out of bed and lifted back the curtains in time to see an impossibly long-legged figure with arms that reached down past its knees lift itself from the lawn, hop over the hedge, and stagger unevenly away down the street.

I went back to bed. I always knew it was going to turn out to be a mistake, leaving beer out for Springheel Jack.

### 3

The doorbell woke me at half past eight. I put on my dressing gown and took my hangover downstairs to yell at whoever was on my doorstep, but when I opened the door Harvey and Pauline were standing there shoulder to shoulder with identical looks of determination on their faces.

"Don't," I warned them.

"The little shit's doing it again," Harvey said. He looked furious; in all the time I had known him, there was only one person who could make him look like that. My heart sank.

"It's important," Pauline told me.

I looked at them, trying as hard as I could to remember the tail end of yesterday evening. "Did you two wind up sleeping with each other last night?" I asked.

Harvey looked embarrassed. Pauline stared at me. "So what?"

"I have a hangover," I told her. "Go away."

"No," she said.

"I haven't had breakfast."

"We've got breakfast." Harvey held up a thermos and a grease-smudged brown paper bag. "Doughnuts. I finally taught Mrs. Frewin how to make them properly." He thought about it. "Well, nearly properly."

"I have a hangover," I told them again. "Go away."

"We're going to stand here, ringing your doorbell every five minutes, until you get dressed and come with us," Harvey said.

"Jesus," I muttered. "All right. Let me put some clothes on."

"We'll come in and wait," said Pauline, obviously thinking of visiting my front room.

"No you won't," I told her. "Wait in the car. I won't be long."  
I closed the door on them.

There were a lot of stories, some of them going back centuries, concerning the relationship between the Woods and the Dawson-Fairleighs. One story said that a hundred years or so ago a Wood ancestor had managed to wheedle his way into the favour of the then-Earl Seldon, who had given him a loan on which the Wood farm had stood as security. The loan had, of course, never been repaid, but successive Earls had not bothered to foreclose on the farm because it really wasn't worth having. There were also dark rumours that the Woods possessed some information which would terminally embarrass the Dawson-Fairleighs.

Whatever. The Wood farm had passed down through generation after generation of pillocks until it fell into the hands of Derek, in whom all the bad Wood genes appeared to have become dominant at once.

The gene for stupidity, for instance, which gossip said dipped in and out of the family from generation to generation. Derek was too stupid to hold his little soirees at a secret location far from home, which was how he got caught, time after time. Doing it at eight o'clock in the morning wasn't going to fool anybody.

Driving through the village, we passed half a dozen photographers and a bunch of Azeris who claimed to be their country's Press Association. Harvey kept his foot down on the accelerator and almost ran over the little Frenchman who had been the last person to ask to interview Karen.

"Slow down," I said.

"I'm going to hang him up by his balls this time," Harvey vowed, snarling through the windscreen, but he did lift his foot off the accelerator pedal fractionally.

"Who is this bloke anyway?" Pauline asked from the back seat while she loaded her cameras.

"Derek Wood," I said.

"Beg pardon?"

"Every town's got one," Harvey said. He changed gear and almost took every tooth off the gearbox.

"Geoff?"

"Derek is not a nice man," I told her.

"Three hundred years ago I'd have been able to have him hanged, drawn and quartered and the bits tarred and nailed to the door of St. Luke's, and *nobody would have been able to stop me*," Harvey muttered. We went around a bend quickly enough for me to feel the Range Rover lift fractionally off its nearside tyres.

"Derek runs dog-fights," I explained.

There was a silence from the back seat. "Oh," she said finally.

I thought about last night, wondering at which point precisely Pauline's scepticism about Harvey had disappeared. I couldn't remember going home, or Betty ringing Last Orders, and a lot of things before that were blurred.

"Did you tell me why you paid those students to make the corn circle?" I asked her.

"No."

"Did you tell Harvey?"

She sniggered.

"How about Domino?"

"No."

I gave up. "How do you know Derek's having a fight this morning?" I asked Harvey.

"Ned Watkins."

"It's not like Ned to have moral scruples," I said. Ned Watkins was the county's most industrious poacher, the bane of about a dozen landowners.

Harvey shrugged. "Don't ask me what goes on in *that* guy's head. He just turned up about seven and said a bunch of the local petty criminal class were gathering at Derek's farm."

"Did you call Nigel?"

He nodded. "He's on his way with a whole posse of policemen. He wants to slap Derek as much as I do."

"Wow," I said. "I don't think I can handle this much excitement at this time of the morning."

He reached into his pocket and took out a Cafe Creme. "Have a cigar," he said.

"It'd probably make me throw up," I told him. But I took the cigar anyway and put it in my pocket.

The Wood farm sat in a little dip, an untidy cluster of run-down buildings and rusting tractors almost lost in a jungle of weeds. There were a couple of dozen vehicles of varying decrepitude parked in the farmyard when we arrived.

"Right," Harvey said, stopping the Range Rover and undoing his seatbelt.

"Shouldn't we wait for Nigel?" I asked.

He paused with his hand on the door-handle and looked at me. "This guy offends me, Geoffrey. He's one of the stupidest, most amoral human beings I've ever met. He thinks two pit-bulls tearing each other to bits is the most exciting spectacle since *Holiday on Ice* and he's a bully to boot. He's one of my tenants and he's

my responsibility."

"Don't you think you're taking your responsibilities a little bit too seriously?" I asked, but he was already out of the door and striding across the farmyard towards one of the ramshackle buildings. Pauline hurried after him, festooned with cameras. I watched them go, the Lord of the Manor and his Official Photographer. I shook my head. Then I got out the car and followed them, the Lord of the Manor's Fool.

Harvey reached the building, and at that point everything began to go wrong. Instead of just sneaking in unobtrusively, he wrenched open the door and shouted, "Derek Wood! Your worst nightmare is here!" And then he disappeared into a tidal wave of beefy bodies that erupted from the doorway. I started to run.

People jostled me as they tried to get past to their cars. I dashed into the barn and saw more of them milling around, shouting and swearing, illuminated by the flash of Pauline's camera. A deep pit had been dug in the middle of the floor, and I caught a glimpse of two stocky, massively-muscled bodies down in the bottom. It was chaos. On the other side of the pit, I saw Harvey for a moment, hand raised above his head, yelling at the top of his voice at someone.

The press of bodies parted and I found myself on the edge of the pit. Whatever Derek had in there, they weren't dogs. For a moment, I had the surreal impression that they were bald chimpanzees. They had the round, short-snouted heads and small ears of bull-terriers, smooth grey-brown hide and short muscular arms that ended in great sharp-clawed hands.

One was obviously dead, lying on the floor of the pit with its throat torn out with such force that it had almost been decapitated. The other one was standing pawing its fallen adversary's body as if confused that it had stopped fighting. Then it looked up and saw me.

All the noise seemed to go away. All of a sudden the creature was in motion. It reached the side and jumped. Its clawed fingers dug into the soil of the pit wall, and it started to haul itself hand over hand up towards me, snarling. Its mouth seemed crammed with tiny razor-sharp brown teeth. Its little yellow eyes were locked on me and it looked completely insane. It was close enough to spray spittle on the toes of my trainers.

Pauline walked unhurriedly up beside me, swung her foot back, and kicked the creature in the face. It tumbled back into the pit and lay in the dirt looking dazed. Pauline got a couple of quick photographs of it.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I looked across the pit. On the other side, Harvey and a big brawny bullet-headed man were yelling at each other. Harvey's nose was bleeding, but Derek looked as if he was going to have a corker of a black eye. For a fraction of a second, they looked just like the thing Pauline had kicked.

"No," I said, looking at my shaking hands. "No, I'm not all right."

Then Nigel arrived with what appeared to be most of the Wiltshire Police Force rugby team, and order, of a sort, was restored.

Our little police action resulted in seven arrests for public order offences, five for offensive weapons, two for actual bodily harm and one for driving a stolen vehicle, Nigel and his boys having checked all the number plates in the farmyard before making their entrance. The live goblin was put in the back of a police dog van and taken away somewhere. The CNN team, who had arrived too late to film the action, were still haggling with Nigel's Inspector for the body of the dead one.

"I call *that* a good morning's work," said Harvey, dabbing his nose with a fistful of paper tissues.

"Tip your head back," Pauline told him. "It'll never stop bleeding otherwise."

Harvey tipped his head back obediently. "Goblins," he muttered. "Jesus."

"I was talking to Nigel," I said. "He doesn't think he'll be able to make a charge stick."

Harvey looked at me.

"It's not illegal to stage a goblin-fight," I told him.

He raised an eyebrow angrily.

"It's not," I said. "Dogs, yes. Cockerels, yes. Badgers, yes. Goblins, no. There's no legislation regarding goblins. As far as the law's concerned, you burst in on Derek and his mates doing something extremely unpleasant but perfectly legal." I watched Nigel frogmarching Derek over to a police van. "You'd better pray that Derek's too stupid to charge you with assault."

Harvey said, "You're a really ungrateful guy, you know?"

"Has something happened today for me to be grateful for?"

"Stop it, you two," Pauline said.

We looked at her. Harvey sighed and tipped his head back.

"Are you staying at the House?" I asked.

Harvey glared at me over his mask of paper tissues.

"Yes," said Pauline.

"I'll ask Karen," I told her.

She blinked at me. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I said, walking back towards the gate.  
I walked quite a long way before I heard Harvey call, "Hey! Hey! You want a lift?"  
I smiled and kept walking.

"Well, I don't know," said Karen.

"She says she just wants to talk to you for twenty minutes," I said.

"But why me?" she asked. "Why not that old bloke who was with the Duke of Marlborough?"

"General Branch."

"Yes, him. He was on GMTV this morning."

I sipped my drink. Karen was having a bad day; she wasn't much more than a vague smoky presence centred around the armchair in the corner of the living room. If the curtains hadn't been closed I wouldn't have been able to see her at all.

"I haven't even been dead very long, have I?" she asked.

"Thirteen months."

"I can't see that I have anything very interesting to say," she said. "General Branch was banging on about great battles and stuff; what do I have to say? How great it was living in Islington in the early 1990s? How I bumped into Cherie Blair once in Waitrose?"

"She wants to know what it's like to be dead."

"Well it's not *that* bloody interesting. I don't know; what do *you* think? Am I having a good time?"

"I promised I'd ask you to talk to her."

There was a silence from the other side of the room. "How many other people have asked to talk to me?"

"There have been a few," I admitted.

"You never tried to persuade me to cooperate with *them*," she said. Another silence. "Is she very pretty?"

I looked into my drink. "Not particularly, no."

"So what's different about her?"

I looked at the febrile impression of motion that was all that remained of my wife. "She saved me from being savaged by a goblin this morning." It occurred to me that Seldon was the only place on Earth where a person could use that sentence and not feel in danger of winding up in a mental hospital.

#### 4

The doorbell rang at ten o'clock on the dot. She was punctual, I had to give her that. I went and opened the door.

"Are you sure this is all right?" Pauline asked.

"Karen's very keen," I told her.

She had her camera-bag slung over her shoulder and her hair was freshly-washed. She looked about twelve years old.

"Is that some of her work?" she asked, looking past me.

I turned to look at the paintings hanging in the hall. They'd been there for so long now that I had stopped noticing them. "Yes."

Pauline stepped into the hallway and walked along the wall looking at Karen's paintings of elves and goblins and fairy-folk.

"She did them for Julie Dunmow's books," I explained. "You know, *The King of the Elves*. *The Tale of Ynessil and Awen*."

"I know," she said, leaning close to one of the paintings. "My nephew's got all her books. I didn't realise your wife did the illustrations."

"Good little earner," I said. "We're still getting royalties."

"Mm." She pointed to one of the pictures. "This looks like those things we saw yesterday. At the farm."

I went over and stood beside her. She was looking at Karen's painting of the King of the Goblins, carousing with his mates in his castle. Now she mentioned it, the goblins did look a little like the creatures from Derek Wood's farm. "I suppose," I said.

She moved on to the next painting, of a stick-thin, inhumanly-beautiful fairy, its gossamer wings spread as it ascended into a moonlit sky. "This is lovely," she murmured.

"It's the last painting she ever did," I said.

"Oh." She suddenly looked awkward. "I'm sorry, I-"

"It's all right." I walked past her and opened the living room door. "Someone to see you," I told Karen.

I had a private theory that Seldon was being punished for having ducked down below the parapet of History throughout its entire existence. Almost seven hundred years of English history had simply passed the village by. None of its sons had gone to war, none of its inhabitants had written books or painted portraits or become

an architect or a disc-jockey or a world-famous fashion designer. Seldon had started out as a village of ordinary people, and it had stayed that way.

General Branch appeared to be an anomaly, but it transpired that he hadn't been a local boy. On his death in battle the Duke of Marlborough had decreed that his General be buried in the little cemetery at St Luke's. Nobody knew why. Even General Branch seemed bemused, and not a little annoyed at being confined within the boundaries of the church grounds.

Seldon was cursed. That was the only explanation that made any sense to me.

Ever since the beginning of July, the village had experienced corn circles, spontaneous combustions, visions of unknown cities floating in the sky, UFOs, falls of frogs and anchovies, alien abductions, metal plaques etched in unknown languages dug up in fields, livestock mutilations, mysterious detonations echoing across the sky, homunculi, succubi and incubi. A Wild Hunt had been observed riding through Hobbes' Wood, and there were so many Green Men that the journalists had stopped reporting them.

And the Dead walked the Earth. Or rather, one of them appeared on Breakfast Television, and the other sat in the corner of my living room watching *Can't Cook, Won't Cook*.

I carried a bottle of Budweiser to the bottom of the garden and sat on the little rustic bench that looked as if it had been slowly rotting away for the past three hundred years. I drank some beer and looked about me.

It was a nice garden. Not too big, not too cramped. Square lawn in the middle, flower-beds up two sides, a line of horse chestnuts along the bottom with some rhododendrons thrown in for a bit of colour. A couple of yards away, sitting in the shade of one of the rhododendron bushes, was a wood-sprite.

I searched the path around my feet, found a bit of bark amongst the gravel, picked it up and waved it half-heartedly at the sprite.

It came out from under the bush, about a foot tall, a pointy, twiggy little thing with tiny scary black eyes under enormous beetling brows. It approached me with nervous scratching noises on the gravel, watching my face all the time, until it was close enough to reach out and grab the bit of bark and scuttle back to the safety of the bushes, where it squatted gnawing on the titbit. Another one came out of the shadows and they started to squabble over the bit of wood.

Somebody on television had coined the term "discrete phenomena" to describe what was happening in Seldon. They hadn't been here, or they would have realised that some phenomena were a whole lot less discrete than others. The village was infested with wood-sprites; they had crowded the squirrels out of their ecological niche. Springheel Jack was everywhere. Corn circles appeared wherever there was a crop tall enough to take a mark, whether it was a corn field or a neglected grass verge. Every evening, around seven, dozens of lights appeared in the sky and started to zoom about exhibiting nonballistic flight previously unseen outside *Close Encounters*. The Americans called it the Evening Show, and some of them still went up to Sefton Hill to shoot fresh footage.

On the other hand, there were only two ghosts, and Elvis had limited himself to one manifestation so far, buying an inflatable mattress at Argos. Sonia Gregory, who worked on the checkout, had testified that the King had appeared to date from the later Vegas Years but had been a perfect Southern gentleman.

The sprites stopped fighting and froze, looking past me towards the house. I looked around. Pauline was walking up the path towards me. I heard a sudden scrabbling noise, and when I looked again the sprites had gone.

Pauline sat down next to me on the bench and looked at the flower-beds on the other side of the lawn. She clasped her hands in her lap and sighed.

"Rosemary," I said.

She seemed to wake up all of a sudden. "Pardon?"

"Over there," I said, pointing to the little bush Karen had planted the week we moved in. "Rosemary."

She looked at me as if I was a dog that had started to recite a McGonnagal poem.

"Nothing like a sprig of fresh rosemary on a lamb chop," I told her. "Dried rosemary isn't the same."

She looked at the bush, and for a moment I thought she might have been half-convinced about the lamb chop. Then she said, "How do you cope?"

"Oh." I thought about it. "I get along." I shrugged. "I suppose."

"She wouldn't tell me what happened."

"Well." I scratched my head. "She was allergic to wasp stings, but she didn't know that until she was stung by a wasp." I looked about us. "A little over a year ago. Right here, as it happens."

She was watching my face.

"She managed to get to the phone in the living room, but she passed out before she could dial 999. She still had the phone in her hand when I came home for lunch and found her lying there."

"Oh." She sighed again. Then she said, "That's a really stupid way to die, isn't it."

"I suppose so." I rummaged in my pockets and found the Cafe Creme Harvey had given me the day before. "Do you have a light?"

"I don't smoke."

I put the cigar back in my pocket. "So. Did you get what you wanted?"

She was quiet for a moment, frowning at the rosemary bush. "It's just so... sad." She shook her head. "How did you feel? When she came back?"

"She hasn't come back," I said. I stood up. "Shall we go for a walk?"

"Yes," she said. "Let's."

Our street was a cul-de-sac, its top end blocked by the houses occupied since the time of the Treaty of Versailles by the Prentice Sisters, a pair of alarming nonagenarian spinsters who went shopping two abreast, towing their shopping trolleys behind them and bowling oncoming pedestrians into the road. A privet-lined path ran along the side of Sarah Prentice's house and back garden, then angled sharply off and opened up into a vista of fields and little copses.

We turned right at the end of the path and walked away from the village. Over in the distance, I could see the bright lights of a television crew vox-popping yet another villager. Not far from them, a group of figures was moving in what seemed to be a slow purposeful dance: crop-circle people, measuring and recording.

"What did you mean about Karen not coming back?" Pauline asked.

I stood and watched the crop-circle people. "General Branch has come back, even if he can't leave St Luke's churchyard. I've had to settle for a disembodied voice. I don't call that coming back."

"Does that make you angry?"

I looked down at her. "Are you recording this?"

She was quiet for a few moments. Then she put a hand in one of her jacket pockets. I heard the faint click of a tape recorder being switched off. "Has anybody had any ideas why Karen and the General can't leave the place they reappeared in?"

"Everyone has a theory."

"Do you?"

I shrugged. Over in a copse I saw sunlight flash on the banked lenses of dozens of remote-controlled cameras.

"Did you know you're on the Internet?" Pauline asked, seeing me looking at the cameras.

"I prefer to think of the Internet as something that happens to other people," I said in what I thought was a suitably stoic tone of voice.

She waved a hand to encompass the village and its environs and all the lunatics enclosed within. "It all winds up there in the end. Print journalism, still photos, full-motion video, hours of recorded interviews. Thousands and thousands of pages and newsgroups and discussion rooms. There are fifty dedicated WebCams installed in Seldon and the fields, beaming back pictures twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, hoping to catch some phenomenon going on. This place is the Mecca of the *X-Files* generation. The only reason the Loch Ness Monster hasn't turned up here is that you haven't got a big enough pond."

I stopped and looked down at her. She sounded angry, and I found that interesting. I'd met all kinds of people since Seldon had been cursed. I had met greedy people who wanted to exploit us. I had met wide-eyed idealists. I had met people who wanted to come and see things they had only heard of in old stories. I had never met anyone who was just angry.

"Has something upset you?" I asked.

She looked at me for a few moments. "I've just spent half an hour interviewing your late wife, and you have to ask me if something's *upset* me?"

"Oh," I said, putting my hands in my pockets and walking off again. "Right."

We drifted, two figures lost in a humming-hot landscape of low hills and fields and copses. We drifted so far that we didn't see a reporter or a news team for minutes at a time.

At one point, we climbed a stile between two fields and were confronted by a young woman dressed as a Druid, standing like a statue in her robes and looking, now we were out of sight of human habitation, a little alarming.

Pauline wasn't alarmed. "Go home!" she yelled at the Druid.

The Druid raised an eyebrow.

"Go *away!*" Pauline shouted, waving her arms.

The Druid-or more properly Druidess, I suppose-leaned on her staff with a certain dignity I envied, and gazed off into some presumably mystical distance. Pauline shook her head and stomped off in the opposite direction.

It took me a few moments to catch up with her. She wasn't very tall, but she could stomp along at an impressive speed.

"I didn't want this assignment, you know," she said.

"You hide it very well."

"I really begged my editor. Any day now the jury's going to be coming back with a verdict in that big

murder trial in Salisbury. I could have been covering that."

I nodded in what I hoped was an understanding manner, though I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. I didn't read the papers much any more, and Karen didn't like to watch the news on the television.

"Oh no," she muttered, kicking at the ground. "Oh no, I had to come here along with the rest of the world's fucking Press and write stories about ghosties and ghoulies." She glanced up at me and her expression changed suddenly. "Oh, Geoff. I'm sorry. I didn't."

"It's all right," I said. "I keep expecting people to get bored with it all and go away."

She shook her head. "This is the Silly Season, Geoff. Parliament's on holiday, there's no football, Wimbledon's over, the weather's not doing anything much, half the population's in Benidorm. People just *lap* this stuff up."

A few hundred yards away, some more crop-circle people were wandering about with their tape measures and video cameras and theodolites.

"Out of interest, why *did* you get those students to make that crop circle?" I asked.

She snorted. "That was another of my editor's bright ideas. She thought I could make a story out of how gullible people are, so she told me to fake up a crop circle and see how many people believed it was genuine."

I thought about it. "I think that's one of the stupidest things I've ever heard," I said.

"My editor's not exactly the shiniest tool in the box." She looked out into the distance and shaded her eyes with her hand. "I don't know, maybe she's right. There's no original angle on this thing any more. Nobody knows why it's happening. All they can do is stand and watch."

"One of the scientists says it's being caused by El Niño," I said.

She snorted. "If all else fails, blame the weather. Nobody knows, Geoff. It's the perfect phenomenon for the new millennium. Pointless, senseless and inexplicable, with great photo opportunities."

"You must have some pretty good material now, though," I said. "What with that business at Derek's farm yesterday. And talking to Karen. Doesn't that give you an original angle?"

She lowered her hand and looked at me. "Do you want to hear what she said?"

"No, thank you." I turned and walked away.

"Why not?" she shouted.

## 5

A couple of days later, I was sitting in the office looking at the accounts when I heard a Range Rover pulled up outside. Domino was taking his turn at the pumps, so I just scowled at the ledger on the desk in front of me and drank some coffee.

"That has to be the saddest sight in the world," said Harvey.

I looked up from the books. "What's that?"

"A good man trying to rescue his business, that's what."

I looked around the office. "Did a good man come in here?"

Despite the temperature, Harvey was wearing what he called his 'local camouflage': tan cord trousers, green cord waistcoat, woollen shirt, knitted tie, tan cord jacket, green wellies and a flat cap. I never saw a man who looked further from home.

"Pauline says you had a row."

"Did she?" I said.

"She says you shouted at her."

"*She* shouted at *me*, as I recall."

"Well." He scratched his head. "I guess we've all done our fair share of shouting at each other in the past couple of days."

I presumed this was a coded reference to last night's meeting of the village council, which had degenerated into a near-riot when the subject of Peter Massey's succubus had been raised. Domino, who had attended the meeting, had given me a blow-by-blow description of the evening. I thought it was a wonder we weren't all completely insane by now.

I said, "Do you want a coffee?"

He looked at my mug on the desk. "You drink instant, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Pass," he said.

I sighed. "I'm not going to apologise for shouting at Pauline," I told him, "because I didn't shout at her."

All of a sudden he looked embarrassed. "I've asked her to marry me."

I blinked at him. "You *what*?"

"Asked her to marry me."

"Well." I sat back in my chair. "What did she say?"

"She said yes, of course," he said, a little surprised that I'd had to ask.

"You've only known each other a few days, Harvey."

Hey," he said, "haven't you noticed? Magic happens here. Maybe love at first sight happens here too."

I blew a raspberry, just so he knew what I thought of love at first sight and magic and everything that was happening to Seldon.

"Anyway, Menzels hate long engagements," he said.

"Obviously."

"And we want you to be the best man."

I looked at him for a few moments, then I burst out laughing, which was obviously not the reaction he'd been expecting because he took off his flat cap and threw it at me. "I'm serious, you bastard."

"It'll give your tenants the laugh of their lives," I said, subsiding into giggles and tossing his cap back to him.

He pulled up a chair and sat down. "How much is this place worth?" he asked.

"It's not worth anything," I said. "That's why I'll be bankrupt in a few months."

"So why don't you let me buy it from you?"

I stopped laughing.

"See, what I was thinking," he said, examining the inside of his cap, "was that I could buy this place from you, and you could continue to run it for me on a salary."

"You've lost your mind," I said.

He shook his head. "No, sir. I did some telephoning yesterday--"

"After Pauline told you to help me out," I said.

"And it turns out that this place is the only part of Seldon that I don't actually *own*," he went on as if he hadn't heard me. "According to that cobwebby old guy in Salisbury who pretends he's my attorney, Andy Hayward and the Thirteenth Earl cut some kind of deal. He won't tell me what it was, but it turns out that *you* own the land this garage stands on, not me."

"I didn't know that," I said, trying to remember the wording of the documents Andy and I had signed when I bought the place.

"So you could do anything with it," he said. "You could open a bowling alley or a fast-food franchise or a Hindu temple, and you'd be well within your rights." He saw the look on my face and smiled. "Forget it, fella. I have the local council in my pocket. You wouldn't get planning permission for anything more ambitious than a washing-line."

"I've always thought that what Seldon really needs is a bowling alley," I said.

Harvey laughed. "What it means is there's a gap in my property portfolio, right on my doorstep, and I'd like to close it."

"This place makes a loss," I told him. "You'd be insane to buy it and carry on running it as a garage."

"Not at all. People like having a garage in the village. It's not as if *nobody* stops here, is it?"

"No, but the running costs keep going--"

He held up a hand. "It doesn't *matter*, Geoffrey. This garage has been here ever since internal combustion first reached Wiltshire. It's as much a part of the village as The Black Bull, and I'm happy to run it at a loss because of that."

I was stunned. "Pardon me for saying so, but you're the most unlikely Fairy Godmother I can imagine."

"And it'll be a handy tax write-off as well," he said.

Word of mouth spreads quickly in a village as small as Seldon, and by eight o'clock virtually every human being within a five-mile radius was in or around The Black Bull. The car park had overflowed and there were cars double-parked up the High Street all the way to the garage.

Harvey had arranged for a special delivery from a real-ale brewery in Warminster to celebrate his engagement, and had hired a team of caterers from Andover who had organised the food with paramilitary precision. Seldon hadn't seen anything like it since the legendary Tenth Earl, who had commemorated the end of the First World War with a party that had lasted four days.

Domino shook his head as we fought our way through the mob. "Decadent," he commented. "Depraved." He looked at me. "Drink?"

I nodded. "I'll try and find us something to eat."

He regarded the heaving press of bodies and shook his head. "We'll never find each other again," he said. "Better to stay together."

We began to elbow our way towards the bar. There were so many people in the lounge bar that there was a haze of sweat in the air, and a layer of cigarette and cigar and pipe-smoke so thick that I couldn't see the ceiling, even though all the windows and doors were wide open.

All of Betty's staff were on duty tonight, and she had drafted in anybody who seemed willing and relatively responsible to serve behind the bar. It took us twenty minutes to get an orange juice and a vodka and tonic,

and another ten minutes to get across the room to where Harvey and Pauline were sitting.

"Is this not *magnificent?*" Harvey asked, spreading his arms as much as he could and grinning in welcome. He seemed to have got over his embarrassment about Pauline.

"It's impressive, certainly," I admitted.

"Congratulations, Harvey," Domino said, raising his glass of orange. "Pauline."

"I hear you're good with accounts," Harvey told him.

"I can't work miracles," Domino said.

"Well, my accountant dates back to the days when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. How'd you like a job?"

Domino looked at me. "I *have* a job."

"Nah." Harvey waved a hand dismissively. "I mean a *real* job. A *permanent* job."

"Harvey," Pauline said quietly, tugging his sleeve.

"How about it?" Harvey boomed.

"Harvey..." Pauline was looking at Domino while she tried to shut her fiancé up.

"Well..." Domino looked at me again. "It's tempting."

"You sod, Menzel," I said, shaking my head. "You buy my garage, then you buy my staff. How'd you like to pay off my mortgage?"

"We'll speak about that tomorrow," he said, suddenly serious. "I got plans for you and me, fella. You, me, Pauline, Domino, Seldon. We're all going places."

"Well, except Seldon," I said. "I'd like to think Seldon would stay in much the same place."

He burst out laughing. "Yeah," he guffawed. "Wouldn't like to see it get *lost*, would we?"

Harvey was one of those people who can get pretty seriously drunk without showing very many outward signs, and it only occurred to me now that he must have been drinking since this afternoon. He was sprawled in his corner seat, grinning and thoroughly indulging himself as Lord of the Manor, and he was going to have the mother and father of all hangovers tomorrow. I smiled.

Pauline and Domino started to chat quietly to each other, heads close together. I noted a lot of abbreviated hand-waving and a couple of astonished looks on Pauline's behalf, although not quite as astonished as I might have expected. I wondered how she had managed to figure it out.

I became involved in a heated conversation with a couple of Harvey's tenant farmers about the business at Derek Wood's farm. One of the CNN men joined in, then a couple of very drunk CBS cameramen, who claimed to have footage of Merlin doing card tricks over by White Lane Ford. At some point I looked over to the corner. Harvey had passed out and was snoring with a big sloppy grin on his face. Pauline and Domino were still having their conversation. I saw her lift his arm by the wrist and move it up and down, and by the look on her face I knew she was surprised at how light it was.

I went back to the bar a couple of times. The second time, I found myself standing behind the bar watching the Polish newsmen. They were standing in a line in front of me and shouting, "Pi wo! Pi wo! Pi wo! Pi wo!" and thumping the bar top in time to their chant.

"They want beer," Betty told me as she went by towards the other end of the bar. "'Piwo' is Polish for beer."

"Is it?"

She nodded. "In the past six weeks I've learned how to say 'beer' in eighteen different languages." She paused. "What are you doing behind the bar?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, while you're here, make yourself useful and serve these lads, would you?"

I shrugged and started to pull pints. The beer, supplied by Harvey, was free, but the Poles insisted on paying anyway. I took their money and put it in the till, and when I turned back to the bar there were more people waiting to be served. I served them.

Pulling pints seemed not too dissimilar to pumping petrol, so I decided to stay there for a while. I smoked the cigar Harvey had given me, and a little while later a harrassed-looking Betty came along the bar, beamed at me, and handed me a packet of slim panatellas.

The racket in the pub reached a crescendo around half past ten, then started to quiet down a little as the locals began to drift unsteadily off into the night. There were long moments when nobody wanted a drink, and I lit a cigar and leaned back and watched all the foreign newsmen and assorted tourists and villagers and caterers drinking and singing and shouting and laughing.

"I reckon this has been good for us," Betty said beside me.

I hugged her and kissed the top of her head. "Bless you, Bets."

"You daft sod," she said, snuggling up against me. Betty was at least twenty years older than me, soft and small and round, an applied mathematics graduate who always seemed a little astonished that she had wound up running a pub in rural Wiltshire. She was the only person I knew who had the balls to tell me she was worried that I drank too much. "I mean it," she said, gesturing at the assembled revelers. "Harvey's done a lot of good for the village tonight. We've all been under a lot of strain for the past six weeks; we needed

something like this. Blow off a little steam."

"Harvey doesn't care about that," I told her. "He just wanted to celebrate his engagement."

"It doesn't matter. How's Karen?"

"As tenuous as ever."

She shook her head sadly and gave me a firm hug. "Poor Geoff."

"Yes," I said. "Poor Geoff."

"When are you going?"

I looked at her.

"I haven't been here nearly as long as you have," she said, "but even I know that if you want to keep something secret you don't tell Barry Vickers."

"I only asked Barry to value the house for me," I said. "He hasn't put it on the market yet." And then I wondered how much of my dealings with Vickers & Sons, Estate Agents, had reached Harvey's ears, and how much of it had prompted him to offer to buy the garage. I sighed. "I don't know how much longer I can live there, Bets."

"Most of us are amazed you've stayed there this long," she said.

I thought about it, about all the nights when I hadn't been quite drunk enough to prevent me lying awake staring at the ceiling and thinking of Karen trapped in the front room. I couldn't remember when I'd finally decided I'd had enough. It seemed that I had always been ashamed of wanting to run away.

"I'll never sell it, anyway," I said. "Nobody in their right mind will buy a house with Karen's ghost in the front room." I actually felt myself cringe when I thought about it. "Nobody else would know what television programmes she likes to watch."

Betty handed me a clean bar towel. "Dry your eyes and blow your nose," she said.

"Sorry." I dried my eyes and blew my nose.

"Nobody would blame you for leaving," said Betty. "None of us can imagine what it must have been like for you these past few weeks."

"Are you still serving?" Pauline asked, leaning on the bar.

Betty looked at her watch. She liked to keep to the legal opening hours, even though a loophole in the local licensing laws meant that Harvey could order her to stay open as long as he wanted. "Yes, Miss."

"Pauline," said Pauline.

"Yes, Miss," Betty sniffed, going off to pull another pint.

"She doesn't like me," Pauline told me.

"She doesn't know you yet," I said. "When she does, she'll probably hate you."

She narrowed her eyes. "Have you been crying?"

I shook my head. "Too much smoke in here."

She frowned at me. "I'm going to need some help getting Harvey into the Range Rover in a while."

I looked across the bar, but there were still too many people between the bar and Harvey's favourite corner, and I couldn't see him. "Are you sure about marrying him?"

Pauline smiled. "You were right, you know? He really does have a good heart. He's a nice man, he's just a long long way from home. He's very sweet."

"And very wealthy."

"That comment," she said, accepting her pint of bitter, "doesn't do you credit."

Betty snorted and went out into the bar to collect glasses.

"I told you she didn't like me," Pauline said.

I lit another cigar. "Will you carry on working?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this the prelude to another insult?"

"It just occurred to me that you won't have to worry about your editor any more."

"I know." Her face seemed to light up with joy. "You have no idea how that feels."

"I think I can guess."

Domino came up to the bar. "Harvey wants to go home," he told us. He glanced at the clock over the fireplace. "And I have to go soon as well, or I'll turn into a pumpkin."

"That's not a joke you want to make around here," Pauline said. She looked at me. "Come on, Geoff. Let's get His Lordship in the car."

As we were getting him to his feet, Harvey opened his eyes and gazed blearily about the bar. "Where'd everyone go?" he asked.

"Home," I said.

He looked at me. "Hey, fella," he murmured, grinning. "Baxter's Garage."

"That's me," I said, putting my shoulder under his armpit to support his weight. "Baxter's Garage."

"I'm going to buy your house," he said.

"That's very nice," I told him as we got him half-walking, half-stumbling towards the door. The few drinkers who remained raised their glasses to us as we went by.

"My people," Harvey said, waving to them. "Jesus, now I know why King George fought so hard to hang on to the Colonies. He just hated to see all those serfs going off on their own." He frowned. "Is it serfs or serves?"

"Are you going to do this all the time?" Pauline asked him.

He turned his head and looked at her. "Do what? Drink?" He looked thoughtful. "Guess not." He looked at me again. "Yeah. Your house. Going to buy it. You can come stay at the House with me and Pauline. I got plans." He nodded. "Good plans."

"I'm afraid to ask," I said, but I didn't have to because he had half dozed-off again.

Pauline went ahead of us and opened the doors and we followed her out into the car park. Moonlight shone on the roofs and bonnets of all the vehicles crammed in around the pub. Domino looked up at the Moon and scratched his head with his free hand.

There were some moments of low comedy while Pauline searched through Harvey's pockets for his car keys. Then we manhandled Harvey into the back seat of the Range Rover and covered him with a travelling rug. He turned over on his side and started to snore. Pauline closed the door and looked at us.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked me.

"I expect so," I said.

"Harvey was serious about you coming to live at the House with us," she said.

"I know," I said. "I'll think about it."

"You'll still be able to visit her."

"I said I'll think about it."

"Okay." She hugged me and Domino, got into the Range Rover, and drove off into the night with her fiancé.

"Well," Domino said as we watched the car's rear lights vanish around the bend in the road at the end of the village, "that was an interesting evening."

"What were you two talking about?"

"Oh, this and that. She's very bright, you know."

"She's very bright and she's marrying Harvey?"

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. "Let's get you home."

These days, Seldon never really slept. There were always news crews wandering about, on the lookout for some new phenomenon. Tonight there were little groups of revellers as well, most of them staggering goodnaturedly homeward, some of them just staggering. They were being filmed by the CNN crew, who seemed to require neither sleep nor sustenance. In a couple of hours, the celebrations of the Fourteenth Earl Seldon's engagement would be on television screens in hotels in Dubai and duplexes in Waukesha, Wisconsin and flats in Sydney. I made sure Domino was walking between me and the cameras.

We reached the bottom of my street, turned the corner, and started to walk up towards my house. The lights were still on the Prentice Sisters' houses. I couldn't work out what ninety-seven-year-olds found to do so late at night.

As I opened the front door, I heard the end-title music of *Prisoner: Cell Block H* from the living room. "We're back," I called.

Domino walked down the hall and put his head round the door. "Hello, Karen."

"Hi, Domino," she said. "How was the evening?"

"Harvey had a lot to drink."

"What about Geoff?"

"Actually, Geoff didn't have that much to drink."

I heard Karen sigh. "He will."

I stepped into the living room. All the lights were off. The only illumination came from the television, and it threw odd shadows across the walls and furniture.

"Hi," I said to one of the shadows.

"Could you change the channel?" she asked. "*They Think It's All Over's* on BBC1 in a minute."

I picked up the remote control from the coffee table. "It's a repeat, isn't it?"

"I know," she said. "But I missed it the first time around because I was dead."

"Right." I changed the channel for her and put the remote back on the table. "I'll just see Domino out and I'll come back."

"Okay," she said. "Goodnight, Domino."

"See you soon, Karen."

He followed me through the kitchen. I unlocked the back door and we went out into the garden.

"Are you going to sell the garage to Harvey?" Domino asked as we walked along the path.

I sat down on the garden seat. "Do I have a choice?"

"You'll be lucky to get a better offer," he said, taking off his shirt and straightening up.

I looked at him. Standing upright, he was nearly seven feet tall. His breastbone bulged out like the keel of a rowing-boat. He flexed the massive muscular hump of his shoulders and jammed his fists into the small of his back to ease the cramp he was always getting because he went around hunched-over as part of his disguise. I'd told him I thought it was a pretty stupid disguise, but he wouldn't listen.

"What about the house?" he asked.

I took out a panatella and lit it. "I *said* I'd *think* about it, Domino."

"There's no need to shout at me."

"I wasn't shouting."

He sucked his teeth. "Well, don't think too long. Harvey might change his mind." He bent down and took off his trainers and socks. He balled up the socks and put them both in one trainer.

"Harvey never changes his mind once he's decided he wants something. You know what he's like."

"Hm." He undid his belt and took off his jeans and walked out into the middle of the lawn. Without clothes, he looked thin and light enough to blow away on a breeze.

"What about his job offer?" I asked.

"It's an interesting idea," he admitted. "But you'll still need help if he wants you to carry on running the garage, won't you?"

Behind me in the rhododendrons, something rattled. Wood sprites, I thought. Or a Green Man, perhaps. Once upon a time it would have been squirrels or a fox; now you just couldn't be sure.

I said, "If you did want to go off and work for Harvey, I wouldn't stop you."

There was a wet smacking sound, and the great hump on Domino's back opened in a pair of fat fleshy leaves. Two huge damp flags of gauzy tissue tumbled out and hung from his shoulders.

"Don't be noble, Geoff," he said, starting to flap his arms up and down to pump fluid into the banners of skin. He looked, it had to be said, completely ridiculous. "It doesn't suit you."

"Thanks."

"Besides, how did you plan to stop me?"

Good point. "Did you tell Pauline about... um...?" I gestured at him.

"She worked quite a lot of it out herself, actually," he said, still flapping his arms. "As I said, she's very bright. I think it's going to be a lot of fun having her around."

I sat quietly smoking my cigar and watching Domino's pantomime. It was a lovely evening. A large lens-shaped object, glowing a soft blue, drifted slowly over the house and out of sight beyond the trees. Out on the High Street, someone on their way home from the pub launched into a loud, spirited and almost entirely off-key rendition of "New York, New York." I sighed.

"Anyway," said Domino, "it's going to take a couple of weeks for Harvey's solicitors to sort out the paperwork on the garage and the house, so we may as well just carry on as normal until then."

"Yes." I got up from the garden seat and picked up his shirt and his trousers and his shoes. "I suppose we can try that."

"So." He spread his great butterfly wings and smiled down at me. "I'll see you at work tomorrow." And he flew off into the moonlit sky.

I stood for a long time watching him fly away, until he was just a tiny speck, and then I looked away for a moment and he was gone. From inside the house, I heard Karen laughing at something someone had said on television.

There didn't seem to be anything else to do, so I went back into the house to have a drink.

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling. I fidgeted a bit. It seemed that I hadn't noticed before just how uncomfortable the bed was.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, I got up and got dressed and went downstairs. As I walked along the hall, I heard a man's voice say, "To jest poczta."

Karen said, "To jest poczta."

She was following the BBC's early-morning language classes. First it had been Spanish, then Italian, then German, then I had lost track. I was going to wind up with the world's only disembodied voice that spoke eight or nine languages.

"Geoff?" she called as I went past the door of the living room.

"Can't sleep," I said. I opened the front door and stepped outside.

I stood at the garden gate and took big breaths of cool fresh air. The lights were still on in the Prentice Sisters' houses.

I walked down to the corner and onto the High Street. Down by the little Argos car park a small group of people were crouching over something in a pool of bright camera-light. I couldn't see what it was. I walked off in the opposite direction.

At the garage, I unlocked the office and switched on the lights and sat down at my desk. I unlocked the bottom drawer and took out the office vodka and a glass. I put the bottle on the desk and sat back and looked

at it. I'd had that bottle for five years and I'd never opened it. I made it a rule never to drink in the office, on the grounds that there had to be *somewhere* I didn't drink. I opened the bottle, half-filled the glass, and drained it in one go. I poured myself another and sat back in my chair and looked at the light fitting.

I thought about six years of struggle and worry. I thought about Karen. I thought about Harvey riding to the rescue and just suddenly making it all right again. I took a big drink of vodka and shivered. I filled the glass right up to the top. I picked it up carefully and managed to drink most of it in a single swallow without spilling a drop. I wondered if Harvey would make me wear some kind of period costume when I was running his garage.

I got up and went outside into the yard. I unlocked the door to one of the sheds and stood looking at my car, the Peugeot Karen and I had driven down here in six years ago. Apart from routine maintenance and the odd trip back up to London over the years, it had been in the shed ever since, courtesy of Laura Gibbs.

I spent twenty minutes trying to find a length of hose that would fit over the Peugeot's exhaust, and when I did find some it wasn't long enough to go through any of the windows, which seemed to sum up Baxter's Garage quite neatly. I gave up and settled for closing the shed door and stuffing an old tarpaulin into the gap along the bottom.

I sat in the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition. Then I sat for five minutes or so looking at the inside of the shed door. Then I turned the key, reclined the seat, put my head back against the rest, and closed my eyes.

"Geoff?"

I opened my eyes. Nigel was squatting down on his heels beside the car. I blinked at him.

"Karen throw you out?" he asked, smiling.

I rubbed my face. My neck was stiff and I had a hangover. Just another ordinary morning. "What time is it?"

"Half past seven," he said. "I was driving past, noticed the office door was open. Everything all right?"

"I couldn't sleep," I told him.

He nodded. "Rosie was like that when she was pregnant with our Amy. She'd get up at four in the morning and go out and sleep in the caravan. Only place she could sleep, some nights." He looked gravely at me.

"I'm not pregnant, Nigel," I said. "Promise."

He stood up. "Well. I closed the office door for you. Too many strangers about these days to leave your door open."

"I was hoping Derek Wood would come in and torch the place," I said. I climbed stiffly out of the car and stretched carefully. "Thanks."

"All right." He looked fresh and calm and content. Nothing ever fazed Nigel. Not Springheel Jack, not engineless cars, or goblins, or having to force his way into a garage whose door was blocked with a tarpaulin. "Go home, Geoff."

"I'll have to open up soon."

"Well go home and have a bath and some breakfast first," he said. He looked out through the open door of the shed. "Nice garage, this."

"I'm open to offers."

He laughed. "I heard His Lordship bought it off you."

"We haven't signed anything yet."

Nigel chuckled and shook his head. "I know better than to stand between His Lordship and something he wants."

"I know. I'm starting to discover how that feels."

"He's all right, though, His Lordship."

"He's got a good heart," I agreed. "And he's having the time of his life."

We went out into the sunshine. Everything was very still. The birds were singing. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the air already felt warm. We watched a unicorn trot along the High Street. It rounded the corner and vanished from sight in the direction of the Bull.

"Do you want me to call somebody?" Nigel asked.

"Like who?"

He thought about it. "His Lordship?"

I winced. "No, don't. It'll make his day."

He nodded. "All right."

"Actually, I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between ourselves."

He nodded again. "Suits me. The less paperwork I have to fill out, the happier I am."

I thought he must have hardly any paperwork to fill out, because he was the happiest policeman I had ever met. We shook hands and I watched him ease himself into his little car and drive off. Then I turned and went back into the shed and stood, hands in pockets, looking at the Peugeot and feeling hung-over and vaguely

embarrassed. Now I thought about it, I couldn't remember hearing the thing start up when I switched on the ignition.

I reached inside and pulled the bonnet catch. I couldn't remember when I had last run the engine. I shook my head; I'd tried to gas myself in a car with a flat battery.

I went back to the front of the car, lifted the bonnet, and looked down into the engine compartment.

