



ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Sight Unseen



About the Book

It is a hot summer's day in the tourist village of Avebury. A man sits outside the Red Lion pub, waiting. He sees a woman with three young children, two of them running ahead while their sister dawdles behind. A child's voice catches on the breeze.

For want of anything more interesting to do, the man watches. He sees nothing sinister or threatening. Even when another figure enters his field of vision, he does not react. The figure is ordinary - male, short-haired, stockily built. But he is moving fast, at a loping run.

And then it happens. In one swift movement, the running man grabs the youngest child and carries her away. Still the man outside the pub does not react. Suddenly, a white transit van bursts into view, its engine racing, its rear door slamming shut. The child and her abductor are inside. The child's sister rushes forward. The man outside the pub jumps up...

The tragedy begins at Avebury. But it does not end there.

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SIGHT
UNSEEN

Robert Goddard

For the real Claire Wheatley

PROLOGUE

It begins at Avebury, in the late July of a cool, wet summer turned suddenly warm and dry. The Marlborough Downs shimmer in a haze of unfamiliar heat. Skylarks sing in the breezeless air above the sheep-cropped turf. The sun burns high and brazen. And the stones stand, lichened and eroded, sentinels over nearly five thousand years of history.

It begins, then, in a place whose origins and purposes are obscured by antiquity. Why Neolithic henge-builders should have devoted so much time and effort to constructing a great ramparted stone circle at Avebury, as well as a huge artificial hill less than a mile away, at Silbury, is as unknown as it is unknowable.

It begins, therefore, in a landscape where the unexplained and the inexplicable lie still and close, where man-made markers of a remote past mock the set and ordered world that is merely the flickering, fast-fleeing present.

* * *

Saxon settlers gave Avebury its modern name a millennium and a half ago. They founded a village within its protective ditch and bank. Over the centuries, as the village grew, many of the stones were moved or buried. Later, they were used as building material, the ditch as a rubbish-dump. The henge withered.

Then, in the 1930s, came Alexander Keiller, the marmalade millionaire and amateur archaeologist. He bought up and demolished half the village, raised the stones, cleared the ditch, restored the circle. The clock was

turned back. The National Trust moved in. The henge flourished anew - a monument *and* a mystery.

Nearly forty years have passed since the Trust's purchase of Keiller's land holdings at Avebury. The renovated circle basks unmolested in the heat of a summer's day. A kestrel, soaring high above on a thermal, has a perfect view of the banked circumference of the henge, quartered by builders of later generations. The High Street of the surviving village runs west-east along one diameter, crossing the north-south route of the Swindon to Devizes road close to the centre of the circle. East of this junction, the buildings peter out as the effects of Keiller's demolition work become more apparent. Green Street, the lane is aptly called, dwindling as it leaves the circle and winds on towards the downs.

As it passes through the village, the main road performs a zigzag, the north-western angle of which is occupied by the thatched and limewashed Red Lion Inn. East of the inn, on the other side of the road, are the fenced-off remains of an inner circle known as the Cove - two stones, one tall and slender, the other squat and rounded, referred to locally as Adam and Eve. There is a gate in the fence, opposite the pub car park, and another gate in Green Street, on the other side of Silbury House, a four-square corner property that formerly served as the residence of Avebury's Nonconformist minister.

It is a little after noon on this last Monday of July, 1981. Custom is sparse at the Red Lion and visitors to the henge are few. When the traffic noise ebbs, as it periodically does, somnolence prevails. There is a stillness in the air and in the scene. But it is not the stillness of expectancy. There is no hint, no harbinger, of what is about to occur.

At one of the outdoor tables in front of the Red Lion, a solitary drinker sits cradling a beer glass. He is a slim, dark-haired man in his mid-twenties, dressed in blue jeans

and a pale, open-necked shirt rolled up at the elbows. Beside him, on the table, lie a spiral-bound notebook and a ballpoint pen. He is gazing vacantly ahead of him, across the road, towards the remaining stones of the southern inner circle. They do not command his attention, however, as a glance at his wristwatch reveals. He is waiting for something, or someone. He takes a slurp of beer and sets the glass down on the table. It is nearly empty. Sunlight glistens on the swirling residue.

A child's voice catches his ear, drifting across from the Cove. There is, at this moment, no traffic to mask the sound. The man turns and looks. He sees a woman and three children approaching the Cove from the direction of the perimeter bank. Two of the children are running ahead, racing, perhaps, to be first to the stones: a boy and a girl. The boy is nine or ten, dressed in baseball boots, blue jeans and a red T-shirt. The girl is a couple of years younger. She is wearing sandals, white socks and a blue and white polka-dot dress. Both have fair hair that appears blond in the sunshine, cut short on the boy but worn long, in a ponytail, by the girl. The woman is lagging well behind, her pace set by the youngest child, toddling at her side. This child, a girl, is wearing grey dungarees over a striped T-shirt. There can hardly be any doubt, given the colour of her hair, tied in bunches with pink ribbon, that she is the sister of the other two children.

It is much less likely that the woman escorting her is their mother. She appears too young for the role, slim, fine-featured and dark-haired, surely not beyond her early twenties. She is dressed in cream linen trousers and a pink blouse and is carrying a straw hat. Her attention is fixed largely on the little girl beside her. The other two children are dashing ahead.

As they approach the stones, a figure steps out from the gap between Adam and Eve, hidden till then from view. He is a short, tubby man in hiking boots, brown shorts, check

shirt and some kind of multi-pocketed fisherman's waistcoat. He is round-faced, balding and bespectacled, aged anything between thirty-five and fifty. The two children stop and stare at him. He says something. The boy replies and moves forward.

The man outside the Red Lion watches for lack of anything more interesting to watch. He sees nothing sinister or threatening. What he does see is a flash of sunlight on glass as the man by the stones takes something out of one of his numerous pockets. The boy steps closer.

The woman is hurrying to join them now, not running, nor even necessarily alarmed, but cautious perhaps, her attention suddenly diverted from the slow-moving infant who follows at her own dawdling pace, before abruptly sitting down on the grass to inspect a patch of buttercups.

The man outside the Red Lion sees all of this and makes nothing of it. Even when another figure enters his field of vision from behind Silbury House, he does not react. The figure is male, short-haired and stockily built. He is wearing Army surplus clothes and is moving fast, at a loping run, across the stretch of grass beyond the stones. The woman, who cannot see him moving behind her, is smiling now and talking to the man in the fisherman's waistcoat.

And then it happens. The running man stops and bends over, grasps the seated child beneath her arms, lifts her up as if she weighs little more than the buttercup in her left hand and races back with her the way he came.

The man in the fisherman's waistcoat is first to respond. He says something to the woman, raising his voice and pointing. She turns and looks. She puts her hand to her mouth. She drops her hat and begins running after the man who has grabbed the child. Screened as he is by Silbury House, he can no longer be seen by the man outside the Red Lion. The roaring passage of a southbound lorry further confuses the senses. Everything is happening very

quickly and very slowly. The beer-drinker does no more than rise from his seat and gape as the next minute's events spray their poison over all who witness them.

A white Transit van bursts into view round the corner from Green Street, its engine racing, its rear door slamming shut. The child and her abductor are inside. That is understood by all, or intuited, for only the woman has seen them scramble aboard. A second man is driving the van. That is also understood, though no-one catches so much as a glimpse of him amidst what follows.

The man in the fisherman's waistcoat has taken a few ineffectual strides after the woman, but has now turned back. The boy is standing stock-still between Adam and Eve, paralysed by an inability to decide what to do or who to follow.

No such indecision grips his sister, though. She is running, ponytail flying, towards the gate onto the main road. What is in her mind is uncertain. From where she was standing, she will have seen the van pull away. She knows her sister is being stolen from her. She is not equipped to prevent the theft, yet she seems determined to try. She flicks up the latch on the gate and darts through.

The van turns right onto the main road. A northbound car, slowing for the bend, brakes sharply to avoid a collision and blares its horn. The driver of the van pays this no heed as he accelerates through a skid, narrowly avoiding the boundary wall of the pub car park.

The girl does not pause at the edge of the road. She runs forward, into the path of the van. She turns towards it and raises her hands, as if commanding it to stop. There is probably just enough time for the driver to respond. But he does not. The van surges on. The girl holds her ground. In a breathless fraction of a second, the gap between them closes.

There is a loud thump as hard steel hits soft flesh. There is a blurred parabola through the air of the girl's frail,

flying body. There is the speeding white flank of the van and the slower-moving dark green roofline of the following car. Neither vehicle stops. The car driver proceeds as if he has seen nothing. And maybe he has somehow failed to register what has occurred. He does not have to swerve to avoid the crumpled shape at the side of the road. He simply carries on.

The van and the car vanish round the next bend in the road. All movement ceases. All sound dies.

It is only for a second. Soon everyone will be running. The boy will be crying. The woman will be screaming. The man who was drinking outside the Red Lion will be hopping over the wall of the car park, his eyes fixed on the place at the foot of the opposite verge where the girl lies, her blue and white dress stained bright red, the tarmac beneath her darkening as a pool of blood spreads across the road. And her eyes will seem to meet his. And to hold them in her sightless gaze.

But that is not yet. That is not this second. That is the future, a future forged in the stillness and the silence of this frozen moment.

It begins at Avebury. But it does not end there.

ONE

IT HAD BEEN a fickle winter in Prague. Yet another mild spell had been cut short by a plunge back into snow and ice. When David Umber had agreed to stand in as a Jolly Brolly tour guide for the following Friday, he had not reckoned on wind chill of well below zero, slippery pavements and slush-filled gutters. But those were the conditions. And Jolly Brolly never cancelled.

Umber's exit from the apartment block on Sokolovská that morning was accordingly far from eager. A lean, melancholy man in his late forties, his dark hair shot with grey, his eyes downcast, his brow furrowed with unconsoling thoughts, he turned up the collar of his coat and headed for the tram stop, glancing along the street to see if he needed to hurry.

He did not. There was no tram in sight, giving him a chance to examine the letter he had found in his mailbox on the way out. Deducing from the typeface visible through the envelope-window that it was in fact a bank statement, he thrust it back into his pocket unopened and pressed on to the tram stop.

God, it was cold. Not for the first time when such weather prevailed, he silently asked himself, 'What am I doing here?'

The answer, he knew, was best not dwelt upon. He had stayed on after the end of his teaching contract last summer because of Milena. But Milena had gone. And so had the temporary post he had found for the autumn term. He had a small circle of friends and acquaintances in Prague, happily including Ivana, Jolly Brolly coordinator and *entrepreneuse manquée*. But he also had plenty of

evidence to strengthen his sense of drift and purposelessness.

He stood at the stop, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to keep warm, or at least to avoid getting any colder. The heating in his apartment block was in dire need of an overhaul. That could in fact be said of pretty much everything in the block. He had moved there as a stopgap measure when his much more salubrious and ironically cheaper flat near Grand Priory Square had vanished under the waters of the Vltava during the cataclysmic flood of August 2002. He had been in England at the time, but virtually all his possessions had been in the flat. The flood had claimed those tangible reminders of his past, leaving a void in his sense of himself that the sixteen months since had failed to fill.

The red and white nose of a tram appeared through the murk. Those waiting at the stop shuffled forward, some of them taking last drags on their cigarettes before flicking the butts into the slush. Umber squinted towards the tram, struggling to read its route number. It was a 24. Well, that was something. If it had been an 8, he would have had to stand there for another bone-chilling few minutes.

The number 24 pulled up and the passengers piled aboard, Umber hopping onto the second car, where there were more vacant seats. He slumped down in one and closed his eyes for a restful few moments as the tram started away. As a result, he did not notice the short, barrel-chested man muffled up in parka, gloves, scarf and woolly-hat who jumped on just as the doors were closing. He had no cause to be on his guard, after all. A Prague tram at the back end of winter was hardly where he would have expected the past to creep up on him. He was not thinking about any of that.

But then he did not need to. David Umber's past was of an order that did not allow for genuine forgetting. It was not necessary to apply his mind to it consciously. It was

simply there, always, pulling him back, dragging him down. It would never leave him. All he could do was refine his tactics of evasion. And this, he knew but did not care to admit, was why he had stayed on in Prague. It was a refuge, a hiding-place. It was far from anywhere tainted by all that he did not wish to recall. But it was not, he was to discover before the day was out, far enough.

The tram trundled on through the streets, picking up more passengers than it shed, so that by the time it reached Wenceslas Square it was crammed. Umber got off with a mob of others and headed for the Wenceslas Monument in front of the National Museum. That was the appointed meeting-place for those hapless tourists who had decided to spend a thousand koruna on a six-hour walking tour of the city's principal attractions, with lunch thrown in, in the care of an old Prague hand replete with local lore. (Jolly Brolly never knowingly undersold itself.)

About a dozen tourists were waiting by the statue of Bohemia's patron saint. The cold weather had taken its toll on numbers, for which Umber was grateful. He would not have to shout to make himself heard by such a small group. They were the usual mix of ages and nationalities, clutching their polyglot of guidebooks. Ivana was in the process of unburdening them of their cash. She acknowledged Umber's arrival with a relieved smile.

'You're late,' she whispered as she handed him his staff of office - a rainbow-patterned umbrella.

'*Je mi líto,*' he replied, apologizing being one of the few aspects of Czech he had mastered. 'I overslept.'

Ivana's smile stiffened only slightly as she set about introducing him to his charges. A doctor of history, she called him, in order to forestall any complaints about his clearly not having been born and bred in Prague. It was not a technically valid description. Umber had never finished his doctorate. But, in another sense, which afforded him

some wry amusement, it *was* true. There would be a little doctoring of history before the tour was over. He could guarantee that.

There was one latecomer who settled up with Ivana after she had said her preliminary piece. Having failed to register the man's presence on the tram, Umber naturally made nothing of his last-minute arrival. Ivana wished them a good day and hustled off to the bank with the takings. She would soon be back in the warmth and relative comfort of the Jolly Brolly office. A phone call to Janoušek, proprietor of U Modré Merunky, where they were scheduled to stop for a 'typical delicious Czech lunch', and her duties would be concluded.

Lucky her, thought Umber, as he took a deep breath of cold Czech air and launched his commentary with some loosely framed thoughts on the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. It was a well-worn theme. He *was* a historian, after all, albeit not as well qualified as Ivana had implied. He was on autopilot before they had even reached the Monument to the Victims of Communism.

And on autopilot he remained as the tour proceeded. They reached Old Town Square in good time to see the Astronomical Clock's march-past of apostles when it struck the hour, crossed Charles Bridge, popped into and out of the Church of St Nicholas, then took the funicular railway (fare included in the price) up to Petrín Park. The snow was ankle-deep in the park, which slowed their progress, those inadequately clad and shod only now realizing what they had signed up for. Umber had allowed for this, however. Some deft abridgements during their visits to the Strahov Monastery and the Loreto had them at U Modré Merunky, halfway back down the hill to Prague Castle, more or less when Janoušek was expecting them.

The exact nature of the deal between Ivana and this less than glorious example of Czech innkeeping had never been

disclosed to Umber. It was certainly not predicated on the quality of the food. The roast pork was gristly, the red cabbage vinegary and the dumplings unyielding. But no-one complained. Those at Umber's table even praised the food. Perhaps they did not wish to hurt their host's feelings. Umber could have told them, but did not, that Janoušek did not actually have any feelings on the subject that *could* be hurt.

The latecomer to the tour, Umber's fellow-passenger from the number 24 tram, sat at a different table and said little to his companions. Removal of his woolly-hat revealed a bald head with a dusting of shaven white hair above his deeply lined brow, piercing blue eyes and hollow cheeks. He was a short, broad, bony man of sixty or seventy, whom nobody seemed eager to engage in small talk and who looked as if that suited him fine: he was nobody's fool, his bearing proclaimed, and nobody's favourite uncle either. His gaze appeared to be fixed throughout the meal on the back of David Umber's head. But of that David Umber was unaware.

Lunch over, but already repeating on some of them, the group slithered down to the Castle in time for the two o'clock Changing of the Guard. This was followed by a circuit of St Vitus's Cathedral before they made their way to the Royal Palace for Umber's account of the famous Defenestration of 1618 that sparked off the Thirty Years War. He was mildly worried at this stage by the chance that someone might ask him to explain the whys and wherefores of that long-ago conflict. But the moment passed with questionless ease. They made a gingerly descent of Old Castle Steps, crossed back over the river and entered the Jewish Quarter.

Three synagogues and one cemetery later, they returned to Old Town Square, where the tour ended at the birthplace of Franz Kafka. Umber cracked his customary joke about

hoping nobody had found the day too much of a trial. There were more smiles than laughs and a few expressions of thanks, extending in one case to a (very) modest tip. Then the group dispersed.

It was late afternoon now and growing colder. Umber hurried round to the Jolly Brolly nerve centre, two second-floor rooms about halfway between Old Town Square and the Prague branch of Tesco, where he planned to buy his dinner.

There was no sign of Ivana in the office. She had left it in the languid care of Marek, her youthful and, in Umber's view, useless assistant. Marek was sitting with his feet on the desk, smoking a Camel cigarette and texting a friend when Umber walked in. Marek nodded a greeting and slid a small, square manilla envelope across the desk. Umber pocketed the envelope, returned his umbrella to the stack in the corner and made to leave.

At which point he noticed that morning's edition of *Annonce* - the classifieds paper with the most comprehensive accommodation listings in Prague - lying discarded in the waste bin. He fished it out and glanced enquiringly at Marek.

'*Prosím,*' said Marek, with a sarcastic smirk.

Umber exited, checking the contents of the envelope as he descended the rickety stairs. All the money was there. But all, in this case, was not a lot.

Back on the street, solvent if scarcely flush, Umber decided that Tesco could wait. Jolly Brolly HQ's proximity to U Zlatého Tygra, the Old Town's most famous drinking establishment, verged on the unreasonable. At this hour he could be sure of a seat, which, after foot-slogging round the city all day, he needed almost as much as a beer.

U Zlatého Tygra - the Golden Tiger - was its normal soothing, smoky self. Umber settled himself at the table

screened by the pub's trophy cabinet, next to the window on which the eponymous tiger frolicked in stained-glass abandon. Half a litre of cellar-cooled Pilsner was swiftly delivered to him and his tab initiated with a slash of the server's pen. Umber took a deep gulp of beer, then unfolded *Annonce* and commenced a less than hopeful search for attractive and affordable alternatives to his present abode.

But his search never even reached the APARTMENTS TO RENT page. A bulky figure rounded the trophy cabinet at that moment and assumed a looming stance above him. Umber looked up and, to his surprise, recognized the newcomer, or at any rate recognized his outfit of maroon parka and matching woolly-hat. He was one of the tour party.

'Hello,' said Umber. 'What brings you here?'

'You do.' The man pulled off his hat and unwound his scarf, fixing Umber with a steely blue gaze.

It might have been the quality of the gaze that clinched it. Or it might have been the flat, faintly menacing tone of voice. Either way, recognition - *true* recognition - dawned now on Umber.

'I don't believe it,' he murmured. Which was true. He did not believe it.

'You'll have to,' the other man said. Which was also true. It was not a matter of choice. It never had been.

It had begun at Avebury. But it had not ended there.

TWO

'CHIEF INSPECTOR SHARP.' Even as he spoke the words, Umber realized that the man he knew as Detective Chief Inspector George Sharp of the Wiltshire Constabulary could by no stretch of the imagination still be a serving police officer, even though his appearance had not been much altered by the passage of years. He must have retired long since. 'Here on holiday?'

'Let's get one thing straight from the off.' Sharp discarded his parka and sat down. 'This isn't a chance meeting. I didn't sign up for that tour today and suddenly think, swipe me, isn't our guide that David Umber I remember from the Avebury case?'

'No?'

'I followed you from your flat this morning. I just didn't know I was going to have to wait this long for a word in private.'

'You call this private?'

Sharp glanced around. 'It'll do.' Then his gaze returned to Umber. 'And you can drop the "Chief Inspector". I was put out to grass years ago.'

'I suppose you must have been.'

At that moment Sharp's beer arrived. He eyed it suspiciously. 'Don't they ask what you want here?'

'It's taken for granted. Beer or nothing.'

Sharp took a gulp and grimaced. 'Not a patch on Bass.'

'What do you want ... Mr Sharp?' Umber tried to drain the snappiness out of his voice as he finished the question.

'What do you think I want?'

'After more than twenty years? Search me.'

'It's not that hard to work out.'

They looked at each other for several seconds in uncongenial silence. Then Umber said, 'I thought your people reckoned they had the truth when they put Brian Radd away.'

'My people? I'll give you that. But not *me*. I never swallowed Radd's story. Not for a second.'

'Didn't you?'

'Did you?'

More silence, blanking out for the pair the burble and bustle of the pub. Then Umber shook his head. 'Of course not.'

'There you are, then.'

'You still haven't told me why you're here. Or why you've been tailing me. There was no need for the gumshoe routine, anyway. You could just have called round. Or phoned me without leaving England.'

'I like to know what I'm dealing with.'

'And what are you dealing with?'

'Unfinished business.'

'For Christ's sake.' Umber was beginning to feel angry, now the shock of Sharp's appearance had faded. 'You're not serious, are you?'

'Why do you think I'm here?'

'Bored by retirement. Writing your memoirs. God knows.'

Sharp smiled. 'Memoirs. That's a good idea. One I've thought about, matter of fact.'

'Really?'

'I handled quite a few big cases over the years. Mostly with the Met, before I transferred to Wiltshire. I thought it'd be a quieter life down there. Didn't turn out to be, though.'

'Bad luck.'

'Wrong place, wrong time. Like you, I suppose.'

'Not *quite* like me.'

'No. Maybe not. But you know what I mean.'

'I still don't, actually.'

'I put a lot of evil people behind bars. There were a good few more I couldn't pin anything on, but *I* knew what they were guilty of. As far as murder goes, there wasn't one I didn't crack. Not one. Except ...'

'Avebury.'

'You said it.'

'Well, you'll just have to live with that, won't you? Like the rest of us.'

'Will I?'

Umber sat back as his by now empty glass was collected, letting slip the chance to decline a refill and take his leave. He looked at Sharp, steadily and disbelievingly. 'What are you on - a conscience trip?'

'Sort of. I should have got to the bottom of it. And I didn't. It may not be as hard to bear as the what-ifs and why-didn't-Is of those who were there at the time, of course, but—'

'What the hell do you mean by that?'

'Well, you must have said to yourself often enough over the years, "If I'd reacted faster, if I'd moved more quickly ... I might have saved the girl."' Sharp broke off as Umber's second beer arrived, then went on: 'Don't tell me you never have.'

'All right. I won't tell you.'

'She'd be thirty this year. If she'd lived.'

Umber raised a hand to his brow and closed his eyes for a second. 'Oh, Christ.'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.' Umber opened his eyes. 'Nothing at all.'

'Is that the sort of thing Sally used to say?'

There was another wordless interval. Umber swallowed some beer and looked towards the window. 'I don't have to listen to this.'

'I only realized you'd married her when I heard about her suicide. The change of surname. It was a surprise, I don't mind admitting. How did that happen - you and her getting together?'

'None of your business.'

'Orphans of the storm, I suppose. But maybe the storm never quite blew itself out.'

Umber looked back at him. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Put me right, then.'

'It wasn't—'

'Suicide? Not according to the coroner, no. But that's what it sounded like to me. And to you, I'll bet.'

This was too close to the bone - and to the truth. Umber stood up and grabbed his tab. He would pay at the bar and go. He would leave and have done with it. 'I've had enough,' he declared.

'I can make trouble for you, Mr Umber.'

That stopped Umber in his tracks. He looked down at Sharp. 'What did you say?'

'I can call in a few favours if I need to and have your affairs given close attention. Uncomfortably close. Your tax status springs to mind. Always a promising place to start where expats are concerned. Catch my drift?'

'You're bluffing.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. Why take the risk? All I'm asking you to do is to sit down and answer a few questions.' Sharp smiled thinly. 'Help me with my enquiries. As the saying goes.'

Umber hesitated. Why was Sharp so determined to put him through this? It was all so pointless, so pitifully late in the day. He remembered Sharp as a bluff, no-nonsense policeman. There had been no hint of obsession. What *was* he trying to achieve?

'Sit down.'

With a sigh, Umber obeyed. 'I could do without going over it all again,' he said, almost to himself. 'I really could.'

'So could I.'

'Then spare us both.'

'Not in a position to, I'm afraid.'

'Why not?'

'All in good time. Besides, I'm not convinced you don't know why.'

'You're making no sense ... Mr Sharp.'

'All right. Let's stick for the moment to the facts. Those we can agree on. Let's just ... run through a few of them.'

'Must we?'

It was unclear if Sharp had even heard the question. 'Avebury: Monday, twenty-seventh July, 1981,' he said, Umber's heart sinking at the implacable declaration of place and date. 'Two days before the Royal Wedding, incidentally, which denied us a lot of valuable publicity in the early stages of the inquiry. Anyway, that's the where and when. Sally Wilkinson, nanny to the Hall family, takes the Halls' three children - Jeremy, aged ten, Miranda, seven, and Tamsin, two - to Avebury for fresh air and exercise. Also because Jeremy's been badgering her to go on account of a school project that sparked his interest in stone circles. They walk around. They look at the stones. Everything's very normal, very peaceful. But there's a white van parked in Green Street. A man gets out of the van, grabs little Tamsin while Sally's back is turned and drives off with her. Or is driven. We'll come back to that point later.'

'You're not telling me anything I don't already know,' Umber pointed out wearily.

'Tamsin's sister runs into the road, presumably to try and stop the van,' Sharp pressed on. 'She is struck. And killed. Outright.' He paused, as if encouraging Umber to interrupt again. But there was no interruption. 'Witnesses,' he continued. 'Other than Sally and Jeremy, we have three.'

Percy Nevinson, a local man with a comprehensive knowledge of the circle. Not exactly level-headed, though. Tells me he's working on a theory that Martians built Avebury - and Silbury Hill. That puts him in the nutter category in my book. Then there's Donald Collingwood, who drives through the village as all this is happening, but doesn't stop and only comes forward three weeks later. Explains he was afraid of losing his licence on account of his dodgy eyesight. As a result of said eyesight, he isn't too sure what he saw or where the van went. Finally, there's—'

'Me.'

'That's right. David UMBER. Sitting outside the Red Lion. With a ringside view of the whole thing.'

'I told you everything I knew at the time. Every single thing I could remember.'

'Which didn't amount to much. And the same goes for the rest. Confusion is the top and tail of it. No registration number for the van. No decent description of the abductor. No nothing. Result: one dead girl; one missing girl; one traumatized boy; one guilt-ridden nanny; a devastated family; a hamstrung inquiry; an unsolved murder. Maybe two unsolved murders. What happened to Tamsin ... we have no idea.'

'*You* have no idea. Officially, it's down to Radd. That's still so, isn't it?'

'It's a grey area. He was never formally charged. But he did confess. The whole thing had a ... desk-clearing feel about it to me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nine years after the event, and only a few months after I've taken early retirement, Brian Radd, child murderer, suddenly adds Tamsin Hall to his admitted list of victims just before he goes into court certain of a life sentence. Says he drove her off, did God knows what to her, then strangled her and buried the body in Savernake Forest. Can't remember, even vaguely, which part of the forest, so

a search is out of the question. They'd have found bugger all after nine years anyway. Radd's from Reading, so it's a Thames Valley case, but Hollins, my successor in Wiltshire - a by-the-book time-server if ever there was one - goes with the flow and puts out a statement saying they're not looking for anyone else in connection with the crime. I smell a rat. Radd's confession gets the murder *and* the abduction off the books. Nobody cares whether it would stand up in court - whether it's *true*.'

'Sally cared.'

'Were you married by then?'

'No. Together. But not married. That came later.' Later as in too late, Umber thought but did not say. The marriage had been an attempt to deny that their relationship was falling apart. Its disintegration would have been easier to accept if the reason had been something banal like infidelity or incompatibility. But no. The reason was Avebury, 27 July 1981. That was always the reason. 'The police signing up to Radd's version of events really got to her, you know. She saw the bloke who grabbed Tamsin bundle her into the back of the van and climb in after her. Then the van took off. But Radd claimed to have been alone. No accomplice. Therefore Sally must have been mistaken. She'd been blamed for not taking better care of Tamsin. Now she was being told her account of what happened wasn't credible. She never got over that.'

'It would have been different if I'd still been on the Force.'

'Pity you didn't tell her so.'

Sharp scowled into his beer. 'My old Chief Super asked me not to rock the boat.'

'And you were a loyal cop, even in retirement.'

'I should have contacted Sally and assured her I still believed her.'

'Yes. You should.'

'Is that what made you do it?'

Umber was wrong-footed by the question. He had seemed to have Sharp on the defensive. It had not lasted long. 'Do what?'

Sharp stared at him long and hard. The server replaced their empty glasses with full ones. Sharp held the stare.

'What are you talking about?' pressed Umber.

'Remind me why you were at Avebury that day.'

'For God's sake.'

'Remind me.'

Umber sighed. 'All right. Here we go again. I was one year into a Ph.D at Oxford, studying the letters of Junius. I was spending the summer with my parents in Yeovil. I got a call from a man called Griffin, who said he was up in Oxford, had heard about my research and had something to show me which he thought would be helpful. We agreed to meet in the pub at Avebury that lunchtime. It's as simple as that. Though, as I recall, you never accepted the explanation at face value.'

'I kept my notebooks from the investigation. Took a look through them before I came out here. You're right. There were a lot of question marks in the sections relating to you. And question marks mean doubts.'

'Because Griffin never showed up? Well, you had road blocks up within half an hour. He must have got caught up in the traffic jam and ... decided to turn round and go back to Oxford.'

'Plausible enough. But then why didn't he contact you again?'

Umber shrugged. 'I haven't a clue.'

'You had no phone number for him? No address?'

'He was ... cagey. I assumed I'd get the details when we met.'

'How had he heard about your research?'

'He didn't say.'

'And you didn't ask?'

'I was more interested in what he was offering to show me.'

'Which was?'

'You already know. It's in your notebook, isn't it? All this stuff must be.'

'Junius was the pen name of the author of a series of anonymous letters to the press in the mid-eighteenth century blowing the lid on the politics of the day. A mole, I guess we'd call him now. Correct?'

'Yes. More or less.'

'What made him such a big deal?'

'For three years, from 1769 to 1772, he savaged the conduct of government ministers in the letters page of the *Public Advertiser* and succeeded in hounding the Duke of Grafton into resigning the premiership. The reading public lapped it up. Especially since he was clearly either a government insider or someone with access to extremely accurate inside information. But he was never unmasked. The mystery of his identity added to his appeal. And he quit while he was ahead. So, a fascinating figure.'

'What exactly were you researching about him?'

'His identity. The classic unanswered question. Recent historical opinion favours Philip Francis, a senior clerk in the War Office, as the culprit. I was aiming to put that theory to the test.'

'And did you?'

'I never finished.'

'Why not?'

Umber stared Sharp down. 'Something else cropped up.'

'Was it you or the mysterious Mr Griffin who suggested meeting at Avebury?'

'Griffin. But, Avebury being about halfway between Yeovil and Oxford—'

'It's a good bit closer to Oxford.'

'Is it? Well, he was the one doing me the favour. I wasn't going to quibble.'

'And the favour was?'

'After Junius gave up his letter-writing campaign, Henry Sampson Woodfall, the proprietor of the *Public Advertiser*, published a two-volume collected edition of the letters. He and Junius were in secret communication and Junius asked for a special vellum-bound, gilt-edged copy to be sent to him, which Woodfall duly arranged. It's never been seen since. If found, its provenance would obviously be a pointer to Junius's identity. Well, that's what Griffin claimed he had and was willing to show me: the specially bound copy, with, he said, a revealing inscription inside. It sounded too good to be true, but I wasn't about to pass up the chance, was I?'

'If Griffin had this ... unique copy, why didn't he ... put it up for auction or something?'

'He didn't say.'

'Why involve you, a ...'

'Piddling research student?'

'You said it.'

'I don't know. He promised all would become clear when we met. But we never did.'

'Could it have been a hoax? Some fellow student of yours pulling your leg?'

'I don't think so.'

'Then what *do* you think it was all about?'

'I don't know.'

'Did you try to track Griffin down when you went back to Oxford?'

'I asked around, but nobody had heard of him. After what had happened at Avebury, though, it seemed so ... trivial. I mean, Junius, who really gives a damn? I suppose that was one of the reasons why I gave up on the Ph.D.'

'And the other reasons?'

'They were mostly to do with Sally.'

'I was told she went abroad after the inquest.'

'So she did.'

'You went with her?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry ... about her death.'

'Me too.'

'Was it suicide?'

'How would I know? We'd separated by then.'

'But what do you think?'

Umber took a deep swallow of beer and stared at Sharp.
'Same as you.'

Sharp cleared his throat. 'According to my notes, I considered the possibility that you'd made the Griffin story up to explain your presence at Avebury.'

'And did you consider *why* I'd have wanted to be there?'

'Of course.'

'With what result?'

'I never figured it out.'

'That's because there was nothing to figure out.'

'It seems not.'

'Is that definite, then? You no longer think I might have been lying?'

'I'll go one better. I don't think you're lying now either. I just can't decide whether that's good news or bad.'

'What the hell does that mean?'

'It means you're wrong about Junius, Mr Umber. Somebody does give a damn.'

Umber grimaced in bewilderment. Perhaps he had drunk too much. Perhaps Sharp had. What in God's name was the man driving at?

'I had a letter a few weeks ago, basically telling me I cocked up the Avebury inquiry and should do something about it. Anonymous, naturally.'

'Did you think I sent it? Is that why you came all this way to see me?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you've had a wasted journey, then, haven't you?'

'I don't see it that way. You have to understand. You were the obvious suspect.'