

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Equinox

Michael White

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About the Book

Oxford, 2006: a young woman is found brutally murdered, her throat cut. Her heart has been removed and in its place lies an apparently ancient gold coin. Twenty-four hours later, another woman is found. The MO is identical, except that this time her brain has been removed, and a silver coin lies glittering in the bowl of her skull.

The police are baffled but when police photographer Philip Bainbridge and his estranged lover Laura Niven become involved, they discover that these horrific, ritualistic murders are not confined to the here and now. And a shocking story begins to emerge which intertwines Sir Isaac Newton, one of seventeenth-century England's most powerful figures, with a deadly conspiracy which echoes down the years to the present day, as lethal now as it was then.

Before long those closest to Laura are in danger, and she finds herself the one person who can rewrite history; the only person who can stop the killer from striking again ...

About the Author

Michael White has been a professional musician, a science lecturer, a newspaper columnist, science editor for *GQ* magazine and a series consultant for the Discovery Channel's *The Science of the Impossible*.

First published in 1991, he is now the author of 25 books including the international best-sellers *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science*, *Leonardo: The First Scientist* and *Tolkien: A Biography*.

He was awarded the Bookman Prize in the US for best popular science book of 1998 for his biography of Isaac Newton, *The Last Sorcerer*. In 2002, he was short-listed for the prestigious Aventis Award for *Rivals*, and his book *The Fruits of War* made the long-list in 2006.

An Honorary Research Fellow at Curtin University, he lives in Perth, Australia with his wife and four children. This is his first novel.

For more information visit Michael White's website at: michaelwhite.com.au

ALSO BY MICHAEL WHITE

Non-Fiction

A Teaspoon and an Open Mind:
The Science of Doctor Who
C.S. Lewis: The Boy Who Chronicled Narnia
The Fruits of War
A History of the 21st Century (with Gentry Lee)
The Pope and the Heretic
Tolkien: A Biography
Rivals
Leonardo: The First Scientist
Super Science
Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer
Life Out There
The Science of the X-Files
Asimov: The Unauthorised Biography
Breakthrough (with Kevin Davies)
Darwin: A Life in Science (with John Gribbin)
Einstein: A Life in Science (with John Gribbin)
Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science (with John Gribbin)

For Children and Young Readers

Alien Life Forms
Mind and Matter
Newton
Galileo
John Lennon
Mozart

Memoir

Thompson Twin: An '80s Memoir (Time Warner, 2000)

Equinox

Michael White



arrow books

For the guys: Lisa, India, George, Noah and Finn

Prologue

Oxford: 20 March, 7.36 p.m.

HE CUTS THE fuel line to the girl's car while she enjoys an early dinner at her friend's house, and then watches the petrol spatter onto the tarmac and run down the hill away from the car, the residue evaporating slowly.

Minutes later he sees her emerge from the house and he follows the car for a quarter of a mile into the country, observing silently as she pulls the dying vehicle to the side of the road.

Flicking off the lights and turning his ignition key to 'off', he allows his own car to glide to a quiet halt fifty yards along the lane behind her. He listens as the girl tries in vain to fire up the parched engine.

He steps out of his car and walks slowly along the lane, keeping out of the moonlight and staying in the tessellated shadows.

She is a mere silhouette, as the lemon lunar radiance spills across the car roof and lights up the branches of trees and the leaves overhead.

The plastic covers over his shoes squelch against the soft turf. He can hear his own steady breathing, which hits the inside of the plastic visor covering his face. He quickens his pace.

The girl stops turning her ignition key and looks around her through the windows, but she doesn't see him in the deep shadows as he walks towards her car.

He sees her pick up her mobile phone from somewhere on the passenger seat. Two more paces and he is at the door. Opening it, he thrusts inside, scalpel first.

The girl screams and her fingers loosen on the phone, letting it slide down her front and onto the floor of the car. In one seamless movement he leans in close and raises his arm. She cannot see his face, obscured as it is by perspex.

The girl starts shaking involuntarily, her mouth open, speechless with terror. As she is about to scream her attacker's free hand comes down hard over her mouth. His face is only a few inches away from hers now – she can see through the visor that his black pupils are huge.

Her pain starts as a pinprick, but in an instant it swells into her chest. In disbelief, she feels liquid spill out of her, soaking her blouse. The metal of the blade feels like it is rearing up inside her neck, pushing on to pierce her brain.

She shudders and a roar comes from her throat. It hits dead air and is swallowed up.

The next thing that flies from her mouth is a stream of blood. Arterial spray flies over the front seat and hits the windscreen.

Seconds later she is dead.

Chapter 1

LAURA NIVEN WAS led to the door of the Bodleian Library by her old friend, the Chief Librarian, James Lightman. They had been seeing a lot of each other during the past three weeks – her first visit to Oxford in four years. They descended down the steps leading to the street. Laura kissed Lightman on the cheek and he held her at arm's length, considering her. She was tall and slender, dressed in a wide-lapelled crimson jacket, faded blue jeans and suede loafers, her blonde hair done up in a loose bun.

The Chief Librarian shook his head slowly and appreciatively. 'It's been wonderful seeing you again, my dear,' he said. 'Please don't wait so long for the next visit, will you?' His croak of a voice was almost a whisper.

Laura smiled at him, studying the wrinkled, benign face. Lightman looked for all the world like an ageing tortoise, his shell the Bodleian, home to the most magnificent collection of books in the world. She placed a hand on his shoulder before turning and continuing on down the steps. At the bottom she stopped and looked back, but the old man had gone.

Laura loved this city and felt a twinge in her abdomen at the thought that she would soon be heading home. Oxford had seeped into her blood when she had been here as a student more than twenty years earlier. It had become part of her, just as in her own tiny way she had become part of it, part of that vast, complex human tapestry that was the history of the city.

She turned along Broad Street, strode past the Sheldonian and started to cross over. But she hadn't looked each way: a young woman in subfusc pedalling an ancient

black Hercules bike almost ran her over. The cyclist swerved at the last moment, ringing her bell furiously. Laura, feeling strangely exhilarated, watched her wend her way towards St Giles. Twenty years ago that would have been her, deliberately intimidating American tourists.

Perhaps, she thought, she was pining for her youth. But it wasn't just her own personal story, her part in the tapestry that made her love this place. It was ... what? What was it that she loved? She couldn't define it: it was one of those indescribable human feelings, as mysterious as honour, altruism, sentimentality.

When she'd been here as a student Laura had written long letters to her friends in Illinois and South Carolina and to those at home in California about what she had learned. She had boasted about the place because she'd felt that she had become a part of it. To Laura, Oxford was a city of dreams, a super-real place that lavished unmatched riches upon strangers and breathed fresh air into one's lungs. It was, she thought as she crossed St Giles on her way to the restaurant where she was expected at eight-thirty, quite simply a place that made life worthwhile.

Philip Bainbridge's image of Oxford at the same moment was altogether different. He had come into the city from his house in the village of Woodstock about fifteen miles beyond the old city walls to pick up his daughter Jo from her room at St John's College on St Giles. During the drive in he had seen only the worst aspects of the city. He had been cut up on the dual carriageway by a rusty Rover 216 containing three hyperactive youths from the local estate, Blackbird Leys, a sprawling ghetto only a few miles from the dreaming spires. Then, at a traffic light, he'd been verbally abused by the driver of a Mini Metro who had accused Philip of cutting *him* up on the slip road off the main route into the city. A few moments later, a drunk had stepped out onto Banbury Road directly in front of his car

as he'd pulled away from another set of traffic lights – and it was not yet half past eight in the evening.

But Philip was used to it. He loved this city, warts and all, and had been in love with it since he had come up to read philosophy, politics and economics – PPE – at Balliol in 1980. Now, more than a quarter of a century later, he could never imagine living anywhere else in the world, claiming completely seriously that if Oxford had a Mediterranean climate, it would be a city called Complete Paradise and he could spend eternity there.

And this from a man who spent a great deal of his time contemplating – or rather, being forced to contemplate – the seamier side of the ancient city. He had been a freelance photographer for years, and now he earned most of his income with the Thames Valley police force working as a crime-scene police photographer. During his time in this job he had seen oceans of blood and had witnessed the outer limits of pain. Because of this, he knew that at its heart, in its human soul, Oxford was just the same as South Central LA or the East End of London. He still loved the place but he knew that, like all places in the mortal world, anything divine about Oxford was tainted with the blood and grey matter of many a corpse. That, he understood, was simply the way of the world, be it Venice Beach, Eighth Avenue or The High on an English summer's evening.

Parking on St Giles, he ran over to the porter's lodge of St John's where Jo was waiting for him. She looked incredibly beautiful, an Arthur Rackham painting in faded denim and a Ralph Lauren leather jacket. Her russet hair cascaded in tight natural curls to her shoulders. She had burned-wood eyes, pale skin, high cheekbones and full lips.

'Sorry I'm late.'

'Dad, I know you by now,' Jo replied, with a grin. Her voice was slightly husky – it could shatter the defences of any man who had managed to resist her looks.

Philip shrugged and offered her his arm. 'Good. So, are we ready for din-dins with mother?'

'Indeed we are,' she replied with a small laugh.

They headed down St Giles.

'So, tell me. You missing New York?' Philip asked.

'Not yet.'

'You never talk much about your old life.'

'Not much to say, I guess. And dad, "old life" sounds weird. I've only been here, what? Six months?'

'Feels like a lifetime.'

'Gee, thanks!' Jo turned to Philip with her mouth open.

'I'd close that if I were you.'

Jo shook her head and huffed. 'No, it's good here. It felt a little, I dunno, a little claustrophobic in Greenwich Village. Cool place, but you know, apartment-too-small-for-suddenly-famous-author-mother-and-teenage-daughter syndrome.'

'Yes, quite a common social disease in one form or another. Glad I don't have to deal with it - one of the perks of being a committed bachelor, I suppose.'

Jo gave him a sceptical look. 'You reckon? Can't outweigh the disadvantages, though, can it? I've told you before, one of my missions before leaving these hallowed halls is to hitch you to a good woman. Someone who'll look after you.'

'Oh, please. You think I need fattening up?' Philip patted his slight paunch.

They crossed the road and walked past the old Quaker Meeting House. The pavement was narrow: rows of metal railings to the left, road to the right. Old bicycles lined the pavement, padlocked to the railings. Along the way, a ragged busker who had made this patch his own juggled oranges ineptly. 'Spareanychange?' he slurred hopefully as they passed.

Ahead of them, twenty yards off, they could see Laura waiting for them outside Brown's Restaurant.

Their plates had been cleared and the waitress had topped up their wineglasses. Laura considered the dessert menu sceptically and took a sip of her wine. They were seated close to the kitchen doors and as staff charged in and out they caught glimpses of the controlled chaos that lay beyond. The smell of cigarette smoke wafted over from the smoking area, and the conversation of a hundred or so diners created a haze of human voices that interwove with barely audible acid jazz spilling from the sound system.

'We're going to miss you, Laura,' Philip said over the rim of his wineglass, and looked first at her then to their daughter.

Laura's time in Oxford had flashed past and she was due to fly back to New York the next morning. Although she was looking forward to seeing her neat and spacious apartment in Greenwich Village again, another part of her was drawing her in, grounding her here. She would miss Oxford too, and the two people who meant most to her in the world: Philip and Jo.

'Oh, I'm sure I'll be back again soon,' Laura replied, tucking some blonde strands of hair behind her right ear. 'I'll have to keep a check on this one for a start.' She glanced at Jo.

'Yeah, sure - like I need looking after.' Jo gave her mother a rueful look.

'Well, here's to a safe journey,' Philip said and raised his glass. Jo echoed the sentiment, but was easing out of her chair and looking at her watch. 'Hey, mom, I'm real sorry, but I have to split. I was supposed to meet Tom ten minutes ago.'

'That's cool,' Laura replied. 'You run along. Say "hi" to lover boy for me.'

Jo kissed Philip on the cheek. 'I'll see you in the morning, just to check you have your ticket and passport,' she said, turning back to Laura with a wry grin. Then she

negotiated a twisting path between the closely packed tables.

At the exit Jo waved goodbye. Gazing across the restaurant, Laura recalled the many times she had sat here in Brown's. It had been a regular haunt during her student days, the venue for her first date with Philip and the place where she had broken the news that she was pregnant with Jo. She loved the never-changing decor – the cream walls and the old mirrors, polished oak floors and enormous palms. Looking across the room she could almost see her younger self at an adjacent table, and a fresh-faced Philip gazing back at her.

'So, has your trip been worth it?' Philip asked. 'Did you find what you were looking for?'

Laura took another sip of wine, placed the glass down and began to play with the stem. 'Yes and no,' she sighed. 'Well, actually, no, to be honest. I feel I've got stuck up a blind alley.'

'Oh?'

'Well, you know, it happens.'

'Does this mean you've wasted your time?'

'No,' she said emphatically. 'Just that I'll have to work harder.' Laura paused before going on. 'Well, in fact it's not been good. I think I'll ditch the idea.'

Philip looked startled. 'But it sounded so promising.'

'Yeah, but that's what writing is like. You think something's going to work and sometimes it does. Other times it definitely doesn't.'

After years as a struggling journalist in New York and writing half a dozen novels in her spare time, watching each of them flounder and sink, Laura had suddenly pushed all the right buttons a year earlier. *Restitution* was a historical crime thriller set in seventeenth-century New Amsterdam. The *New York Times* had called it 'scintillating'. It had garnered the White Rose Fiction Award and had sold enough to allow Laura to finally quit

the day job. The media had taken to her immediately, promoting her on her looks and her career as a journalist who had specialised in covering the grisliest crimes in New York City. Seizing her chance, Laura had launched herself into the next project, a novel set in fourteenth-century Oxford in which the real-life theologian and mathematician Thomas Bradwardine was the central character in a complex plot to murder the king of the day, Edward II.

‘So what about the mysterious monk, Bradwardine?’

‘Oh, I’m still interested in him. He was never a monk, by the way, Philip.’ Laura smiled. ‘It’s just that I’ve come to realise that he could never have been involved in a plot to kill the king. He just wasn’t the type. He was a deeply religious man who was the greatest mathematician of his time and went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury, but he was no Rambo. Anyway, it’s OK, I hadn’t gone that far with the idea. Besides, there are plenty of other stories; they’re all out there in the ether ready to be grabbed. And I even think that Bradwardine may come back on the radar one day – I’m just storing it all away.’

‘Sounds like something I would say,’ Philip retorted.

‘Yeah, well, perhaps I’ve been too harsh on your odd little personality traits all these years.’ Laura leaned back in her chair and took a sip of her wine. As Philip looked away to attract the attention of a waiter, she caught a glimpse of his profile and was struck by the fact that more than twenty years had passed since they’d first met. In that time Philip had hardly changed. Of course, there were now quite a few grey hairs among the unruly mop of dark curls, and his face was podgier, his eyes more tired. But he still had the same confident, world-weary smile that she had found so attractive when he was twenty-two, the same devastating brown eyes.

She had thought so much about him when she was the other side of the world. She had been away so long it almost seemed impossible that they could be sitting here

together in this crowded restaurant with the rain splashing against the windows and the massicot glow of the street lights outside.

Seeing Philip now, Laura knew why she had fallen for him in the first place, why she had given herself to him in a way she had never done before or since. For a second, she could not believe that she had walked away from it all.

‘Coffee?’

She looked at him blankly.

‘Hello! Coffee?’

The waiter was beside the table and Philip was waving a hand in front of her.

‘Oh, yeah, ahem ... sorry. I’ll have a decaf latté ... thanks.’

‘You were miles away. In the land of Bradwardine and the Plantagenets?’

‘I guess,’ she lied.

‘So, what’re you going to do?’ Philip asked as the waiter walked away.

‘Don’t really know right this minute. I’m sure I’ll think of something.’ Laura was being deliberately evasive and Philip knew it. He was about to move the conversation on when his mobile rang. ‘Philip Bainbridge,’ he said. ‘Yes ... Yes.’ He sounded uncharacteristically curt on the phone, Laura thought. ‘OK, I’m only a mile or two away. I could be there in – what? – fifteen minutes ... yes? OK.’ He flipped the phone shut.

‘Problem?’

‘No, just a nuisance. That was the station. They want me to take some pictures, an incident near The Perch. They wouldn’t tell me anything more. Sorry, we’d better get the bill.’

Chapter 2

PHILIP DIDN'T HAVE time to drop Laura at his place first. It was freezing in his thirty-year-old MGB and Laura was relieved when she saw the blue lights ahead. They pulled off the road and across a stretch of muddy verge before stopping ten yards from a brightly lit white box-tent about fifteen feet square that marked the location of the crime scene.

Philip killed the engine and Laura looked through the dirty windscreen, as a figure in a white suit with FORENSICS stencilled on the back in green walked past the side of the car towards the tent.

'Laura, you'll have to stay here, I'm afraid. Police personnel only.' Philip got out, went around to the boot, pulled out a sturdy leather bag containing his camera equipment and slung it over his shoulder. He rummaged through the bag as he walked back to the door of the MGB. Fiddling with the lens of his Nikon digital he bent down to the window. 'You'll be OK?' he asked. 'I don't suppose it will be very pleasant in there, anyway.' And before she could answer, he had turned away.

Laura sat in the car for a few minutes but then curiosity got the better of her. She stepped out onto the mud and made for the flap of the tent. There was no one around to stop her. She would just take a peek, she told herself.

Pulling aside the plastic sheet just a crack she looked inside but all she could see were the backs of two police officers and the Forensics guy crouching down and placing something unidentifiable in a clear plastic wallet with a pair of tweezers. Behind him was a small red car, the doors open, mud splattered up the panels.

Closing the flap, Laura tiptoed around the edge of the tent. She crouched down and put her eye to a gap in the plastic. The car was only a few feet away and she had a clear view straight through the open offside door.

The body of a young woman was slumped on the back seat. Her arms and legs were splayed, her head pushed back, eyes open, staring, sightless, at the inside of the car roof. She was wearing a simple top and skirt, both blood-soaked. Her flesh was an intense white as though all the blood had been drained from her and her skin seemed to be bleached further by the powerful floodlights inside the tent. The interior of the car was smeared with blood; arterial spray had splashed across the windows and over the cream dash.

The girl looked very young, about Jo's age. She had once been very pretty: her long blonde hair cascaded across the back of the seat, but it was also matted with blood and had stuck to her shoulders in clumps. There was a deep red trough that stretched from ear to ear across her neck and another extending from her throat to her navel. Her ribcage had been opened up and the bones had been snapped back.

Laura stood up. For a long time now she'd believed that she had seen enough crime scenes for nothing ever to affect her, but suddenly she felt a wave of nausea sweep over her and thought she was going to throw up. She took great gulps of air and gradually the sensation ebbed away. She was about to make a dash for the MGB when she heard a voice beside her. 'Good evening.'

She whirled round and saw a young policeman staring at her. She must have looked a mess, she thought incongruously. Her skin felt cold and she knew that the blood had drained from her face. Beads of sweat had broken out on her forehead.

'I, er ...'

‘Come this way, please.’ The policeman took her by the arm.

Just inside the tent, he called to a plain-clothes officer standing close by. Laura was transfixed by the view she now had into the car a few yards away.

‘Well, hello.’ The officer looked her up and down. ‘And what brings you out on a nasty cold night like this?’

She was about to respond when Philip looked over, lowered his camera and sighed heavily. ‘Shit,’ she heard him mutter.

‘Inspector Monroe,’ Philip made sure he did not catch Laura’s eye. ‘This is a friend of mine, Laura Niven.’

John Monroe was a tall, broad-shouldered beefy man wearing an ill-fitting brown suit and an off-mustard tie that had seen better days. In his early forties, he was bald except for patches of dark hair shaved to a mere stubble either side of his head. He had once been a promising sprinter but had let himself get out of shape. He had a large head sitting on a thick short neck. His most remarkable feature, and something that gave him the merest hint of physical attractiveness, was a pair of large black eyes that suggested both intelligence and grit but no hint of softness or humour. ‘Ah, a friend, Mr Bainbridge.’ Monroe’s voice was a classic baritone darkened with habitual sarcasm.

‘Yes, and I apologise. I asked—’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Philip,’ Laura snapped suddenly. ‘I *can* speak, you know, and I’m not a child.’ She turned to Monroe who for a second looked a little startled. ‘Officer ...’

‘Detective Chief Inspector ...’

‘Detective Chief Inspector ... Monroe? I’m sorry. Philip told me to stay put. I was ...’

‘Curious?’

‘Yes, I guess I was ...’

‘You realise now, of course, Ms Niven, that this is a murder scene, and a particularly nasty one at that.’

Members of the public—'

'Detective Chief Inspector, I can vouch for Laura,' Philip persisted. 'I think she knows she shouldn't have, but—'

He was cut short as a white-suited figure near the car called over. 'Chief Inspector? I think you should see this.'

Monroe spun round and took two paces towards the car. Philip glared at Laura and was about to say something when, to his disgust, she strode after Monroe.

'It was just inside the wound,' the Forensics officer said. Between his gloved thumb and index finger he held up a coin daubed with blood.

Monroe took it in his gloved hand and held it up to the light. Laura managed to get a good look at it before Monroe scowled at her and she took a step back. It was the size of a quarter, and the side facing them depicted a beautifully crafted scene with five naked female figures holding a bowl aloft.

'It looks to me like solid gold,' the Forensics officer said. 'But I'll have to confirm that back at the lab.' Monroe placed the coin gingerly into a plastic bag held open for him. Then, turning, he saw Laura only a few feet away. He gave Philip a sour look.

'Mr Bainbridge,' he said and ran a finger between his shirt collar and the skin of his neck. 'If you have finished here, would you be so kind as to escort your lady friend back to your car, and go home?'

'Well, good night to you too, Detective Chef Inspector,' Laura retorted as Monroe turned on his heel. 'Nice meeting you.'

Chapter 3

‘WHAT THE BLOODY hell do you think you were doing?’ Philip yelled. He was more angry than she could ever remember him being. ‘This is my job, Laura. Stunts like that could get me fired.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Philip, calm down. I was just peeking through the tent flap. That cop made things far worse by bringing me inside, didn’t he?’

Philip turned to look at her for a moment before glaring back at the road. ‘You know, sometimes ...’

‘What?’

‘A crime scene isn’t open to the public unless the police say it is. You damn well know that, Laura.’

‘OK, OK. I’m sorry. I would have apologised – I didn’t get a chance.’

‘You’re lucky that Monroe was preoccupied.’

They fell silent for a moment.

‘So, what do you make of it?’

‘I’m not at liberty to talk about it, Laura.’

‘Oh, come on, Philip – it’s me, remember?’

He stared at the road and Laura could see the tension in his jawline.

‘So that’s it, ha? You’re clamming up on me, just because I broke the rules?’

He continued to ignore her.

‘Typical,’ she huffed.

Suddenly Philip hit the brake and pulled the car off the road onto the verge. Leaving the engine to idle, he turned in his seat to face Laura.

‘Look,’ he said, unable to keep the anger from his voice. ‘Laura, as much as I love you, sometimes you can be the

most annoying, arrogant bitch.'

She made to protest.

'No, you listen to me for once.' Philip raised his voice a notch. 'This is my life here. You can swan off to New York tomorrow and get back to your books and your own private little world. I have to work with these people several days a week. It's my bread and butter. But you know, you never were big on respect, were you?'

'What?' Laura snapped.

'You've always done just what you pleased. You've come and gone as you liked.' He stopped, suddenly regretting that he had said so much and knowing that a part of his anger had nothing to do with Laura's performance this evening and a lot to do with the past. There was a long silence.

'I don't really think that's fair,' Laura said finally. 'You make it sound like a one-way street, Philip. If you're talking about Jo, about what we've chosen to do, you were every bit as involved in those decisions.'

'Was I?' Philip replied, his voice a little calmer. 'Was I really? Would you have stayed in England with her if I had asked you to? I don't think so.'

Laura didn't know how to respond. They had been kids, it was as simple as that. She had come from a broken home – her parents divorced, Jane, her B-movie actress mother, then living post-rehab in a commune in San Luis Obispo, her father a top-notch lawyer in LA. Laura had won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford to read history of art at Magdalen. She had been ambitious, a high-flyer.

Then she had fallen pregnant: morning sickness just before her Finals. While the others had been swigging champagne from the bottle after the last exam, she had gone back to her room to cry and vomit some more. Her parents had come over for Laura's graduation and she had managed to tell her mother. Jane Niven had taken it stoically and had never tried to push her daughter in any

one direction. She had struggled with her own demons for years and a daughter pregnant at twenty-one was no big deal. Laura wondered now if it would have been better if she had been guided into a decision.

Philip had tried to be grown-up about it, but he had been little more than a child himself. He had graduated a year earlier, but he was living in digs, scratching a living photographing weddings and babies and dreaming of his own exhibitions that in reality lay more than a decade ahead. He was broke, immature and had no idea what to do. After the birth, Laura had contemplated staying in England and getting a job somewhere. Maybe she and Philip could have worked something out, shared their lives, but something had told her that it couldn't possibly succeed. Before their baby daughter was six months old Laura had taken the decision to move back to America with her.

Laura and Philip had remained friends, though, and Philip had come over to the States whenever he could. When Laura landed a job at the *New York Post* as a crime reporter she began to earn a little, and she was able to make a few trips over to England with Jo. Three years later she had married. Her husband, Rod Newcombe, had been a determined and ambitious documentary-maker and they had forged great plans to work together on a true-life crime series. Rod had been good for Jo, who had grown to adore him, and for a short time it was happy families. But then, in 1994, Rod had headed for Rwanda and had come home in a body bag. Jo had been seven and could not understand what had happened to her stepfather, and how all that remained of him now was an image on a videotape.

It had also come at a crucial time for Laura. She had just moved into crime reporting and hadn't yet learned to cope with the squalor and the agonies that she was forced to witness each day. After being sent to cover a murder in which a prostitute had bitten off a customer's penis before

shooting herself in the face, Laura had resorted to antidepressants and weekly therapy sessions.

That phase had passed and Laura had become hardened to the grim realities of what she did to pay the bills. But so many times she regretted the choices she had made; and whenever she met up with Philip again she realised how things could have gone in other directions, how much she really loved him and how different her life might have been. But each time she did this she was also conscious that their lives were moving apart, that it was getting harder, not easier to ever consider an alternative reality in which the three of them – Jo, Philip, herself – could be together.

For an instant, what she had said and done tonight seemed strangely symptomatic. Laura felt overwhelmingly sad and it was all she could do to stop the tears. She didn't know the answer to Philip's question. Would she have done anything different?

Taking a deep breath, she said, 'I'm sorry, Philip. I was being unreasonable.'

Philip looked at her for a few seconds. She hadn't been able to answer his question, but he could understand that. He had no answers either. He suspected that sometimes Laura wished that things had been different. He knew he did, more often than he cared to admit, even to himself. And when he did dwell on the subject, an insistent voice would end the internal conversation with the logical announcement that it was all too late now and what had happened had happened.

He smiled suddenly. 'Oh well, I'm sure Monroe will get over it. He's a good cop but a jumped-up bastard.'

Laura leaned over and kissed him on the cheek as he put the car into gear and pulled back onto the road.

'So, you going to tell me what you know?'

Philip let out a heavy sigh, but the anger had evaporated. 'God, woman, you don't give up, do you?'

'Nope,' Laura replied, with a smile. 'Not usually.'

‘Well, to be honest, I don’t know much more than you do. She was a young kid about twenty, driving back from a friend’s house. Died sometime between seven and eight-thirty this evening. Discovered by a guy walking his dog. Nearest house a couple of hundred yards away. No one heard anything or saw anything.’

‘But the wounds ...’ Laura began, her voice trailing off. ‘Nearly fifteen years of crime reporting back home and I never saw anything like that.’

‘No, not nice.’

‘I’m used to “not nice”: tricks cutting the tongues out of hookers, heads blown apart by semi-automatics – that kind of thing. But that girl had her heart taken out, for Christ’s sake. Surgically removed, carefully done.’

‘I know, I photographed it.’

‘Strikes me as way beyond the range of your average murder, Philip. More ... I don’t know ... ritualistic, I guess.’

‘Yes, maybe,’ Philip replied, staring at the road ahead. ‘I’m not a cop.’

They fell silent for a while, then Laura said. ‘And that coin. What the hell was that about?’

‘Why such interest?’ Philip retorted impatiently.

‘Search me. I guess I’m still an old crime hack at heart.’

Chapter 4

THE WIND RATTLED the windows in Laura's room in Philip's house and she drifted in and out of a disturbed sleep, dreaming the same thing she always dreamed on nights like this one: a dream that was not a dream, more a distorted memory.

It began with her flying over Los Angeles. It was night and she was going to visit her parents at their respective California homes soon after she had moved back to New York. They were over the outer suburbs before the pilot even announced that the plane was beginning its descent. Ten minutes later she was over the city proper and the plane was banking slowly to the north, moving up parallel to the coast. She could see the city now, all lit up, like a galaxy, like one of those incredible images from the Hubble telescope. And each car was a star, and each house a little solar system, a solar system of lights. The pollution in the air made them twinkle and fray.

Laura had taken this flight before of course, maybe a dozen times, but never at night, and it was just amazing. And then she saw it. She was staring at the lights, this show of defiance, humankind sticking up a finger to the gods, pure chutzpah. It reared up, the I-405 with its million automobiles. But from three thousand feet up it looked nothing like a road. She could see no crash barriers, no tarmac, no borders, just a black strip between the lights. And the dots of sodium light – they could not be cars, could they? They had become disembodied, mere headlights moving by their own volition, just lights. It was then that it struck her, the whole view, the bigger picture, the long strips containing all those lights, all moving in strict