

STRYGA

Rob Parnell

I knew it was Dave. I recognized the remains of his trademark leather jacket. There was so much blood, everywhere, not just on him but on the walls and floor, even the sink and mirrors were red spattered. My drummer – I guess I should make that ex-drummer – looked like he'd been mauled by a wild animal. An animal that wanted to chew his face off.

"You shouldn't be in here." I turned. An aboriginal woman dressed in a sky blue suit pushed past the police officer guarding the changing room. "You're Patrick, right?"

I nodded, realising I must be in shock. I couldn't move my mouth. The woman smiled and held out her hand.

"Detective Inspector Judith Hasper, Adelaide Major Crime Unit."

The interview room was stark. White. One window looking out on to blackness, a table and two chairs. The clock on the wall said one forty. I'd only agreed to go there because Hasper insisted. She wanted the 'crime scene' to be clean, she said. My presence there would look bad – to forensics. She'd been nice about it but I was still uncomfortable. I wasn't happy being a suspect in a violent crime. Especially something I knew I wasn't capable of committing – something I didn't think *anybody* was capable of committing.

"When was the last time you saw Mr Parker alive?" The detective opened a tiny notebook. A silver pen hovered above it in Hasper's delicate caramel fingers.

"Must have been around half eleven." I tried to appear relaxed though my heart was beating hard. "He said he'd met some girl – a hot chick he said. He was going out to find a bar, maybe check out the casino."

"Sky City."

I shrugged. I didn't know where she meant.

"Did you meet this girl?"

"No. Me and Pete left Dave in the changing room of the Gov. He said she was waiting for him in the bar, but I didn't see anyone. I didn't want to hang around – I don't drink." Hasper looked at me, sizing me up: the leather jeans and white T, shoulder length black hair. I could tell what she was thinking.

"But you didn't leave at that point?"

"No, Pete wanted a quick one before we went back to the hotel. We were in the back bar for about ten minutes until I, until we all heard the screaming."

I watched as the detective made notes. The pen stopped moving for a long while before she looked up at me. Her eyes were far away. A deep frown creased her forehead as though she was assimilating information, weighing facts. Then she sighed, defeated.

“How long have you been in Adelaide?”

“We got in yesterday morning, on the plane from Melbourne. We’re touring. Supposed to be playing some outback gigs soon. Though I suppose—”

“You suppose right, Mr. Wonhoff. I don’t want you, or your guitarist – Mr. Laughton? – leaving town for a while. At least until we have a clearer idea of what happened last night.”

“Am I a suspect?”

Hasper smiled and leaned forward. “You’re free to go, Mr. Wonhoff. Though I’d like you to be processed first.”

“Processed?” Sounded ominous.

“It won’t take long.” Hasper stood and ushered me to the door. “The usual stuff. Fingerprints, couple of swabs of your clothes, DNA. Just to identify your presence in the evidence – and eliminate you as a suspect.”

Twenty minutes later, I met Pete in the lobby of the police station. He looked shell-shocked. Pete was a Buddhist, though from his appearance – he dressed like a goth – you’d never know it. Pete’s world was lentils, peace man, and meditation. Luckily, I’d managed to shield him from seeing Dave’s body. I didn’t think he could handle it.

“How’s it going, Pete?”

“They think I saw her.” I didn’t need to ask. “Only from the back but, I saw a girl, a woman, going towards the changing room. Do you think it was her?”

I said nothing. I didn’t know. It seemed unlikely that any female could have created the mayhem I’d seen. I put my arm around Pete and gently pulled him towards the exit.

At the Holiday Inn on South Terrace, I made sure Pete was comfortable, reasonably reassured and went to my room. I sat at the writing desk, my ears ringing. For a moment I wished I hadn’t stopped drinking two months ago. I pushed the thought aside, got undressed and slipped into the overly starched bed. I was surprised how tired I felt.

What the hell had happened?

Dave was a big strong guy, worked out every day, could hit the drums so hard it felt like your ears were bleeding. How could some young girl overwhelm him, stab and scratch at him, eat his face off and – get away?

And what had been her motive? Dave’s sexual appetite was legendary. *Anything with a pulse* was his motto and he lived by it. Was his killer a jilted lover? Or some ex-lover’s husband? Or maybe a complete stranger? Nothing made any sense.

As I lay there in the dark, drifting off, the screaming started again.

At first I thought I was dreaming. The shrill sound had an unearthly quality – one scream was echoed by another, higher pitched. Then, as I jolted awake, I realised the audible frenzy was real, and close by.

I fumbled for the light switch but couldn't find it. In the dark, I quickly pulled on my pants, aware that each second represented agony. I stumbled toward the door, stubbing my toe on the way. The screams were loud now, becoming more intense, feral. I tore out of the hotel room into the dim yellow light of the corridor and headed left, toward Pete's room. Other residents peeked from their rooms. A heavysset man wearing striped pyjamas stood banging on Pete's door, shouting.

"Hey! What the fuck is going on in there!"

"Excuse me, will you?" I pushed past him and rattled the handle. It was locked. "Pete! It's me, Patrick, let me in!"

The screams stopped. A hollow silence followed. The heavy man backed away from me, apparently unwilling to offer any more assistance. I listened to my own breathing and, coming from inside, squelching – as though someone or something was stepping in thick liquid.

"Pete, for God's sake open the door."

Another sound. A rumble. No, more like a deep *ruffling of feathers*. But it couldn't be that. The noise was too *big*. The bird – what else could it be – would have to be huge. I had to get inside the room. I looked around. The corridor was now deserted. Where the hell was Security?

Someone once told me the weakest part of a locked door was its centre. I didn't know if that was true but I figured it was time to find out. I took a step back and kicked at the door with my right foot. A long crack appeared down the middle of the wood but otherwise the door hadn't budged. Inside, I heard sudden frantic activity. Furniture overturned, crashing down and breaking. Then a hard whack followed by glass shattering.

Without thinking, I shoulder-barged the door. It broke apart like so much balsa wood. I fell into the room, thin splinters peppering my face, hands and body. I hit the floor and felt glass splinters scrape against my face and forearms. I pushed myself up, shards cutting into my hands. I shook my head in the darkness, looking around feverishly.

Then I saw it.

When Hasper arrived, she appeared calm but mildly puzzled, looking at me as though I was some enigmatic irritant.

"How's Pete?" I asked, shifting uncomfortably in the hospital bed. I wasn't in too much pain, only embarrassed the doctor and nurses had insisted I stay overnight.

"Unconscious. Badly cut up, lost a lot of blood. Critical but stable."

The detective sat on the seat nearest me. I checked myself for stealing a glance at her honey coloured legs, barely hidden beneath the light cloth of her skirt. I feigned a sigh and looked away as she rifled through her tiny notebook.

"A large bird-like animal," she read. "About five or six feet tall. Covered in white and black feathers – with, large, flapping, wings."

"I know it sounds—"

“And the creature flew from the hotel window as you entered the victim’s room.”

“Right.” I tried to sound persuasive. “I guess you don’t believe me.”

She smiled and I felt a blush rising, as I always do when I’m near a woman I find attractive. “The guys at the station think you’re crazy, on drugs, some sick pommie psychopath, or worse...but, yes, I believe you think you saw what you did.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hasper shrugged and paused. “I don’t think you’re lying.”

“But I may be delusional?”

“Maybe that – or overwrought.” I must have looked puzzled, or hurt. She reached over and patted my hand. I may have flinched. “Trust me. I’m a good judge of character.”

The detective withdrew her hand quickly and went back to her notes. I thought about Dave and Pete. What had happened to them? Jeez, it was all my fault. It had been my idea to come to Australia, to play this tour. Pete wanted to stay home with his new wife; to give up the music business. He’d been offered a ‘proper’ job with Madame Tussaud’s – something to do with researching for their models. At twenty nine, Pete felt it was time to hang up his guitar and move on. They were getting too old for hard rock, he’d said. Maybe that was so but I’d pushed him, harassed him into this one last bid for glory and fame...

And Dave, what about him? Dave was about to study massage, maybe get a gig as a ‘doctor’ of sorts – specialising in female clients no doubt. I wondered who would miss him – I knew his parents were dead. He’d had few, if any, real friends. How many of Dave’s bastard children would never get to meet their father? It seemed so unfair that Dave should have his life snuffed out so quickly, so pointlessly. As if reading my mind, the detective asked a question.

“So what do you think it was?”

“Some nutcase killer in a birdman outfit?”

“A first for Adelaide.”

Judith Hasper stood and paced the room to the window. She stood side-on to me, gazing out into the night with that far away expression I’d noted earlier. What was she thinking? I felt heavy and my eyes hurt. I considered closing them, shutting out the night’s horror, when the detective turned to face me.

“Your hotel rooms were seven floors up.” She didn’t seem to be speaking to me. I looked hard into her eyes but they were focussed above me, behind me. “Can I help you?”

With an effort I turned my head and upper body. A middle aged woman wearing a long blood-red velvet dress stood in the doorway. Her voice was dry as fallen leaves when she spoke.

“The men at the station said I might find you here.”

“Marilyn Baker. Pleased to meet you.”

As she approached I saw her hair was a wig. Had to be. It was too black, the purple highlights too fake. Her skin, what I could see of it, was ash white and spotted with dull pink welts, especially around the neck. She seemed older as she drew nearer. Ignoring me, she shook hands with Hasper, a pained smile smearing her otherwise emotionless face. I noticed her fingertips were blackened.

"I'm here about what's happened. I know who did it." The woman finally looked down at me, surveying the cuts and bruises on my arms and face. "Oh dear." That voice again: paper thin, weak. Her expression softened. "I'm so sorry."

The woman hovered for a while, clearly unsure how she to proceed. Hasper indicated she should sit on a small sofa at the end of the bed. She did. I wondered briefly if this was ethical. Shouldn't this 'informant' be interviewed without the chief suspect present? The detective didn't seem to think so. Hasper resumed her place next to me and turned to a blank page in her notebook.

"Marilyn, please, tell me what you know."

At the mention of her name, the woman's body deflated. Her eyes shrank back into their sockets. She sighed and gently slapped her palms against her knees as though it was time to tell all.

"It's my daughter. Heather."

"How do you know that, Mrs Baker?"

"I—I just know. I can't explain..." Marilyn's voice trailed off. She avoided eye-contact with either of us. The detective tried another tack. I stayed silent.

"And where is your daughter at this time?"

"I don't know. She...hasn't come home yet."

"When was she the last time you saw her?"

"Around eight, before she went out."

"She lives at home with you?"

"Yes, she's at college."

"And how old is your daughter?"

"Sixteen, nearly seventeen."

"Could you describe her? Her physique?" The detective's tone became less enthusiastic although Marilyn was clearly warming to the interrogation.

"She's a lovely looking girl. A real sweetheart. Very pretty – it's her downfall, of course. She's 5'6", beautiful blonde hair down to her shoulders and blue eyes and well, she's quite petite really, you'd never guess—"

Hasper cut her off with a loud clearing of her throat. "Mrs Baker, I'm very glad you felt the need to come to me with this information. However, I suspect—" The women stood, taking both by surprise. I had to say something.

"My drummer was not killed by a sixteen year old sweetheart, Mrs Baker."

"No, no, you don't understand." Marilyn's demeanour changed again. This time she appeared strong, defiant. "That's only *one side of her*."

Detective Judith Hasper made her apologies and left taking Marilyn with her, presumably for further questioning. I didn't know. Maybe she took her outside and handed her to the men in white coats. I was too tired to care. Despite everything, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I was awoken by a young nurse with a tray.

"You should eat, Mr Wonhoff."

"I don't remember ordering room service."

The nurse waved and gave me a coy smile as she left. She must have liked what she saw. God knew why. I didn't feel attractive.

I pushed myself up, looked at the tray of food in front of me and put it to one side. I couldn't eat. Hell, I didn't think I could do anything much for a while. I was alone in a strange city, my only conscious friend an Aboriginal police woman who probably thought I was a delusional mass murderer.

I swivelled my legs out of the bed and tried to stand, expecting the worst. I felt fine. No dizziness, just a few aches around my ribs, neck and shoulders but that was about it. I decided I should go visit Pete, if I could find him.

Pulling on my clothes I glanced into the mirror on the far wall. I moved closer to inspect my face. It was covered in a mish-mash of tiny lacerations, probably from where the wood had splintered as I entered Pete's room. Maybe also from the shattered glass that had littered the floor. My forearms were the same – lots of thin, short cuts. Nothing too deep though. Probably what looked worst was that my hair was matted with dried blood. I spent a few moments cleaning up, then combed through water from the sink until I looked half presentable. I didn't want to frighten anyone.

The hospital was small but it was still as confusing as hospitals get. A maze of corridors labelled with incomprehensible names. Wards surrounding large receptions filled with computers. There didn't seem to be many people about – staff anyway. The odd patient wheeling a bag of blood on a pole passed me, oblivious to my presence. A young girl passed me, nearly bumping into me. She studied the signs on the walls, clearly as confused as I was. At the end of a long walkway, I found a sign that read ICU: Intensive Care Unit and followed the arrow downstairs.

As I neared a door marked ICU, a black nurse sitting behind a wooden reception desk eyed me suspiciously. I decided it might be prudent to talk to her.

"I'm looking for Pete Laughton."

"Are you a relative?"

"A friend." She looked unimpressed, though at least she started looking through a file, presumably for Pete's name.

"It's a bit early for visiting."

"I want to know if he's okay."

"You'll need to ask the Staff Nurse."

My impatience rose. I looked around for the fabled Staff Nurse. Walking towards us was the girl I'd spotted upstairs. I frowned. I noticed this time she was dressed in a

faded denim skirt and a pink smock. She was petite, blonde, no more than sixteen. I called out.

“Hey.”

Even from thirty or so feet away I saw the girl’s eyes enlarge and her jaw drop. She turned quickly and started to run.

“Hey! I won’t hurt you!”

I ran after her.

She was fast. She made it to the revolving doors of the hospital entrance a ways before I did. I saw her struggle with the door, pushing it hard against its natural momentum and then she was out, turning left, disappearing from view. It took me a good five seconds of clattering across the marble floor to reach the entrance doors and run out on to the street.

I spun my head to the left and saw her sprinting at an unreal speed down the road. I started to follow but knew I’d never catch her. Either she was some Olympic athlete or I, at thirty two, was too old to compete with the fresh limbs of an adolescent. I didn’t want to let her go. After all, from her reaction, who else could it be than Heather Baker? But I was in no shape to do more than watch her dwindle in size. A quarter of a mile away she may have crossed the road into a side street, I wasn’t sure. I gave up. What else could I do?

I realised then I had no idea where I was. Despite that, I kept walking. A few hundred yards on I approached an old man waiting at a bus stop to ask directions to South Terrace. He looked at me like I’d wiped a used hanky on his shirt.

“Turn left at the lights and keep going.”

“Can’t miss it?”

The old man grunted and moved away from me. I guess I looked strange to him – to most people probably.

Just before the lights, I looked across to street I thought I’d seen Heather dive into. I wasn’t hoping for much. Maybe I should have been. She was there. A long way off but I was sure it was her. Absorbed in a flirtatious conversation with a young guy, perhaps two or three years older. They were sat outside a café, at a table, ignoring their drinks.

I didn’t think it would be a good idea to confront them – not in a crowded café. Even if I managed to catch hold of Heather, what would I do then? And what if she could switch into that bird thing I’d seen the night before? I wasn’t willing to take the chance. I quickly scanned the area. There was a payphone on the corner. I headed for it.

“She’s in a café off Wakefield Street.”

“Which one?” They’d taken a while to put me through to Judith but I insisted, making sure her staff knew it was me calling.

“I don’t know. I’m in Victoria Square. It’s the first turning on the left from here. The café’s on the right.”

“Gawler Place?”

“I guess so. You’re the one who lives here.”

“Stay where you are.” I waited. I could hear faint clicking noises and the detective barking orders. “Better still, go and wait in the lobby of the Hilton. I’ll meet you there.”

“What about this Heather girl?”

“Don’t worry, she’s under surveillance.”

“Already?”

“Didn’t you notice the police headquarters building?”

I screwed up my eyes. Sure enough, at the end of what must have been Gawler Place, I saw a large silver police emblem bolted to a faceless white-brick wall.

I didn’t like the Hilton. I couldn’t sit anywhere without getting hassled to buy a drink. It was half nine in the morning and I felt like shit so I ordered a long black, two sugars. I didn’t have any money on me but thought the detective might pay for it when she arrived. That took some explaining to the waiter.

“You look terrible,” Hasper said when she arrived. She looked different, more businesslike. Her hair was pulled back and her skirt had been replaced by dark slacks, her blouse by a police work shirt. She still looked hot.

“I’m auditioning for a part in a zombie movie.”

“You’ll get it.” Her smile was warm, her dark eyes sparkling under the refracted indoor lights. She sat on the same sofa as me, pulled out a manila file from a briefcase and placed it on the polished stone table in front of us. The detective drew a large breath before she spoke.

“Heather’s a stryga – according to her mother.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I had to look it up myself. A stryga is a mythical beast – supposed to be anyway. In pre-Christian Ireland, there were women who would lure unsuspecting men into bed with them, demand their love and when it wasn’t given, turn into huge ferocious birds which would tear them to pieces.”

“Sounds like a cure for adultery to me.”

“Exactly.”

“And this is what Ms Marilyn Baker told you?” Hasper raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. “And *you* don’t believe her either.”

“No, though clearly she’s got it in for her daughter.”

The detective began skimming through the notes in the manila file. I saw corners of 8 by 10s that had to be photos of Dave and Pete. Chemicals in my stomach skittered from one side to the other. Hasper pulled out a report and scanned it.

“Seems Heather used her superpowers to kill Mum Baker’s new boyfriend. A guy called Eric—”

I touched the detective’s arm to stop her, immediately wishing I hadn’t. Too personal perhaps, though she didn’t flinch or draw away.

“Wait, Detective.”

“Judith.”

“Okay, sure. Uh, why are you including me in all this?”

“The guys at the station aren’t much help.” Her tone was unconvincing. She went on, sounding curiously vulnerable. “This not really their area...we don’t see...crimes like this in Adelaide.”

“That can’t be the reason.”

She sighed. “No it’s not.”

“Then why?”

Judith absently smoothed the report on to the table, that faraway expression returning. Finally she smiled and twisted her body to face me. Our eyes locked for a couple of seconds. I felt uncomfortable. I wasn’t used to intimacy, however fleeting.

“Long answer or short?”

“Long.”

“Well, my father was American, from Boise, Idaho. Came over here in the sixties and married my mother, a Torres Strait Islander. Not really the done thing in those days but, whatever. Mum is big on Aboriginal culture. Was, still is, her life. She always told me there were two types of people. Those who live with their heads in the air, like most white fellas, and those who live with their hearts in the land.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure if it was compliment, or whether it even applied to me. I’d need to think about it later. I stole another glance at Judith. She looked worried, as if she’d said too much. I smiled to reassure her, which she seemed to like.

“The short reason?”

“I like you.”

A beeper sounded. Judith pulled it from the back of her slacks and looked down at the message.

“Shit,” she said. “We’d better go.”

“What do you mean, you lost her?”

I didn’t know how Judith could concentrate on balling out her officers while surrounded by so much carnage. I couldn’t help but stare at the kid – the one I’d seen earlier – lying across the toilet seat in a grisly, unnatural position. His back broken. His chest and stomach open, black red innards mutilated, still seeping blood. I could feel the heat and taste the copper. I felt a sharp jab in my ribs.

“What’s he doing here?”

“Helping with my inquiries. Now answer my question.”

The uniformed rib-digger moved away and another, more fresh-faced officer cleared his throat.

“They ran into the crowd, Ma’am.”

“What crowd?”

“Gay Awareness.” The policeman consulted his notes, though I’m sure he didn’t have to. Judith rolled her eyes.

“So how did they end up here?”

The policeman stood mute, as though the answer might be supplied by someone else. God perhaps.

“Seal the door and wait for FSU okay, Miller?” Judith motioned to me to leave. Maybe she’d seen something about my expression that worried her. I followed her out of the bathroom – the Ladies’ I noticed. At the door, she turned.

“Just don’t touch anything. Except that.” Judith pointed to a small silver-sequined handbag that lay in the middle of the tiled floor. “Bag it up and bring it through to the bar.”

In the empty bar of the Exeter, Judith made some calls. I didn’t understand what was being said. There were so many code numbers and acronyms I got lost. The only thing I understood was that the detective was irritated. Eventually she slumped onto a chair.

“Ma Baker’s on her way over to ID the handbag. I called her mobile.” Judith looked at her police-issue watch. “Should be here...”

Three raps sounded against the window. I did the honours. Marilyn appeared flushed, the welts on her neck a little darker. She tore past me, straight up to Judith, who by now was standing.

“Oh God, no, not again. Please tell me, not again. My poor baby!”

“Please sit down, Mrs Baker. Pat, could you get some water?”

As far as I could remember, this was the first time Judith had referred to me by my first name. It sounded foreign but oddly pleasant to hear her say it the way she did. I found my way behind the bar and filled a glass with tap water. It smelt over chlorinated to me so I added some ice – as if that would help.

By the time I got back, an evidence bag sat on the table in front of Judith. Marilyn’s head was in her hands. She was sobbing. I didn’t need to ask. I placed the glass by her side and wondered what I was doing here, eight thousand miles away from home, hounded by death and demons. Nobody told me Australia was going to be like this.

“Mrs Baker, please.” Judith placed a hand on Marilyn’s arm. “We need your help.”

The murderer’s mother stopped crying and heaved herself up. Her face was streaked with black mascara, rouge and smudged lipstick. She sniffled.

“She has a lair – where she nests.”

I had to stop myself from making a sound. Judith glanced at me. She knew. Unfazed, the detective leaned in closer to Marilyn.

“Do you know where it is?”

“I’ll take you.”

An hour later, about a hundred police officers were apparently moving into position, though I'd only seen about half a dozen. We, Judith, Marilyn, me and two uniforms, stood at the corner of Hindley Street and Gray Street – I only knew because I'd read the street signs. We were waiting for some kind of go-ahead. In the distance, I heard a helicopter circling. Judith now wore a gun.

"You're sure it's at 144?" Judith asked for the second time. Marilyn nodded.

"Yes, in the attic."

"And you think she will be there?" It was my turn to ask a question.

"That's where she goes – after a kill."

Judith frowned, about to ask Marilyn another question. A radio crackled behind us before releasing an unintelligible babble. A uniform translated.

"Time to go, Ma'am."

144 wasn't keen to open its doors. I'd guessed by this time it was a brothel. A metal-plated surveillance camera hovered above our heads. The residents were either busy or didn't want to donate to a police charity.

The police officers pulled out their guns. I was tugged back by unseen arms as two more uniforms appeared from nowhere with a battering ram.

The front door collapsed inwards and Judith was the first one through, followed by the rest of the police. I stood next to Marilyn, feeling bewildered. We'd been abandoned. Marilyn glanced at me. I knew what she thinking.

"Come on."

As I bounded up the carpeted staircase I could hear a lot of noise above me. Shouting, boots clattering and doors being opened and closed. A naked man clutching his clothes pushed past me, heading down, whispering to himself. I got stuck on a stairwell where five young women, scantily dressed, implored me to tell them what was going on. Marilyn, close behind me, urged me on.

"Quickly, I've got to get to my baby!"

I pushed past the girls without explanation, up another flight. At the top, a dozen or so policemen were huddled around a wooden ladder that led to the ceiling, an opening, presumably to the attic. Marilyn and I fought our way through. Two armed uniforms stood at the base of the ladder.

"Stand back, please," one of them said. Above a girl was screaming.

"Leave me alone! I haven't done anything!"

"Heather Baker! Get down here. On to the floor." A man's voice, gruff, nervous. "I'll shoot if I have to!"

"No!"

"Okay everybody, calm!" It was Judith. "Officer Cooper, stand down. She's not armed!" Silence for around four seconds.

Marilyn suddenly lurched forward and grabbed the ladder.

“I want to see my baby!” The uniforms tried to hold her back as she struggled. I tried to get them off her. One of the officers began to tussle with me. Above us, Judith’s face appeared.

“Let them up!” At the sound of Hasper’s command, the officers let go. Marilyn went first. Then I climbed up the ladder, a tightness forming in my chest, my legs shaking so much I could hardly keep my footing. Finally, I was up and out onto rough wooden floorboards.

Then, the smell hit me.

The attic room was a contradiction. Acrid, and dark. Fetid yet oddly warm.

As my eyes grew used to the gloom I saw that the floor was covered in grey, black and white feathers of varying sizes, forming a carpet, out of which sprung mounds of faeces like putrid mountains rising from a hellish mist. The sloping walls of the inner-roof were decorated with crude charcoal drawings of people in various stages of mutilation. Some of the pictures were peeling off, some torn.

The only light source came from above. A triangular window set into where the wall met the roof. In front was a cross strut maybe ten feet off the ground. Sat huddled on to it was Heather Baker. She looked terrified. Three armed policemen stood below her. Judith stood to one side, arms extended, beckoning.

“Come on, Heather. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“No! You think I killed people!”

“Not you, darling.” It was Marilyn, creeping forward slowly amongst the filth and feathers. “The *other* you. The *bad* you.”

“That’s not me!”

“I know, sweetie. You didn’t mean to kill anybody, especially not Eric.”

“I didn’t kill him, Mummy, it wasn’t me!”

Heather began to hyperventilate, her chest heaving crazily. Her fingers tore at her neck and body. She sobbed, fighting some internal demon. As much as I hated her for what she’d done to my friends, I couldn’t hate her. She looked too pathetic.

“Be careful,” Marilyn called out. “She’s turning!”

Heather fell from her perch. She hit the ground with a loud *thwup*. The police officers rushed her – more had appeared – and six or seven were successfully holding her down.

“Kill her!” It was Marilyn, screaming from somewhere over to my right. “Kill her now!”

Judith was quick to counter. “Do no such thing! Make sure she doesn’t hurt herself.” Already, Heather’s appearance was changing. Quills breaking off, feathers rapidly expelled from her body.

“No! No! Na! Neek!”

A deafening screech almost split my eardrums. I spun around. My jaw dropped. I couldn’t believe what I saw.

Marilyn – who else could it be – had transformed.

A third again in size than her daughter, this stryga was the real thing. Huge, ferocious, entirely feral. It thrashed its wings with alarming speed and violence. It bobbed up and down and prepared to strike. Suddenly it flew headlong at the melee of armed officers. Its beak caught one by the throat, searing the man's head off. Blood spurted from the neck as he fell. The bird threw itself around the crowded attic, bouncing off the walls and sloping ceilings with deafening crashes. I ducked down. I felt a wing hit my back, forcing the air from my lungs.

The policemen were in disarray. They'd released Heather, who was now back to normal. She crouched in a foetal position less than three feet from me. Her shoulders were juddering. I guessed she was crying.

We kept our heads down – except Judith, who stood with her arms straight out, trying to get a fix on the rapidly moving target with her gun. She fired three shots in succession. They either missed or had no effect on the swirling mass of bird. The policemen followed her lead and began firing randomly at the stryga.

Its now warbled screeches ever more piercing, its flight path grew increasingly erratic. Then it impacted Judith. Hard. She flew sideways, the gun spinning from her hand. I saw it land a few feet from me, disappearing beneath the carpet of feathers.

The stryga flew up into the rafters and perched on a beam. It fell silent.

"Hold your fire!" Judith sounded hoarse, winded, in pain.

For a moment the only sounds were laboured breathing as everyone tried to catch their breath. I used the calm to inch towards Judith's gun, all the while watching the stryga high above. It watched Heather, cocking its head, as if listening for her too.

Then it launched itself. Down. Heading straight for Heather.

I moved quickly, thrashing at the carpet of feathers. The side of my hand hit metal. From the corner of my eye I saw the dark shape bearing down at alarming speed. The screech was constant, inhumanly high-pitched. I snatched up the gun, pointed blindly and fired, once, twice, three times.

The stryga's head exploded. A shower of blood, flesh and bone rained down on to my face and chest. Its neck hit the ground inches from Heather, inches from me, the rest of the body collapsing in on itself. Even before its wings touched the floor I knew – we all knew - it was dead.

"She blamed me for Eric's death," Heather said. "But I knew I hadn't done it."

We stood outside 144 Gray Street. I watched the paramedics wheeling away what was left of Marilyn as Heather spoke with Judith. Heather continued.

"She doesn't remember what happens when she gets like that."

I thought it curious she was still using the present tense. Maybe the death of her mother would take a while to sink in.

"When did – this – start happening to you?" I had to ask.

"That was my first time. It was really horrible. So painful. I don't know how she..."

“Maybe you should go see a doctor,” Judith said. “In fact, why don’t you go with the paramedics now. Just to check you out. Maybe they can get you something...”

“Okay. If that’s what you think.”

Heather left us. She seemed so young, so out of her depth. I felt for her.

“Can I go now?” I asked. Judith looked at me, amused.

“You’ll need to make a statement. It can wait until tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

“By the way, your friend Pete, he’s conscious. He’ll be fine they told me.” I sighed with relief during the pause that followed. “So, Pat, what are your plans?”

“I’m seriously thinking about taking up drinking again.” I laughed, or tried to. Judith took my hand and squeezed. It felt good.