

BLOOD ARTIST

Chapter 1

There were two beds in the room, but only one was occupied. The bed by the window was a tight white parcel of expectant linen, dormant for the next cardiovascular inpatient.

It was the other the three men had come to see.

“This is him,” said the doctor, staking a position at the foot of the bed. He didn’t look at the shrouded body in front of him and hadn’t bothered folding back the linen to reveal the deceased’s face. “If you can make it quick, please.”

The first of the other two men, his blonde hair turned crimson by the buzzing fluoros, approached the bed. Sticking his fingers into the tangle atop his head, he surveyed the rolling mounds. His eyes were naturally drawn to the largest bulge, of course: a Christmas full belly. It had almost certainly contributed to the man ending up under a white sheet in the cardiology ward of the Alfred Hospital.

“How’s your day been?” the blonde man asked the doctor, his eyes still on the covered corpse.

The doctor emitted an impatient nasal sigh. “Busy, detective. Can we get this done?”

“Real madhouse ‘round here today, is it?” persisted the detective.

The doctor said nothing. Crossed arms and chin tucked, he had an imperious air about him. There was a whiff of soft cologne, too, which suited his appearance: groomed to almost anal perfection. And was there a hint of make-up on his face, around the eyes perhaps?

“You mind shutting the door, Teipo?” the detective asked the third man, a stocky Fijian who was leaning casually against the doorframe.

After Teipo had clicked the door into place, the blonde detective slowly peeled back the white sheet covering the dead man’s face. There was no great moment of shock or recognition. The dead man was totally unremarkable. He looked somewhere in his fifties or

sixties, with receding grey hair, subtle liver spots around his eyes, and fine spider veins on his pitted nose. The strands of his grey hair had matted to his head like jagged, skeletal fingers. There were oval-shaped pinch marks either side of the bridge of his nose, and he had dark, almost black rings under his eyes. His eyelids were closed, rimmed in purple.

He seemed limp and wan in death, but peaceful enough. The body had a faint, familiar old man musk that only barely lifted itself above the alcoholic bite of hospital disinfectant.

“Will this take much longer, detective?” the doctor asked with another nasal show of irritation. He was now fiddling with his moustache, stroking and flattening its worm-like length.

The detective didn’t reply. Without warning he lurched forward, almost collapsing on top of the big-bellied dead man. At the last moment he arrested his descent, and it became clear he had simply bent forward from the waist; sharp, neat, irregular. His ear stopped a half-width above the corpse, head twisted to the side as though listening for something. His flop of fire-golden hair almost brushed the sheets.

The doctor frowned. He looked quizzically at the fuzzy-haired Fijian—Teipo—who had found a new leaning spot against the closed door. Teipo had a relaxed half-smile on his face, shrugged his thick eyebrows for the doctor.

The doctor snorted in exasperation. “Detective, I really need to—” he began, but was cut off by a raised finger and harsh *shh* from the bent-over detective.

“You hear that?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said the doctor. Still, a shift in his eyes suggested an undercurrent of nervous doubt.

The detective’s hand joined the ear above the bed linen, palm downward and fingers splayed as though trying to find the dead man’s chakra.

“Shh,” the detective repeated, this time in a soothing tone, almost reverent. “You don’t hear that?”

He moved his ear along the dead man's body, north of the belly, across the covered chest, to the rumpled neck. He slowed down as he approached the dead man's grey, motionless face. The detective's brow was scrunched, deep in concentration. When he reached the dead man's slightly parted lips, he dropped his ear even closer.

"Doctor," said the detective. "This man is alive!"