

In the Blood

Chapter 1

The doctor pulled the curtain closed behind him, separating the cubicle from the rest of the emergency ward.

“This is him,” he said to the two detectives, nodding to the hospital bed. He hadn’t folded back the sheet to reveal the deceased’s face. “He was brought in about an hour ago.”

With one hand deep in his untidy blond hair, Detective Senior Constable Kai Darragh surveyed the body. Nothing about the shrouded corpse stood out as unusual—there were no seeping blood stains or misshapen lumps to indicate a violent death.

“What happened to him?” Darragh asked.

“Uh, it was cardiac arrest.” The doctor was only a young man—mid-twenties or so—and tended to finish his sentences with a self-conscious upward inflection. “It happened down in Cheltenham, at the Southland Shopping Centre. The first one, anyway. Someone tried to resuscitate him using one of the centre’s defibrillators. Then the paramedics got him going, but he arrested the second time in the ambulance. He was dead before he got here.”

“And these are his things?” Darragh gestured to the blue plastic bin liner on the bedside table, stuffed half full and tugged closed at the top.

“Everything he had on him.”

Darragh nodded, but ignored the bag. He stepped closer to the mattress.

“Would you mind if I...?” he asked, jutting a thumb toward the body.

The doctor appeared mildly confused by the request. His eyes slipped to the third man in the cubicle—Darragh’s partner, Detective Senior Constable Tevita Matai—but the Fijian merely shrugged his thick eyebrows.

“Oh, ok.” The doctor attempted a tentative smile. “Sure. Please, go ahead.”

Darragh’s face spread into a reassuring grin. “Thanks, mate.”

Darragh slowly peeled back the sheet to reveal the dead man's face. He looked to be in his sixties, with his face bearing many of the hallmarks of age: liver spots around his eyes, spider veins at the corners of his nose, receding grey hair that had matted to his head like jagged, skeletal fingers. There were oval-shaped pinch marks either side of the bridge of his nose, and unhealthy dark pouches under his eyes.

What made the man remarkable was his expression. In death his face had stiffened into a fearsome grimace, as though his final thought had not been a kind one. The visage was made all the more menacing because his eyelids lay obstinately open, revealing pitiless grey eyes that seemed locked on something no-one else could see.

"Doesn't come across as the happiest chap, does he?" offered the doctor. He was standing at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed, stroking and flattening his pencil moustache.

Darragh turned to the doctor and widened his grin. There was a rakish appeal to the detective that his easy smile only amplified. He might even have been considered good-looking if he wasn't so scruffy.

"With the day he's had, I can't say I blame him." Darragh winked.

The young doctor snorted. "Fair call." He seemed chuffed with the exchange.

Darragh leaned in for a closer look at the dead man's face. A familiar, slightly sweet old man musk rose from the body, just noticeable above the alcoholic bite of hospital disinfectant. And those glowering grey eyes—Darragh almost expected the dead man to lurch to life and grab him. This was not a corpse to turn your back on.

"Did anyone get any names?" Darragh asked.

Again uncertainty clouded the doctor's face. "You mean, at the shopping centre?"

"Yeah. The person who attempted to revive him, for example."

"Sorry, detective. I don't think so. Not that I was told."

Folding the hospital sheet further back, Darragh revealed the dead man's arms and shoulders. Both were naked. His skin was milk-white, as though rarely exposed to the sun. The forearms, however, were sturdy, blotched and freckled, with wiry grey hairs rising from

the dead flesh. And his hands drew the eye—thick, meaty, indelicate working hands, calloused and strong. *Good strangling hands* was Darragh’s unbidden thought.

A strip of white flesh circled the wrist.

“His watch and glasses are in the bag?” Darragh asked.

“I would assume so,” the doctor said. “I haven’t taken a look. I think they must have been removed at the scene? Sorry, I’m not being much help here.”

Darragh turned to face the doctor square-on. The detective’s vivid green eyes made for a captivating gaze, marred only by an unnerving patch of nutmeg on the left iris.

“Nonsense,” he said. “You are doing a brilliant job. I’d deputise you in a heartbeat.”

The doctor beamed, turning a light shade of beetroot from the attention.

Darragh returned to the bed, folded the sheet back one final time. The whole body was now revealed. The dead man was shirtless, but wearing cheap tan chinos. His belly was almost a sphere, slightly hairy, but he was otherwise not a particularly fat person. Cheap white sneakers were on his feet, well-worn but at a glance a size too large. A circle of green paper was stapled to a belt loop almost hidden by a fold of skin at his hip.

The only physical trauma on the dead man’s entire being was the four pink distortions on his torso: one pair of perfectly circular rings, and a matching pair of mottled rectangular blotches. There was also some mild bruising on the chest.

Without warning Darragh began humming. The tune was an instantly recognisable Bee Gees classic, and as he got into the swing of it Darragh added a little upper body dance to the performance. He reached the chorus in a quiet falsetto: *Stayin’ Alive, Stayin’ Alive*.

The young doctor frowned at him, but with quizzical amusement rather than disdain. “Everything ok?”

Darragh ducked his head sheepishly, as though only just realising he wasn’t alone.

“A hundred beats per minute,” he explained. “The optimum chest compression rate for CPR. Same speed as *Stayin’ Alive*. Easy to remember. And much better than the alternative.”

Half the doctor's face rose into an intrigued smile. "What's the alternative?"

"Another one bites the dust."

The doctor laughed out loud. Matai echoed it with a derisive grunt from where he was leaning casually against the cubicle wall.

Darragh nodded back to the corpse. "Any contributing factors?"

"Nothing suspicious, if that's what you mean. From everything I've heard it was a straightforward cardiac arrest. We'll have to wait for the coroner's report if you want more detail." He shrugged. "Sorry."

"So why the call out?" interrupted Matai. He had stepped away from the wall, chunky arms crossing his stocky chest. The Fijian was shorter than average, but with his characteristic bluntness and solid build could easily be construed as intimidating.

"Sorry, there must be some confusion," the doctor said, stumbling on his words. "I thought dispatch would have told you. We called you in because—"

Matai must have seen it coming, because his posture sunk and he let out a groan.

"—we don't know who this guy is. He doesn't have any ID on him. We were hoping you could locate and inform the next of kin. That's the usual process, isn't it, when we can't ID someone? I mean, we don't usually get detectives in here for this sort of thing, so I was a little surprised to see you guys, but...sorry, I mustn't have been clear."

"Not your fault," Darragh said. "It looks like it's pretty busy in here, and it hasn't been much better out there today. Our vans were tied up with other jobs so they called us in. Communications just got a little wonky, it sounds like."

The young doctor seemed happy with Darragh's telling of it, but was interrupted by an insistent beeping. His eyes dropped to the pager attached to his belt.

"Sorry, guys, I have to run." The disappointment was evident in his voice. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, you've been great." Darragh extended a hand to shake the young man's. "We won't hold you any longer. You've been a great help. Really."

The doctor grinned, shook Matai's hand, and slipped around the closed curtain. His wooden-soled shoes could be heard beating a rapid retreat down the corridor outside.

As soon as the doctor left, Darragh moved over to the plastic bin liner that was slumped on the bedside table. After loosening the pull-ties he began rustling around inside.

"Van's tied up, you said?" Matai asked. "No chance we can ship it to them?"

"No such luck, Tips," Darragh replied, head still deep in the bag. "We'll have to handle this one ourselves."

"Then tell me there's something good in there. No wallet, I'm guessing? What about a phone, yeah?"

"Doesn't look like it." Darragh pulled his head out of the bag. "No wallet, no drivers' licence, no credit cards, no phone. All he had on him was some cash in a clip, glasses, a cheap digital watch. And whatever this is." Darragh held up a small, hard white object.

"Is that a bone?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it? Weird, no?" Darragh spun it around his dextrous fingers. It was about half the length of a digit. He returned it to the bag. "A bunch of keys in there, too, but nothing on them to tell us where he might have lived. And his shirt and jacket. That's it."

Matai crinkled his flat nose. "Figures. Without a phone it's going to be a tough one."

Darragh had a hand deep in his hair again, tousling his blond strands that, under the emergency department's harsh fluorescent lighting, looked closer to the shade of orange he'd enjoyed in his youth.

"No, it shouldn't be too hard," he said at last. He moved back to the bedside. "Did you catch this green tag on his pants? It's from a dry cleaners. There's a jacket in the bag that has one, too. Might be able to ID him through whichever dry cleaner did the work."

"How are we gonna know which one he went to? Must be thousands in Melbourne."

“I’m all over it. You see this guy’s shoes?” He gestured to the white sneakers, the worn ones that looked a size too big. “Look at the wear pattern. He liked to walk, I can guarantee that. And there weren’t any car keys or a Myki card in the bag, so he wasn’t driving or catching buses or trains. Must’ve lived within walking distance of Southland, would be my guess. All we have to do is look up the names of the dry cleaners near the shopping centre and find out which ones use that type of tag. Then we’ll get the credit card details and we’ll have his name by lunch.”

Matai’s broad shoulders lowered in visible relief. He came up close to Darragh, laid a solid arm around his partner. Matai had such a genuine smile—easy half-moon curve to his brown eyes, big lips spread wide to reveal strong round teeth—that it was impossible not to reciprocate.

“Taci,” he said, using the affectionate Fijian word for *little brother*. “I’m a lucky man to have a work husband like you. You know, most of the time.”

Darragh’s face curled into an irrepressible grin. “Then let’s get this done, shall we?”

Chapter 2

The first two dry cleaners Darragh and Matai visited didn't use green tags. The detectives had started with the modern outfits—the chains and franchises, with their bright signs, sliding glass doors, gleaming equipment and uniformed employees—but it quickly became clear they should be looking elsewhere. It had been some time since the big companies had used paper tags, now preferring automated cataloguing systems with barcodes and RFID chips in the hangers. The detectives had wasted little time moving on, pausing only so Darragh could fish a couple of jelly beans from a counter-top jar.

As soon as Darragh and Matai stepped into the chemically warm air of Harry's Laundromat they knew it was a much more likely candidate. Harry's was a dirty little business that opened up directly onto the Nepean Highway, a different breed entirely to the two professional shopping centre establishments they had just visited. The front windows were grimy and the door was chocked open with a piece of bent cardboard, while the floor was a stained and cracked linoleum print. Inside, the walls were spattered with coloured stars so faded the special offers handwritten on them were barely legible.

One half of the shopfront was a self-service bank of coin-operated washing machines and dryers, while the other was the laundromat side of the business—a couple of racks of garments in plastic covers, a sparsely populated conveyer belt crawling along the ceiling. At the back of the shop was a counter for service, behind which a rangy man was bent at the neck over a hissing iron. He was the only person in the shop, with just a single washing machine thumping through its cycle to keep him company.

"Howdy cowboy," Darragh drawled as he approached, Matai a couple of steps behind. "Nice place you have here."

The man behind the counter popped his head up at the voice, blinked twice from behind his thick glasses, and hurried to turn down the volume on the portable radio he had been listening to. How he could have heard the smooth FM classics over the clunking of the washing machine was a mystery.

"What's that?"

Darragh flipped out his police identification. "Detective Kai Darragh, Victoria Police. Would you mind if we asked you some questions?"

The man behind the counter blinked twice more. He looked a little ratty in his frayed jeans, untucked shirt and self-mended glasses, and had a day-and-a-half's untended facial stubble to go with his acne-pitted face. He would not have been out of place washing car windscreens at traffic lights, but when he smiled it was languid and genuine.

"I'll just finish this one up, alright?" he said, and bent back to his task, humming the tune that was no longer playing on the radio. After easing a shirt sleeve free of wrinkles he tipped the iron into a standing position in a final huff of steam.

"Alright then," he said, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He seemed to be mildly cross-eyed. "What can I help you with?"

"Are you the owner?" Darragh asked. "The manager?"

"Both," the man said cheerily. He had a chip in his front tooth, resulting in a slight lisp.

"Looks pretty quiet in here." Darragh nodded to the other half of the shopfront.

"It's too early for them lot. Might get a few in later in the morning. Name's Peter. Peter Shaw." He hurried to the counter, rubbed a hand on his grubby shirt, extended it across the peeling green laminate. There was a twitchiness to the way he moved, almost like a rabbit.

Darragh took the hand, shook it, noticed vertical scars on the inside of the man's forearms and a yellow tinge to the man's ripped nails. Shaw offered the same hand to Matai.

"So, what were you after?"

Now that he was closer Darragh could smell the man over the chemicals and detergents. Sweat and nicotine were the most of it, but there was a grassier undertone, too.

"What kind of laundry tags do you use, Mr Shaw?" Darragh asked.

"Peter'll do fine. What do you mean?"

Darragh twizzled a finger in the air, simulating the loop. “The paper tags you attach to clothing to mark who owns them. Do you use them here?”

“Of course.” Shaw pushed his glasses back again, blinked twice more. His face still held that easy-going smile, but his movements were increasingly twitchy. “What about them?”

“Are they green?”

“Uh, they come in different colours. I use whatever the supplier gives me. Not too fussy, really.” He sniffed, ran the back of his hand across his nose. Peter Shaw was probably in his mid-forties, but could have been a hard-luck thirty-five. The latter would have made him a tad younger than Darragh.

“Have you used green recently?” Darragh asked.

“Going through a green roll right now.”

Darragh looked at Matai. The Fijian was casually inspecting the various *do this, don't do that* signs on the walls, not really paying attention.

“Would this be one of the tags?” Darragh asked.

To that point Darragh had ignored the brown jacket he was carrying over his shoulder—conspicuous, but worn blithely. It was the dead man’s jacket, from the blue bin liner at the hospital. Darragh had noticed Shaw’s eyes drift to it more than once.

Laying the worn, soft faux leather on the counter, Darragh folded back the collar to reveal the green tag attached to the hook loop. Shaw leaned forward, holding his glasses in place and squinting at the tag as though it was the first time he had noticed the garment.

“Looks like it. Yep, that could be one of mine.”

“Can you find out who it belongs to? Can you run the number to see who dropped it in?”

“Nope, sorry. Not with just the number. Each roll has the same series of numbers, so, you know, can’t really tell them apart once you’ve gone through them. And he pays cash, anyway, so there wouldn’t be any credit card records.”

Darragh cast Matai another glance. The Fijian was no longer strolling around.

“What’s that, Peter?” Matai asked.

“What’s what?”

“You just said *he pays cash*. Like you know whose jacket this is.”

Shaw squeezed his eyes together. His smile was slipping. “Well, yeah, I know him. Actually, I don’t *know* him, but, you know, I know who he is. He’s a regular. I recognise the jacket.”

“Who is he?” Darragh asked.

“Don’t know.”

“And he always pays cash.”

“Yup.”

“So, no credit card records.”

“Nope.”

“Anything else? Customer registration? Phone number to call when his clothes are done?”

Shaw shook his head. He drew in a big breath, his narrow chest puffing out then sinking away to nothing.

Darragh drummed two fingers on the counter, thinking. “Does he ever come in with anyone?”

“Nope, always by himself. Always the same day, every two weeks. Like clockwork.”

“When is that?”

“Last time was on Monday.”

Three days ago.

“And has he ever dropped off any dry cleaning for anyone else? In with his stuff, maybe?”

“Nope. Same items every time. Six shirts, three pairs of chinos, the jacket. Nine items, gets three free. Same day of the week, same clothes. Then he uses one of the machines for his sundries. Always by himself. Pays cash. Don’t know why, I mean, look at this thing,” he tapped the jacket with the back of his hand, hissed a laugh out between his teeth. “Why not just buy a new one? Hmm?”

Darragh nodded. He stepped back from the counter, cast his eyes wide around the dry cleaners.

“You have cameras in here, Peter? CCTV?”

The wastrel thin man bit his lip. It looked rough, chopped up, like he did it a lot.

“Not in here I don’t.”

“What do you mean *not in here*?” Matai stepped up to the counter. “You have it somewhere else?”

“No, no! Nothing like that. I can’t afford the stuff. And nothing ever happens in here, you know? What is there to steal, anyway? My green tags?” That hissing laugh again, the sound whistling through the chip in his tooth.

“The guy next door, the chicken place,” Shaw continued. “He’s got it. He’s had all sorts of trouble, put it in a couple of years back. So yeah, have a chat to him, he should be able to help. Name’s Marcos. Tell him Pete sent you.” Shaw nodded rapidly, seemed pleased and relieved to have been some assistance.

“Ok, thanks Peter,” Matai said. Then, to Darragh, “You all good, Kai?”

Matai had turned his shoulder to leave, but Darragh was still standing at the counter, watching Peter Shaw. His stare lingered for a moment, Shaw holding on to his goofy smile until it trembled, before Darragh turned to follow his partner.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Matai was almost out the open glass doors when Darragh stopped, spun neatly on his heels. The linoleum chirped under his rubber sneaker soles.

Shaw spasmed. He hadn't resumed ironing, hadn't moved an inch. He had just been waiting for the detectives to leave.

They hadn't left.

"Sorry, Peter," Darragh said, walking back over to the counter. "One last thing. I hate to ask this, but, well, it's kind of my job." Darragh had a prominent, hawkish nose that, when he chose to angle it just right, lent gravity to his otherwise boyish features. He cast his green gaze down the ridge at Peter Shaw's indecisive orbs.

"Are you dealing, Petey?" Darragh asked. "Or is it just a personal use kind of thing? For medicinal purposes, yeah?"

Shaw's hands were by his side now, fingers ticking the air listlessly. His smile had evaporated entirely. Shaw's eyes strayed to Matai, who was now blocking the doorway like a human brick. Shaw seemed to be breathing shallowly, and the thrashing of the washing machine in the background must have been resonating through his head.

Darragh clapped his hands, bringing Shaw's attention back to him.

"I don't care about the weed, Petey. No-one is taking you in for that. But I get the feeling there is something you aren't telling me. Do you need me to get some uniforms in here to help you get that cat off your tongue? They might need to look around a bit, too, make sure there aren't any other felines about the place. You know what I'm saying?"

Shaw swallowed, his Adam's apple slicing down his spindly neck.

"Ok, sure," he said at last. "There is one thing. I meant to tell you, ok? It's nothing. It slipped my mind."

"What is it, Peter?" Matai had stepped over now, arms crossed to accentuate his muscles.

"The guy. He was odd, you know? Really odd. Creepy. And when he'd bring his stuff in, sometimes there'd be blood on his clothes. Not a lot, but I notice that sort of thing. I think that's why he came in so often. It was odd."

There was something else, Darragh sensed. "And?"

Shaw sighed. His face was screwed tight. Extreme reluctance.

“Ok, alright? I had my niece working here not long ago, during the uni break. He creeped her out, too. I had some...things...look, it doesn’t matter. She was working the counter when he came in and he made quite an impression on her.”

“What’d he do?”

“Nothing. He didn’t say nothing, didn’t do nothing. Never does. He just freaked her out. It wasn’t just the blood, neither. Something about the way he looked at her while he was waiting for his clothes to dry. She—look, I don’t know what it was, I wasn’t there, but she came and grabbed me after he left. I was out the back. Working, right? Anyway, she asked me to mind the counter and she went out there and watched him for a bit. Followed him.”

“Followed him where, Petey?”

“To his house! Where else?” Shaw suddenly pulled back, hands up high, head shaking. “Look, I don’t want no more of this, alright? If you want the address I’ll give it to you. I just don’t want no cops coming in here, ok? I don’t want none of this coming back on me. I give it to you and we are done.”

Darragh shot a hand across the counter. “Deal.” A playful smile flashed across his face. “But write it on one of them green tags. As a memento. Green seems pretty apt for this place, doesn’t it?” He winked at Shaw.

With his big arms folded, thick lips thrust forward, and dark brows raised in a wild-eyed rebuke, Matai didn’t look as forgiving. “Why didn’t you say something before, eh? You could have saved us some time here.”

Shaw’s free hand—the one that wasn’t writing—was in the air, waving the comments away. When he finished he looked up, distress in his unsteady eyes. “Look, whatever he’s into I don’t want none of it. Ok? I don’t want him knowing I said anything to you. Alright?”

“I think you’ll be just fine.” Darragh took the green tag from Shaw in pincered fingers.

“But next time you just tell us straight up, you hear?” Matai added, still bullish.

“I done my bit.” Shaw had dropped further back behind the counter. “We’re good, yeah? None of this comes back on me?”

“We are *excellent*, Petey,” Darragh said. “You’ve been a champ. Look after yourself now, y’hear?”

The two detectives left the laundromat.

Chapter 3

It was nearing lunch time, so Darragh and Matai stopped at the takeaway next to Harry's. The chicken basking in the golden glow of the bain-marie proved too enticing, and both detectives found themselves back in their unmarked police car hunched over a steaming foil bag. Darragh finished first and began driving while Matai continued ploughing through his half chicken and large chips.

The address Peter Shaw had given them was on Neish Street, a brief, unremarkable stretch of suburban bitumen in Moorabbin lined by single storey, three-and-four bedroom brick homes. Because the street was hooked to dissuade non-local traffic it was a quiet area, the kind of place where kids could kick a ball on the road for hours and never see a car. Mature gum trees insulated the neighbourhood from the thrum of Nepean Highway and its tributaries, leaving only the droning of a lawnmower a street or two over to break the stifling quiet.

The house itself was much like every other on the street—a 1950s double-brick box with brown roof tiles, small, wood-paned windows, and a bland, plant-less front lawn. Down the side of the house ran a narrow, cracked driveway, leading to a single garage at the back.

Darragh was leaning against their unmarked police car, facing the property from the far side of the street. He had a slanted, contemplative posture—arms crossed, head tilted—as though appraising a painting at an art gallery. After polishing off the remnants of his lunch, Matai clambered out of the car and joined him, feet spread wide and hands on hips, like a labourer figuring out what job to do next.

“This it?” Matai wiped some chicken grease from his mouth with the back of a hand.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” asked Darragh.

“Yeah, I see it.” Matai nodded toward the property, thrusting his chin out. “Those bars, eh? What’s that about?”

It wasn't unusual for Melbournians to be security conscious and many houses in the area had metal roller shutters, but the house in front of Darragh and Matai was a step beyond. Black metal bars covered each and every window, zoo-strength rods bolted deep

into the brick. For such an ordinary, suburban house it came across as excessive. Disturbing, even.

Matai shrugged. “Let’s just get this done, eh?” He crossed the road, lumbering in his awkward way—legs set wide, propelling himself more from the shoulders than through the legs. His broad back bulged against his short-sleeved shirt, and faint rings of sweat stained his armpits.

Darragh followed, but at a pottering pace. There was something unusual about the house, and it wasn’t just the bars. It took a pause mid-street for the detective to place it.

The house was a blank. The other houses on Neish Street were physically similar—same era, same build, same brick—but they all had something this house did not: some sign of life. Next door, a child’s plastic spade and bucket lay discarded on the front lawn. To the other side a wooden plaque hung on the front porch, some difficult-to-read, slightly cobwebbed saying burned onto it. The house behind him featured a decade-old car parked imperfectly across the nature strip, grass growing up around sagging tyres. There were fresh oil drips on driveways. Basketball rings above garages. Shoes by front doors.

But the house in front of Darragh had none of these things. Now that Darragh looked more closely, there wasn’t even a number on the mailbox. Nothing to rest an eyeball on, nothing to risk drawing attention. The place was completely featureless, like it was trying not to exist.

Matai—used to Darragh’s unusual pauses and enquiring stares—ignored his partner and jogged bulkily up the two concrete steps to the front door. He was met by a metal screen door in the same style and colour as the bars on the windows, which he pulled aside with well-oiled ease. Behind was a slab of a wooden door, also black. Matai knocked on the wood three times. The dull thuds failed to resonate through the heavy timber.

“Solid door,” he said to Darragh as he waited. “You see anything, taci?”

Darragh hadn’t followed Matai up onto the porch, instead strolling over to the closest window. He was standing in the bare garden bed and peering past the black bars with cupped hands. He shook his head—*nothing*. The next window was equally unrewarding, with bulky curtains making it impossible to see inside.

Matai exhaled in mild exasperation. He regularly complained that nothing was ever straightforward. A minute had passed since he had knocked so he banged on the door again, this time using his fist like a mallet. Once more the solid wood absorbed the noise.

The sound of a car approaching caused both detectives to turn.

A small, unhurried hatchback trundled the length of Neish Street. Behind the wheel was a woman in her mid-fifties, craning her head to show concerned interest in the two brutish shapes poking around a neighbour's house. Darragh returned the stare, an exaggerated, Wild West squint that followed the woman until the car was out of sight. The lawnmower continued to drone a street over, and Darragh could smell fresh lawn clippings. Overhead, a helicopter buzzed northward, in the distance, a flickering dot against the cloud-dappled sky.

"Hello?" Matai called out, striking the door for a third time. He turned to Darragh. "No-one home, taci. Dead end. We'll have to pass it to the—"

"Shh." Darragh inclined his head toward the house. "Did you hear that?"

"Didn't hear nothing. Someone inside?"

"Try knocking again."

Matai did, louder once more. "Hello? Is someone in there? Police here!"

Both detectives listened closely for a response, but heard nothing.

"Not happening, taci. No-one here."

"Then why is the front screen unlocked?" asked Darragh. "They have all these bars on the windows and then don't lock the front door? Try the handle."

Matai did, swamping the round silver knob in a meaty hand. It jiggled, but didn't turn. There were also two gleaming deadbolts holding the solid door in place. Again, the security measures seemed excessive.

Matai shrugged at Darragh. Time to give up.

Darragh stood firm. "I heard something. There's someone in there. Let's check around the side."

The concrete driveway led around to the garage, its single beige flip-up door sitting passive and closed. Darragh tugged on the handle—locked. There was no second entrance to the house this way.

Darragh crossed over to one of the bar-clad windows on the side of the house. He held himself close to the bars, trying to block as much of the outside light as possible. There seemed to be a chink in the heavy curtains, the slightest sliver of a view inside.

“You see that?” Darragh stepped aside so Matai could look through the window.

“What am I looking at?” The Fijian cast an unenthusiastic glance at the crack.

“You don’t see it?”

“I don’t see nothing.”

“There’s someone on the ground in there. Not moving. I’m sure of it. You don’t see it?”

Matai looked again, this time with his head pushed in between the bars and faced screwed up as though it might improve his vision.

“I don’t see it, taci. It’s all black to me. What do you see?”

Darragh stepped away from the window and strode around to the front door. He slammed his palm against the resistant door.

“Hello?” Darragh called out, though lacking Matai’s volume. “Is anyone there? Police!”

Silence.

Matai joined Darragh on the front step. Darragh turned to him. “We’re going in.”

“What? Based on that?” He seemed genuinely put out. Darragh guessed his partner had seen an opportunity to pass the job over to the next shift, and now worried Darragh was dragging him into more paperwork.

“And how we gonna do that, eh?” Matai spoke with a curt clip.

Darragh slipped a hand into his jacket pocket, pulled out a chunky set of keys. It took a moment for the provenance of the object to register in Matai's eyes—the dead man's belongings, at the hospital. Darragh had told him there were keys in the bag.

"You serious?" Matai shook his head, frustration mixed with resignation. "Just do it, eh?"

There were close to a dozen keys on the jangling fob, and it took Darragh several moments of testing to find the one that slotted into and released the top deadbolt. The key for the second deadbolt was easier to locate—right next to that first one, very orderly—and it too slipped out of the way with oiled ease. The last lock was in the centre of the round silver knob, and it asked for a larger, older-style key. Darragh located it, turned the lock and the whole knob with it.

With some effort, Darragh pushed the stiff door open.

That is when the smell hit them.