



THE
NUMBER
94
PROJECT

CHEYENNE BLUE



CHAPTER 1

THE NOSY NEIGHBOURS

“PSSST.”

Marta glanced around. The voice was Coral’s husky ex-smoker’s croak, but although Marta had stopped outside Coral’s house, her friend was nowhere in sight.

“Over here.” Coral’s pale, age-spotted hand waved from behind the giant rosemary bush at the front of her yard. “Don’t keep walking.”

Marta pushed open the sagging front gate and spied Coral stooped behind the rosemary, peering down the street. “What’s up?”

“Bruce’s niece is here.” Coral’s scarlet chiffon scarf caught on the bush and she twitched it free. Her bright-red nail varnish flashed in the sun. “You would have walked into her if you’d kept going.”

Marta switched the litre of milk she carried to her other hand and pushed a pair of secateurs out of the way with her toe. “I need to get this milk into the fridge before it turns into sour cream. Since when has Melbourne been this hot in March?”

“You can drink your coffee black if the milk goes off. This, darling, is hot news. What do you think? Look quickly and tell me.”

Marta looked where Coral pointed.

A slender, white woman stood in the middle of Gaylord Street, hands on hips, scrutinising the row of terrace houses on the opposite side of the street to Coral’s. Her brief white singlet revealed tanned shoulders, and even from twenty metres away it was obvious her faded khaki shorts had seen better days. Lean legs ended in heavy workboots. A tool belt with hammers and a blocky tape measure hung low on her hips.

Something heavy plummeted from Marta's chest to her stomach. "Oh. It must be her."

"That's what I said. Try to sound a little excited." Coral tugged at Marta's T-shirt. "Get down. She'll see you."

"She'll spot me in about two minutes when I get home. She's my new neighbour." She scrutinised Coral. "Why aren't you already in her face saying hello as you do to everyone who even pauses outside your gate?"

"I'm doing my reconnaissance first. Once I've got a feel for her, then I'll be over there borrowing a cup of sugar and pumping her for information." Coral peered at Marta through heavily mascaraed eyelashes.

"Did ASIO recruit you overnight to spy for them?" Marta heaved a sigh and put the milk down in the shade. She'd thought she was doing better. But seeing Bruce's niece—for who else could it be prowling around outside his house—stirred up a longing for her old friend. She ducked her head momentarily to hide her damp eyes.

"Hey." Coral rested a motherly hand on Marta's shoulder. A quick squeeze and then she ran her hand down Marta's arm to clasp her fingers. "It's okay to be upset. I miss him too. And it's only been six weeks."

"I always thought Bruce would be around forever." She blinked fast and managed a wobbly smile.

"Ssh." Coral rubbed the back of Marta's hand. "His niece is probably lovely. She has his genes after all, so she's probably as funny and delightful as our Brucie was. And we don't know what she's going to do with the house—although she'll have to do something. It will crumble into the ground if she doesn't."

Marta bobbed her head and dashed at her eyes with the back of her hands. A deep breath. Another.

"Okay?" Coral tipped her head to one side and regarded her.

"Yeah." Marta's voice cracked, and she switched her attention back to the street. "Bruce ordered me not to be sad when he passed, but I've never been good at following orders."

Coral's scarlet lips parted in a grin. "I know, darling. We'll get through." She inclined her head at Bruce's niece. "And she could be just the woman to hold your hand as you do."

Marta flicked Coral's scarf away from the rosemary once more. "Not everyone who comes to Gaylord Street is queer. Bruce's niece probably has a handsome husband and three mischievous but adorable kidlets."

Coral made a rude sound. "Use your eyes. She's wearing a tool belt. And she has a fine pair of hammers hanging from it. When did you last see a woman with a tool belt who didn't like other women?"

"The last time I went to Bunnings and couldn't find silicone sealant. The aisles were full of women with tool belts, and if they were all queer, then the ten-percent theory is well and truly smashed."

Coral puffed out her cheeks. "And don't we wish that it was." She peered down the street again toward Number 94.

Bruce's niece took a couple of paces toward the house.

Marta knew what she was seeing: a tiny, overgrown yard in front of a shabby red-brick house with a black-painted door and a single front window. For the most part, the tightly packed houses along Gaylord Street were the long, narrow Victorian workers' cottages dating to the early 1900s. With a layout and plumbing to match.

Coral grabbed her arm and ducked behind the rosemary again. "She's looking this way."

Marta got an impression of chin-length brown curls, but she was too far away to see the woman's expression. Marta waved, and received a half-wave in return. "See, she's friendly. No need to hide."

Coral bobbed up with the secateurs in her hand and made some vague passes at the overgrown rosemary. Fragrant clippings fell to the ground. "Is she still looking?"

"Not anymore. You can stop pretending. You haven't trimmed this bush in ten years."

"Time to start then." Coral picked up some of the clippings and handed them to Marta. "Add these to your risotto, or whatever you're cooking tonight." She peered up the street again. "Look, she's going in."

The woman pulled something from her pocket, opened the rusty gate, and walked the three paces to the front door of Number 94.

The same wash of sorrow pushed into Marta's throat. Bruce was gone. His niece was here, and times were changing. She needed to accept that.

The woman disappeared into Bruce's house.

“I wonder if she’s ever seen inside before.” Coral, too, looked down the street. “For all that we loved Bruce, he was the world’s worst housekeeper. She could be in for a hell of a shock.”

The woman exited the house and went to a rather battered white truck parked outside. She pulled out a sports bag and returned to the house.

“If that’s all she’s brought, it doesn’t look as if she’ll be staying long.” Coral switched her gaze to Marta. “Have you still got a key?”

Marta nodded. “Another reason I should say hello—to give her the key.” She picked up the milk.

“Don’t forget to report back. Find out what she’s going to do with the house.”

“I will.”

“Bruce said...” Coral’s gaze fixed on the peeling purple paint on the gate. “That he’d remembered some of us in his will. He said I was one. And while he didn’t say any names, I’m betting you are too. Of all of us, you were closest to him.”

Marta nodded. “Yeah, he said the same to me. A keepsake, I imagine. Maybe he’s left me his souvenir teaspoons.”

Coral laughed. “Just what you need. Kitschy tourist spoons. But you’re probably right; that’s exactly the sort of thing he’d do. Me, I’m hoping for a couple of his china cats. Remember how, after every dinner party, when we’d all overeaten as usual and were awash with wine, he’d hold up that ugly figurine of a kitten, the one with bright-red protruding eyes and a pink bow around its neck and say—”

“Pussy’s bow, darlings. I’m stuffed to pussy’s bow,” they said together, and then dissolved into laughter.

Marta fancied she could hear Bruce’s great booming laugh honking along with them. She looked up to the sky and smiled, then glanced over at Number 94. The front door stood ajar. Bruce’s niece was probably walking around the cluttered interior, eyes wide with disbelief at his bad taste. “It will be strange having a neighbour again.”

“Don’t be too sure.” Coral nodded in the direction of Number 94. “She’s leaving already.”

The woman opened the door of her truck, but instead of driving off, she pulled out a couple more bags and a toolbox and took them inside.

Marta rested her hand on the gatepost. “I should go and say hello. See if she needs anything.”

“Go.” Coral gave her a push in the small of the back.

Marta stepped onto the narrow footpath and squeezed through the parked cars to cross the street.

Bruce’s niece had disappeared, and the door was now closed.

Marta entered her own yard. Her wooden fence was painted the same mint-green as the door, and the tiny yard boasted a tangle of herbs and native Australian shrubs: grevillea, correa, and pink heath. They spilled over the uneven brick paving in a riot of colour. Marta paused and let the pleasure of arriving home warm her once again, before she glanced over the low brick wall that separated her house from Number 94. The truck was still there but there was no sign of anyone. She opened her door and went inside. For a second, she paused to listen, but no noise came through the wall. Bruce’s niece didn’t seem to have inherited his rowdiness along with his house.

What was she like? Bruce had barely mentioned her, and his solicitor hadn’t given her name. There was only the impression of a lanky body and bobbed curly brown hair. Her clothes suggested she was a tradesperson of some sort. Well, that would be just the thing for Number 94.

No doubt Marta would find out about her new neighbour soon enough.

CHAPTER 2

THE NIECE FROM THE OUTBACK

HOW HAD BRUCE LIVED IN this clutter? Jorgie edged her way along the hallway. Her tool belt caught on a spindly table, tilting it alarmingly. Some china ornaments slid along the dusty surface, and a couple of them crashed to the floor.

Shit. When Jorgie stooped to brush the pieces into a pile, her toe collided with one of the table legs. The leg collapsed, and the rest of the figurines crashed to the ground in a melee of colourful china. Colourful, *broken china.*

Jorgie blew out a frustrated breath and stepped over the pieces. “Sorry, Bruce,” she said to the dust motes in the hallway. “I hope they weren’t your favourites.”

She’d clear it up later; right now, she was curious to see the rest of the house. *Her house.* She shook her head in disbelief. *Who’d a thunk it?*

Two doors opened off the long hallway. Bedrooms, she presumed. She pushed open the first door, and a long cobweb trailed over her face and hair. *Ugh.* She shivered and brushed it away, trying not to wonder where the web’s occupant was.

A wrought-iron queen bed and railings of clothing made the small room appear even tinier. It had to be Bruce’s bedroom.

A tweed jacket hung next to a rose-pink crushed velvet blazer, as if Bruce hadn’t been able to decide between Oxford scholar and camp, inner-city gay. A memory of Bruce wearing the blazer with a lime-green shirt edged into Jorgie’s mind. The two of them, eating in an African restaurant somewhere nearby. It was the last time she’d seen him, but he’d done so much for her in that one visit. It must have been most of thirteen years ago,

yet he still had the blazer. She pressed it to her cheek, catching her breath as the memory pulsed in her throat and a familiar guilt weighted her gut. Carefully, she rehung the blazer and smoothed the collar.

Jorgie pressed a hand to the bed. It was firm. Good. Once she'd cleaned up, vacuumed the dust from the room, and found some fresh sheets, she could sleep here. She returned to her truck to grab her sports bag and put it on the bed.

She left the bedroom and eased her way down the hallway, careful not to knock anything else. The polished floorboards sagged alarmingly as she stepped into the second bedroom, which was laid out as an office. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined most of the walls, and extra books were stacked in haphazard towers on the floor. A sleek, silver laptop looked out of place on the dark wooden desk.

The hallway opened into a cramped kitchen. Jorgie turned a slow circle. The appliances looked older than she was. Hell, even her mother would turn up her nose at them, but at least they were clean. The ancient microwave would probably suck more power than the national grid had to offer—if it worked at all. The tiny living room off the kitchen had cracks in the wall and a huge wooden table pushed to one side but otherwise didn't look too bad.

Where was the bathroom? Jorgie frowned and retraced her steps. No bathroom. That left the door from the kitchen. It took some tugging and jiggling of the rusty lock before she could open it. Outside, a covered concrete walkway led down the side of the house. Jorgie walked to where she could see two more doors leading back into the rear of the house.

She opened the first door. A pale-blue bathtub with a shower head dominated the room. Jorgie's lips twitched in a rueful smile. At least it wasn't avocado-green.

The final door led to a laundry area and toilet, and beyond that the passageway ended at the tiny backyard.

She blew out a breath. This wasn't the sleek, modern cottage she'd imagined when the solicitor had called. She'd dreamed of a light-filled, airy space of plate glass and polished timber, with racy modern art on the walls. The reality was rundown. But that was okay; it was hers.

Sort of.

A twitch of something she couldn't immediately identify beat in her stomach. The house was shabby. Bruce had had money—his will was proof of that—but he obviously hadn't cared to spend much on home maintenance. The twitch grew to a flutter. *My house*. She went out into the backyard, where rusty gutters and a sagging fence weighed down by creeper greeted her. The house was awful. But it was hers.

Jorgie threw back her head and laughed to the cloudy sky. She was a homeowner. She spun in a circle, arms outstretched, twirling and spinning with a delirious joy until she was dizzy and staggering. She collapsed on a wooden bench by the rear door and rested her head back on the wall.

What should she do?

The house needed a lot of work. Repairs to the walls and floorboards, and a new roof. The bones of it had to be made strong before she considered anything else. To make it liveable, desirable even, the house had to be brought into the twenty-first century. A modern bathroom. A kitchen that didn't look like it belonged in a museum with a sign reading *The 1950s housewife's daily duties were easy in a modern kitchen like this one*.

She worried her front teeth with her tongue. *Decisions, decisions*.

Jorgie returned to the kitchen and pulled open the fridge, bracing herself for a sour smell. But the fridge was clean and empty. There was a neighbour who'd written to her and Cilla offering condolences. What was her name? Marta? She must have cleaned out the fridge.

The two women who'd stared at her from across the road leaped into her mind. Stalking her more like—she'd seen them ducking behind the bush. Jorgie grinned. Maybe one of them was Marta. She'd have to find out.

Jorgie pressed her hands to her stomach. How long since she'd last eaten? Hours ago, and only a rather tired sausage roll she'd bought from a servo when she'd stopped for fuel. She'd bring in the rest of her gear then go grab a sandwich and takeaway food she could reheat later. Maybe she'd sit on the veranda and listen to the sounds of the city. Try to sort through the conflicting ideas and emotions in her head and figure out what she was going to do.

When she went out to her truck, the two women were still in the front yard a few doors up on the opposite side of the street.

Jorgie took her toolbox and remaining two bags from the truck and carried them inside, past the ornate metal plaque proclaiming *Number 94*.

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The house next door had pale-green paintwork and a cared-for appearance. It oozed charm. That must be where Marta lived, since Bruce's house—her house—was the end of the terrace.

The email from the solicitor leaped into her head. It was all very well deciding what she *wanted* to do, but it wasn't entirely up to her what happened to the house. Her stomach turned an uncomfortable circle. First, she had to decide what she was *able* to do.

Then, she'd have a talk with Marta and the others.

CHAPTER 3

A FISHING EXPEDITION

WHEN MARTA WATERED THE HERBS a short while later, her new neighbour's battered white truck was still outside Number 94. She stared at it as she waved the hose over the array of pots and cursed when the spray wet her feet.

She could knock on the door and introduce herself. After all, she'd sent a condolence card to Bruce's sister—the new owner's mother.

The spray from the hose soaked her sandals as she remembered Bruce's last days.

He'd clutched Marta's hand and told her things he wanted her to know: that his only regret was not returning to Thailand to seek out the young man with pansy eyes he'd fallen for when he, too, was young. That Marta should get a cat once he was gone, as he knew she hadn't out of consideration for his allergies. And then he told her his house was going to his niece as she would have need of it most of all.

"Our little gay village in the heart of the city," he'd said, his voice so faint Marta had to bend close to hear the words. "How I have loved living here." His eyes opened and pierced Marta with their gaze. "Don't be sad for me, Marta. Celebrate life, celebrate living. Enjoy every moment and remember me fondly."

"I will," Marta replied. "I'll remember your fondness for pre-dinner martinis and after-dinner port, that terrible pink blazer of yours with moth holes in the collar, and those wonderful dinner parties that went on until morning."

"We had good times, didn't we?" His voice fluttered, so barely there for such a larger-than-life man.

“We did,” she said. “I love you, dear friend.”

Bruce’s soft sigh had been her only answer.

And now Bruce’s niece was here, and Marta should go and say hello rather than dithering and drowning her sandals. Should she call Coral and ask her to come too? But it was cocktail hour, and Coral would be filling her wide, old-fashioned champagne glass before settling onto her front porch to hold court for anyone who passed by.

Marta turned off the hose and squelched back inside. She put a couple of the cranberry muffins she’d made that morning in a paper bag and checked her hair in the mirror in the hallway, smoothing some strands that stuck out from her short bob and fluffing the back so it didn’t look so flat. Then she walked the few steps from her gate to Number 94.

The bell didn’t work, so Marta banged on the door as she always used to do. After a minute, the tread of feet echoed on the wooden floor and the door swung open. Up close, Bruce’s niece appeared older than Marta had guessed, maybe late twenties. Her white skin was tanned golden, as if she spent most of her time outdoors. A trail of cobwebs festooned her curly hair, probably from poking around in the house. She didn’t look much like Bruce: her cheekbones were higher, her nose thinner, her lips fuller, her neck longer—but her eyes were the same, warm and brown, with faint laugh lines at the corners. *Wow*. Marta shuffled her feet in the damp sandals. The woman was arresting, with her direct gaze and regal, almost haughty expression. But then her face broke into a friendly grin and a dimple winked in her right cheek. The standoffish first impression vanished like champagne from Coral’s glass. It was impossible not to smile back.

A dimple. Don’t look at it. Marta averted her eyes. *Kryptonite.*

“Hi,” the woman said. “I think I saw you in the street earlier?”

“You did,” Marta said. “I live next door though. I’m Marta, Bruce’s—” She caught herself. “Your neighbour.”

“I wondered if you were. I’m Jorgie, Bruce’s niece. My mother Cilla was Bruce’s sister.” Her gaze moved from the top of Marta’s head, across her face, and down her body to end at her still damp feet.

Marta’s toes curled in her sandals. Jorgie’s gaze wasn’t predatory; it seemed more curiosity, a cataloguing of her uncle’s friend, but it was still unexpected—and somewhat flattering.

“Thank you for your card. It was kind of you. Cilla and Bruce weren’t close. But you probably know that as you were his friend.”

“Bruce never talked much about his family,” Marta admitted.

Jorgie’s lips twisted. “Yeah. Well. I’m not surprised.” She glanced back along the hallway. “I was about to sit on the veranda for a while. Maybe have a beer. Would you like one?”

Marta hesitated. Would she be interrupting? But Coral’s voice echoed in her mind: *Find out what she’s going to do with the house.* And they were going to be neighbours, for however long. “Sure. Beer is always good. If you’re not rushing off anywhere?”

“I’m not,” Jorgie said. “I was going to reheat the takeaway I bought earlier and have an early night.” Her thousand-watt smile flashed again. “I’d really like it if you’d stay.”

Warmth trickled down Marta’s spine. That smile was dynamite. “Then I’d love one.”

“I’ll go grab them. It’s VB brand; nothing special.”

“That’s fine.” Belatedly, Marta held out the bag. “These are for you. They don’t really go with beer, but you might enjoy them for breakfast.”

Jorgie took the bag. “Thanks. I haven’t dared look much at the kitchen yet, except to wonder if the microwave works.”

“It does. But it makes twice as much noise and takes three times as long as you’d expect.”

“Sit.” Jorgie gestured to the wicker seats on the veranda. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Marta sat, shedding her sandals and curling onto the seat as she’d always done, thinking of the times she’d sat here with Bruce—him with his customary martini, her with a beer or a mug of green tea. They’d sat and watched the world of Gaylord Street pass by, their friends and neighbours, people heading to the Retreat Hotel on the next corner or to stroll along the Yarra River.

Jorgie returned with two small bottles of beer and handed one to Marta. For a moment there was silence.

Thoughts swirled in Marta’s mind, possible conversation openings, but none seemed quite right. She could hardly come straight out and ask what Jorgie intended to do. Maybe she should start babbling about the

neighbourhood, or the weather. She pulled her knee up, rested her arm on it, and slid a sideways glance at Jorgie.

“I had a look around Abbotsford this afternoon,” Jorgie said. “I’ve only been here once before, and it was a long time ago, when I was fifteen. Cilla and I were living in South Australia then. I had some of the usual teenage drama, and I stormed out and came here to Bruce. I remember we walked by the river and went out to eat. Then he paid my coach fare home. I never saw the house.”

“It’s probably more dilapidated now, but it’s basically the same. Same paint, same kitchen and bathroom. Same dust.” She rolled her eyes. “Bruce wasn’t the handiest with the vacuum.”

“Mm. I’ve learned that.” Jorgie’s lips twitched.

Marta’s glance fixed on them. Up close, Jorgie’s lips were fascinating. Full, and with a delightful bow to them. They looked as if their owner smiled a lot. And the dimple, oh God, the dimple. She’d never been able to resist those cheeky little indentations. She was getting as bad as Coral, checking out every woman she talked with.

“I’m trying to decide what to do with the house.” Jorgie switched her direct gaze to Marta. “I’m sure you’ve heard I’ve inherited it?”

“Bruce told me before he passed.” Marta’s stomach roiled with anxiety. What was Jorgie going to do? Sell? Move in? What if she rented it to a gaggle of noisy college students? It was possible.

“It was a total surprise, to be honest.” Jorgie rolled the bottle between her palms and stared out at the street.

A couple walking past with a French bulldog gave a wave. Marta waved back, and after a second, Jorgie lifted a hand.

“It’s kinda nice here. I drove around for a while and then took a walk along the river,” Jorgie continued. “I didn’t expect such green space in the heart of Melbourne. There’s a huge brick building right on the river, surrounded by gardens. What’s that?”

“Abbotsford Convent,” Marta said. “It hasn’t been a convent for decades, of course. Now the rooms are offices and spaces for practitioners and artists. There’s a couple of restaurants and a bar in the courtyard. It’s a great place.”

“I’ll have to explore more.” Jorgie flashed her a smile.

Marta's stomach churned a little less. The smile made her neighbour seem more approachable—less the niece no one knew and more like Bruce whom everyone knew. She returned the smile with one of her own. "I have a studio at the convent. I'm a potter. Well, part-time potter, part-time social worker." She pointed to a row of bright flowerpots in the alcove in the veranda wall. "Those are my work."

"They're gorgeous. I love the colours." Jorgie reached out and touched the trailing vine that hung from one of them. "Someone must have been watering these. You?"

Marta nodded. "No point letting them die." Was Jorgie ever going to turn the conversation back to what she was going to do with the house? She wished Coral was with her. Coral would know what to say. She'd look Jorgie square in the face, bray her big horse laugh, call her "darling", and ask outright if she was going to live in her inheritance, sell it, rent it, or demolish it. If only Marta had a quarter of Coral's confidence with small talk, she'd have been fine. It was easy enough to talk with her clients: straightforward words about housing affordability and where to get assistance. But social chit-chat? Always hard with a new person.

"I expect you're wondering what I'm going to do with the house." Jorgie settled back in the wicker chair.

Marta itched to brush the trail of cobwebs away from Jorgie's hair. Instead, she set down her beer and clasped her hands in her lap as if she were on the tram to St Kilda. "Yes. We're all...that is, Bruce's friends, are curious as to what will happen to Number 94. If I had to guess, I'd say you're going to sell."

"This is all new to me." Jorgie waved a hand at the street. "I live in a tiny town—Worrock—in outback New South Wales. The population is only a few hundred."

"Cilla lives there too. I remember the name."

"Yeah." Jorgie's lips compressed. "I can't leave her alone for long. She's one reason I shouldn't move here. And there are others. I should sell." One tanned shoulder lifted in a shrug.

Marta nodded. Jorgie didn't sound as if the decision was done and dusted. There were probably a hundred reasons why a move was impractical. No doubt Jorgie had work, commitments—maybe she did have the handsome husband and the pack of kids. Marta bit her lip. Jorgie might consider her

options—which sounded like a Victorian marriage proposal—but Marta was sure she'd sell.

She swallowed the lump in her throat at the thought of Bruce's house under the auctioneer's hammer. It would be the end of an era when new people took over. When there were people who weren't Bruce holding court on his veranda.

"This street is tightly held. Very little comes up for sale, or even for rent. Especially in this stretch, between Weatherby and Bright Streets. Bruce always used to call it our little gay village." She shut her mouth with a snap, afraid she'd said too much. She shot a glance at Jorgie. Surely it wasn't news to her that her uncle had been gay? And, by implication, she'd outed herself as well.

Jorgie nodded and regarded Marta with a slight smile. She didn't seem perturbed by what Marta had said; indeed, her smile was a knowing one. Marta tried to breathe quietly. A gorgeous woman with a dimple. That was it; she might as well rip her clothes off and throw herself at Jorgie's feet right now.

"Then, hopefully, the house would sell easily. I have a few decisions to make first though. It's not as straightforward as it seems."

Marta stared out at the street. What did Jorgie mean by that? Probably something complicated to do with probate. She wouldn't have a clue.

"Tell me about Bruce's life here," Jorgie said. "If you don't mind, that is. I didn't know him, not really. One visit, Christmas cards, an occasional email. Our family are lousy communicators, and Cilla's the worst of the lot. I know he was a philosophy professor at Melbourne Uni, but what about his friends? I don't even know if he had a boyfriend."

Marta let out a slow breath. So Jorgie knew Bruce was gay. That made it easier. "Bruce was talking about retirement when he got sick. He said he wanted to spend more time on his hedonistic lifestyle, but that was a joke. His friends on Gaylord Street were his family— Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean—" Marta stared down at the dusty tiles. *Tactless idiot!*

"Hey, that's okay." Jorgie rested a hand on Marta's arm briefly. "Found families are special, and I'm glad Bruce had that."

"He always said we were one big happy family here. And then he'd laugh his great booming laugh and argue with Coral for the millionth time about the best way to make kimchi. Shrimp paste or no shrimp paste—that was the debate." Marta smiled up at the rusty veranda roof. "He never had a

boyfriend as long as I've known him. He tended to remain within the circle of close friends."

"You, of course," Jorgie said. "Who else?"

"Coral. She lives at Number 69. That was her I was with when we waved earlier. She and Bruce were around the same age—early sixties—and they were forever reminiscing about the good old days, and the good old gay scene around inner Melbourne."

"Was there one?"

"To hear them talk, yes. I never did sort fact from fiction when they got to reminiscing. But it was quite different back in the seventies—a lot more underground." Marta took another sip of her beer. "Then there's Leo. He bought his place about five years ago." Marta pointed at the double-fronted weatherboard directly opposite. "Leo's lovely. You won't miss him when he walks past. He's ripped and bulky, and wears muscle tees. But he's the sweetest person. He does carpentry and labouring work from time to time, so if you need a hand, he's your man. Leo organises our street get-togethers. We all bring food and booze and hang out in the middle of the street." Her gaze flicked toward Jorgie. "Stay around long enough—a week or so—and you'll get an invite. Accept, as long as you're not easily shocked."

"I'm not." A smile tinged Jorgie's voice. "So you, Coral, and Leo, you were Bruce's family in Gaylord Street?" Jorgie tilted her head and regarded Marta. "If you don't mind me saying, you're a lot younger than Bruce."

"Maybe I'm an old soul." Marta shot her a smile. "I'm a homebody really. And like Bruce, I found my family in Gaylord Street. My parents both died when I was in my late teens, and I've been here pretty much ever since. I rented for a while, then bought my house about eleven years ago when it was as cheap as chips. Not like now." She pushed her hair behind her ears. "You'll do well if you sell it. But for me, I don't see myself living anywhere else. My friends are here, and my studio's nearby. My social-work clients are all in the inner city. What else is there?"

"When you put it like that, it makes sense."

"Bruce had younger friends, apart from me. Leo's the same age as me—mid-thirties, and then there's Elfin. She's nineteen and has lived here for a couple of years. She shares a house with Lulu. They're a few doors up on this side. Bruce and Elfin got along well. He was always very protective of her." Did Jorgie think it strange that Bruce was closer to neighbours than his actual relations? If she did, she wasn't showing it.

Marta snuck a glance at Jorgie's profile. It reminded her of something that should be in the National Portrait Gallery: an aristocratic profile with a determined jaw and high cheekbones. Her lips, though, were anything but severe. The full curve of the lower one made Marta think she appreciated the sensual things in life. And the dimple. She'd like to touch it with the tip of her tongue. She shook herself. Where had *that* thought come from?

"There's a heap of things I should ask you." Jorgie turned to face Marta. "About Bruce. About this house. Whether I'm going to fall through the floorboards in the bedroom, what day the bins get collected, but I think they'll have to wait."

"The first two will take a while. The floorboards in the north east corner by the window are rotten. And bin day is Tuesday." Marta's beer was finished, and from the way Jorgie was twisting the bottle, so was hers. Marta stood. "Thanks for the beer. Please drop around if you need anything. You know where to find me."

Jorgie stood as well. "I will. And thanks for the muffins." She suppressed a yawn. "I'm sorry, I'm not being very welcoming, but it's been a long day."

"I'll leave you to it." Still Marta stood, watching the arm muscles revealed by the singlet Jorgie wore. A mental shake, then she took the three paces to the gate. "Bye."

"See you."

Jorgie's gaze made her neck prickle as she rounded her own gatepost and took the three equivalent steps to the front door.

Once inside, she went down the hall to her open-plan kitchen and living area. Light flooded the warm, welcoming space, with its polished floorboards and green plants dotted around. Her own pottery provided touches of bright colour.

Marta opened the fridge and pulled out vegetables for a stir-fry. Maybe she could invite Jorgie over for dinner one night. Bruce's kitchen was a bit outdated. It was one reason Bruce's dinner parties were all catered. And he used to have dinner at least one night a week with Marta, another night with Coral, and frequently with Leo.

It was a pity Jorgie wasn't intending to stay. She'd have been a connection to Bruce. Maybe she'd change her mind. There were so many maybes. Marta sighed. Whoever said change was a good thing obviously hadn't known about Gaylord Street.

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