

Nothing to Fear

A Blackbridge Novel

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Nothing to Fear: The Blackbridge Series

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DEDICATION

To you, my reader – because you're awesome!

Chapter 1

The numbers in front of Hannah Novak blurred as she stared at them, but they didn't change into the numbers she wanted. She sighed. Not once had she thought building a luxury retreat was going to be easy, but she hadn't expected it to be quite so hard either. She shouldn't have let her grandparents push her into it so soon. She wasn't ready, but she couldn't tell them that – not without them asking why.

Her skin tightened.

That was something they never needed to know.

The phone's ring was shrill and she reached for it in relief. "Blackbridge Holiday Park. How may I help you?"

"Help me, Hannah Banana. You're my only hope."

Hannah grinned at the plaintive tone in Lincoln's voice. "What can I do for you, Sergeant Zanetti?"

"You can tell me you've got an onsite cabin free for the next few weeks."

She laughed. "The summer holidays start next Thursday," she said. "We're booked solid until February."

Lincoln swore. "Everyone is booked solid."

"Glad I was the last one you came to," Hannah joked. "Why do you need accommodation?"

"It's for our new senior constable. Do you remember Ryan Kilpatrick? He lived here for a couple of years during high school."

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Hannah's heart fluttered. "Yeah, I remember him." She'd never forgotten her first crush. He'd arrived in town when she was eleven and he was a much older sixteen. She'd been so in love with him that she'd ridden into a ditch one day when she'd seen him unexpectedly. That most mortifying experience had morphed into the best day of her eleven-year-old life, when he'd picked her up and taken her home to her grandparents to have the grazes on her knees tended. She smiled at the memory. He'd been good-looking then, what would he look like now?

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Lincoln said. "The government house he was supposed to stay in has been trashed by the last tenants, and with Christmas coming up, we can't get it repaired in time. The closest accommodation available is in Albany and it's a reasonable drive if he needs to come out in an emergency. Plus, he can't leave his kid at home."

"He's got a child?" She ignored the flash of disappointment. Of course Ryan would be married by now.

"Yeah, an eight-year-old boy."

She hesitated, glancing at the spreadsheet in front of her. "When's he due here?"

"Sunday night. Have you got something in mind?"

It would be tight to get the cabin finished, but it was possible. It would give her a boost of funds, and having a family as her first guests would give her a chance to get used to having someone else on her property. A way to ease herself into the situation.

"Hannah, I'll be forever in your debt if you find me a solution," Lincoln pleaded.

The idea of taking the next step sent her pulse racing, but his plea twisted her arm. "Ah, well it's not ideal ..."

"What have you got?"

"It's kind of small for a family." She winced at her tone. She was supposed to be trying to rent the cabin not trying to make him change his mind.

"It's just Ryan and his boy."

Hannah froze, her chest tight. "What about the boy's mother?"

"Ryan's divorced. Have you got a place for them to stay?"

No Mrs Kilpatrick. That wasn't good. Her breath came in

short pants and she closed her eyes, concentrating on her breathing. She'd be out there on her own with only Ryan and his boy. It was too risky. She couldn't be alone with any man these days. So few could be trusted.

"Hannah? You gotta help me." Lincoln wasn't going to let up.

She opened her eyes. If she was ever going to make the retreat succeed, she *had* to do this.

Ryan had been kind to her when she was a child. She had trusted him then, and now he had a son. Surely, he wouldn't do anything bad with his son around.

Hoping she wasn't making a mistake, she said, "The first cabin at Hideaway Retreat is almost finished. It needs the flooring and curtains installed, and the walls painted. I might be able to get it done by the weekend." She still hoped he would refuse.

"Can I take a look at it?"

She sighed, checking the time. Lynette would be starting soon. "I'll meet you out there in half an hour."

"Perfect, I'll see you then."

Hannah hung up and put her head in her hands, hating the nausea in her stomach. She should have kept her mouth shut.

The back door rattled as Lynette came into the office. "Morning, Hannah," she said. "It's already shaping up to be a scorcher today." She hung her wide-brimmed straw hat on the hook in the hallway and wiped her forehead.

"Morning." Quickly, Hannah went over the work that was required around the park.

"I've got this," Lynette said. "You've got plenty of work on your construction site."

Hannah forced a smile to her face, thinking about Lincoln's request. "I sure do." The summer holidays would cut into the time she had to work at the retreat as the caravan park would be full and there were always guests needing something. She whistled for Joe, her brindle-coloured bull mastiff who was lying on his bed in the corner, and grabbed her keys. "Shirley will be in at ten. I'll see you this afternoon."

The warmth hit her as she stepped outside, holding the door open for Joe to follow her. She breathed deeply. It was still early

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so there was no one in the pool, and no kids in the playground. Most of the people staying in the park at the moment were grey nomads – retirees who travelled the country in their caravans. Many of the park sites nearby were empty, but there was a red car parked at one of the onsite cabins. By the end of next week, the park would be full of people who wanted to get away before Christmas. The southern coast of Western Australia was a popular tourist destination. Breathing out, some of the tension left her. Having grown up at the park with her grandparents, she knew every bit of this ground. It was her safe zone, the place she'd fled to after both traumatic events in her life.

She wanted her retreat to feel like that for her guests – a safe haven, a place to get away from it all and just *be*.

With that in mind, she headed for her car.

Lincoln was waiting at the entrance to her property when she arrived ten minutes later. She waved at him as she drove in and he followed her in the police car. Her four-wheel drive shuddered as it bounced over the potholes. She'd have to grade the gravel drive if Ryan took the cabin. It had been on the list of things she had to do before she made the cabins available, along with setting up more of the facilities – the nature walks, widening the path to the beach and fencing off the lookout area so no one fell off the steep cliff. She would have to do all of it at once if she rented the cabin. She'd hate for Ryan's son to wander off and hurt himself.

The scent of peppermint trees floated through her open window, reminding her of how much she loved this land. On a quiet night she heard the waves washing up against the shore, and the cows from the next property quietly mooing. It was the perfect location for a retreat, for people to get away and relax.

When the road forked, she took the left branch and pulled up in front of the wooden cabin. It looked good, comforting, quaint. There was a short path up to the front door and she still needed to plant the garden beds under the windows with some hardy Australian natives, but aside from that, the outside was finished.

Getting out of the car, she waited for Joe to jump down before facing Lincoln.

“You’ve done a great job, Hannah.” He stood at a comfortable distance from her with his hands in his pockets, looking at the cabin.

“You haven’t seen inside yet.” She opened the door. The concrete floors and bare walls needed a good clean to remove the remaining building dust before they could be finished. “The kitchen’s small, but equipped with stove, oven and microwave.” She led him into the main room, making sure Joe was with her. “There are two bedrooms in this one, both with ensuite.”

Lincoln peered into the bathroom and grinned. “Very nice!”

She smiled. “I can get the painting finished by Sunday, but the flooring isn’t due to go in until the end of next week.” They wandered back out into the main living area.

“What about furniture?”

“Hasn’t Ryan got his own?” she asked.

“He left most of it with his ex,” Lincoln said.

Damn. She’d been hoping to spend the furniture budget on grading the road. “All right. I’ve got pieces picked out and on order in Albany. I’ll ask if they can deliver it this week.”

“This is perfect, Hannah. Ryan said he didn’t need a lot of room. How much do you want for rent?”

She hesitated. No, she had to do this. She had to get over her fear of being alone with men. If she was going to run this facility, she needed to be comfortable with people coming and going. Though her target market were couples and groups, there were sure to be times when singles came to stay. Still, she added a little more to the price than she needed, in the hope Lincoln might refuse.

“That’s perfect,” Lincoln said as they walked back out to the police car. “I finish work at five. I’ll come around and help you paint.”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to.”

“You’re doing me a huge favour here. I’ll rustle up a few more people to help and we’ll be done in no time.” He got into the car and drove off before Hannah thought of some way to dissuade him.

“You’ll be fine,” she told herself. “It’s Lincoln and if he brings others, it’ll get done twice as fast. You’re safe here.”

Joe nudged her hand and licked it.

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She had Joe to protect her as well. Joe was a complete softie, but a great deterrent. Arguments tended to end pretty quickly with him by her side.

Everything would be all right.

She just wished the tightness in her chest would ease.



Ryan Kilpatrick pulled in to the Zanetti property early in the afternoon on Sunday. The driveway was lined with towering eucalyptus trees that shaded the road from the hot summer sun. The cheese factory off to the right was a large silver building that reflected the sun's light, and the little shop next to it was a quaint rammed earth building with outdoor seating and a small playground for children. As he rounded a bend in the road, the farmhouse came into view. It was nestled amongst a lush garden, lovingly tended by Mrs Z and had a huge tin roof that came down to a wooden verandah, which wrapped all the way around it.

“Are we going to live here?” Felix asked, the hope in his voice clear as he peered out the window at the farmhouse and surrounding land.

“No, mate. This is Lincoln's parents' place. He said he'd meet us here and show us where we're going to be staying.” After driving for four days, Ryan was exhausted, but for the first time since he'd made the decision to leave Karratha and move his son two thousand kilometres away from his ex-wife, he relaxed. The farmhouse was like coming home. It was the only place where he'd ever felt he belonged. The tension eased out of his shoulders.

“There are so many trees.”

“Sure are.” It was vastly different from the red dust of the Pilbara, the only landscape Felix had known. It had been an amazing car trip south as Felix had exclaimed over every new thing he saw.

A couple of dogs came racing out from around the side of the house and they were followed by a tall, dark-haired man. Ryan grinned. “There's Lincoln. Let's get out.”

Felix scrambled out of the car and ran over to the two dogs,

patting them enthusiastically. Perhaps when they were finally settled, he could get Felix a dog. Paula had always hated them.

“You made good time.” Lincoln held out a hand.

Ryan shook it and they hugged. “Yeah. Once we got through Perth I just wanted to get here.” Felix slipped his hand into Ryan’s. “You remember my son, Felix.”

“The last time I saw you, you were about this big,” Lincoln said, holding his hand to his thigh. “Why don’t you both come inside? Mum’s putting on the kettle and I heard mention that she’s made her famous cassata cake.”

Felix perked up.

Ryan grinned. He fondly remembered Mrs Zanetti’s cake. “Lead the way.”

They followed Lincoln inside the farmhouse. The scent of the trailing honeysuckle on the verandah took Ryan straight back to his teenage years when he and Lincoln would sit out there after a day of surfing and talk about what they were going to do after high school.

“Ryan!” Mrs Zanetti rushed over and embraced him.

His chest swelled as he wrapped his arms around the small woman, inhaling the scent of roses. She’d barely changed in the nine years since he’d seen her last. “It’s great to see you, Mrs Z.”

“And who is this?” she asked as she stepped back.

“My son, Felix.”

Felix looked up at her wide-eyed. “Hello, Mrs Z—”

“Zanetti,” Ryan prompted.

“Nonsense. Call me Nonna.” Mrs Z cuddled Felix. “I’ve been waiting for grandchildren for years, but neither of my boys is willing to give me any.” She took his hand. “There’s a piece of cake in my kitchen with your name on it.”

Felix glanced over his shoulder at Ryan, his expression one of excitement as he followed Lincoln’s mother down the hallway.

Ryan’s eyes watered at her instant acceptance of him and his child, and he blinked rapidly. Mrs Z had been more of a mother to him than his own had been. He shook his head. “She hasn’t changed.”

“No,” Lincoln agreed. “She was thrilled when I told her you were moving back.”

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He swallowed hard and forced a smile to his face. “We’d better get in there, or Felix might not leave us anything to eat.”

Lincoln clapped his hand over Ryan’s shoulder. “It’s good to have you here.”

“It’s great to be here.” He’d been stupid not to come back sooner. No, he’d been naive, hopeful ... delusional more like it.

He shook his head. He didn’t want to think about Paula now.

He was going to enjoy his homecoming.



Hannah checked her watch for the third time. Lincoln had promised they would be there by three and it was coming up to half past. She had half a bathroom tiled at the other cabin and wanted to finish the rest before she called it a day.

Finally, she heard tyres on the gravel road and Joe barked. She scanned the room one more time to make sure everything was in place. Aside from helping with the painting, Lincoln had called in a few favours and got the flooring done early, and picked up the furniture she’d ordered. She was pleased with how it had turned out – it was comfortable but with touches of luxury in the bathrooms and bedrooms. The perfect little getaway. With a deep breath to brace herself, she went outside to greet her new neighbours.

The white four-wheel drive that pulled up was covered in a film of red dust. There was a winch on the front that meant business, and a heavy-duty roof rack on the top full of containers. Ryan climbed out of the driver’s side and her stomach flipped. He had definitely improved with age. His thin, wiry frame had bulked out into lean muscle, his skin was brown from the summer sun and his short brown hair was trimmed neatly. He smiled at her and it was the same as she remembered – slow and sweet.

Ignoring her rapidly beating heart, she held out a hand. “Welcome, Ryan. I’m Hannah.” His hazel eyes had mesmerised her when she was eleven, but there was no recognition now – not that she expected him to remember her. She’d been so much younger than him.

“Nice to meet you.” His grip was strong, firm and he held on a little too long.

Nerves flooded her body, swamping the attraction. “Where’s Lincoln?”

“He got recalled to duty – a car crash in town.” His voice was the same gentle, calm tone. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

The tension leapt to Hannah’s shoulders and she moved away. Lincoln wasn’t here. She was alone with Ryan. Where was Joe?

“Dad, is that a dog or a horse?”

The voice startled her. She hadn’t noticed the young boy get out of the car. He was the spitting image of his father and he was staring wide-eyed at Joe, who was sniffing at one of the newly planted kangaroo paws. Hannah whistled and the dog trotted over. “This is Joe. He’s a dog – a big one. He likes to be patted, if you want to say hi.”

The boy inched forward and then patted Joe’s coat. Joe sniffed him and licked his hand.

“You’ve been given Joe’s seal of approval,” Hannah told him.

The boy laughed and wiped his hand on his pants.

“This is my son, Felix,” Ryan said.

“How’s it going, Felix?” Hannah asked.

“Pretty good. Are we staying here?” he asked his dad.

“Yeah, for a while,” Ryan told him.

Felix glanced around, and then nodded.

Hannah smiled. “Why don’t you come inside?” She was careful to keep Joe with her as she led them into the cabin.

“This is nice,” Ryan said.

She warmed at the compliment. “There’s a bedroom with a bathroom at each end, and the kitchen has all the essentials.” She handed him a card with the key. “There’s a lookout near the beach that I haven’t fenced off yet. If you go up there, don’t go too close to the edge. If you have any problems, you can find me at the Blackbridge Holiday Park.”

Their fingers brushed as Ryan took the card and put it in his pocket. He was so very male and awareness hummed along Hannah’s skin, startling her. She needed to go.

He could easily overpower her. He was taller than her and

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the muscles in his arms were well-defined. All he had to do was grab her and she wouldn't be able to get free. Her breath quickened. There were two exits and she had room to move. She placed a hand on Joe's head, letting the softness of his fur under her palm calm her. She could do this. "Have you got any questions?"

"No."

"All right." Relief flooded her. "I'll leave you to get settled in." Saying goodbye to Felix, she left, hurrying up the path to the next cabin.

She was OK. Nothing had happened. She was safe, and she had Joe with her.

Still, when she entered the isolated cabin, she checked that all the doors were locked before she continued tiling.



Hannah walked out the door and Ryan admired the way her hips swayed in a natural, sensual way. It was the only thing overtly feminine about her. She'd not cleaned up to greet him, wearing a blue T-shirt two sizes too big and baggy black shorts that were covered in smears of cement. The clothes hid any shape of her figure. Her hair was held off her face in a headband that made the short blonde strands poke out in different directions. She obviously didn't care about her appearance, but her face was pretty.

There was something both familiar and odd about her. He would have to ask Lincoln if Hannah had lived in Blackbridge when he had. She seemed nervous around him. She'd checked where her dog was a number of times during their very short conversation. Why would she build a retreat if she wasn't comfortable around people?

"Dad, can I have this room?" Felix called.

Ryan wandered through to the bedroom that had a double bed in it. It was nicely made up with a pastel-green bedspread and mountains of pillows at the head, and a modern steel lamp on each side table. He had an urge to flop onto it and go to sleep. It had been a tiring few days.

"Let me check the other room first." He went across the

living area. Both bedrooms had double beds and his ensuite included a spa bath. Felix would love having such a huge bed to himself. "It's all yours, champ," he called.

"Yes!"

Ryan smiled at his son's enthusiasm. Felix had far more energy than Ryan had at the moment, but he needed to get some of their things unpacked, including the few groceries he'd bought.

"Come and give me a hand," he called and went out to the car. He handed Felix the lightest of the grocery bags, and he carried the rest. On the next trip in, he brought Felix's toy bag and left it in the living area, where Felix dived straight in. Ryan was happy to let him play. The rest of the stuff was too heavy for him to carry. He wandered back out to the four-wheel drive and stared at the boot and roof rack full of containers. Nine years of his life and it all fit into one car.

This was all he needed. He had escaped Paula's barbed tentacles and he had his son. They could easily buy more things, and he would make sure Paula never hurt either of them again.



A couple of hours later, he tucked Felix into his new bed. He picked up the book they were reading together and opened to the chapter they were up to.

"Dad?"

"Yes, mate?"

"Will Mum be able to find us here?"

Ryan put down the book. He couldn't read the expression on Felix's face. "I have to let your mum know where we are." He hoped that she didn't want to contact them. "Are you all right with that?"

Felix shrugged. "She won't be able to take me away, will she?"

His throat tightened. "Not if I can help it." He sighed. He should be honest with his son. "She's still your mum, and that means she has a right to see you."

"But she won't want to, will she? She said she didn't want me."

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He hated that Felix had heard one of Paula's rants – this one about Felix ruining their life. He hated that his ex was manipulative and cruel, hated that he'd stayed with her for so long, hoping she would learn to love them both. "I hope not."

"Good. It's better when it's just you and me." Felix snuggled down in bed. "Where did we get up to in the story?"

Ryan was more than happy with the change in subject. He began to read.

Later, after he'd switched off the light in Felix's bedroom, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and went outside to sit on the narrow verandah. The light was beginning to fade and something moved in the bushes. As his eyes adjusted, he spotted a kangaroo grazing. He debated waking Felix, but there were likely to be other days when they would see them. He relished the scent of eucalyptus and dirt.

He was here.

After six months of planning and four days of driving, he was finally back in Blackbridge. The town was as he remembered it and the Zanettis had welcomed both him and Felix the same way as they'd welcomed him a decade earlier. This was a place of family, of community and he'd wanted to return years ago.

But Paula hadn't wanted to leave Karratha.

He scowled. He'd wasted too much of his life on his ex already. Still, he couldn't ignore the ache in his heart. He'd failed at the one thing he wanted desperately to be good at – being a family. He'd wanted Felix to have the security, support and love he'd never had growing up, but it hadn't worked. Paula had only cared for herself.

Ryan sipped his beer as he forced his thoughts elsewhere. He'd be starting work tomorrow, and Mrs Z had agreed to take care of Felix during the school holidays. Felix would adore playing on the small hobby farm and Mrs Z had promised to introduce him to kids his own age so that when he started school next year he'd have some friends.

He'd made the right decision, bringing Felix here – he was almost positive of it. Paula had become increasingly manipulative, making threats and accusations that made Ryan worry about her mental health, but he hadn't been able to

convince her to seek help. Now she was too far away to hurt either of them.

Felix needed a more stable influence in his life and Ryan could give him that in Blackbridge. Here, he had the Zanettis for support and a decent work roster so he'd be available when Felix needed him. He would be able to make it work. This would be good for Felix.

He hoped.

As he played with the label on his beer bottle, the gravel crunched in front of the cabin. They were a good ten minutes' drive out of town, so it could only be Hannah. Still, he got to his feet to check. He walked around the cabin as Hannah and her dog passed. "Finished for the night?" he called.

Hannah shrieked and whirled as Joe let out a low growl.

Ryan held up his hands. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

Hannah put a hand on her dog, but he continued to growl. "Did you need something?"

"No. I heard footsteps and was checking it out."

"Ah, well I've finished at the next cabin over and I'm heading home."

"You walking back to town?"

"No." She hesitated before she added, "I've got a place on the property."

He hadn't noticed any other cabins on the drive in. Though he couldn't see the cabin she'd been working on either. It was as if they were in the middle of nowhere, on their own private property. "Do you need a lift?"

"No!" She took a step back and stuttered. "It's a-a nice n-night for a walk. I'll see you later." Without waiting for a response, she hurried away, almost at a jog, checking over her shoulder before she disappeared from view.

What was wrong with her? She seemed almost scared of him. It made no sense. He had done nothing to threaten her and he was a police officer.

Did she have something to hide?

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