

Nothing to Gain

A Blackbridge Novel

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Nothing to Gain: The Blackbridge Series

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DEDICATION

To Colleen Browne and Marie Perrier

Two of the best teachers a child could ever hope for.

*Thank you for encouraging my writing, teaching me to challenge the world, and to
think outside the box.*

Chapter 1

The clock on the wall taunted Mai On with its slow-moving minute hand. Maybe the battery was dead. It was either that, or the day was dragging as badly as it seemed.

Normally she loved working out the front of the bakery, catching up with friends and neighbours, and hearing all of the positive comments about the delicious baked treats in the big glass cabinets, but normally she'd had a midday siesta to catch up on sleep. Today she'd been working since one a.m, and maintaining a friendly and bright façade was becoming more difficult as the day wore on.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the jingle of the bell above the door signalled the last of the lunch rush customers had left.

“Thank God,” Sylvia said, taking off the powder blue apron she wore and throwing it on the bench. “I’ve got to go to the toilet, I’ll be right back.”

Mai nodded as her employee dashed out through the kitchen to the back. She could handle this. She'd done much longer days when she'd first set up the bakery a couple of years ago. She was just out of practice.

Mai collected a couple of dirty dishes from one of the small tables lining the big, glass windows, and wiped the wooden surface.

Turning back to the counter, she smiled. This was all hers.

She'd designed the bakery to have a nineteen twenties feel,

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like the building it was in. The display cabinets had wide, rounded glass with powder blue name tags for each item. Smudged fingerprints at toddler-height marred the perfection, but she didn't mind. It was a joy to see the excited faces of children trying to decide which treat to choose.

She smoothed the tissue paper used to wrap the bread and stacked a couple of small white cardboard boxes neatly on the bench ready for the next customer. They'd almost sold out of bread for the day, so she transferred the remaining loaves to one wicker basket and tipped the crumbs into the bin. The big glass jar containing Florentines was almost empty, as was the shortbread jar. She'd need to make more tomorrow.

Simply reviewing her place, planning for tomorrow, soothed her, lifting some of her fatigue.

She'd worked hard to make it a success, and no one could take it from her now. She would grow; she'd buy the building she was in, then expand into the empty unit next door. More tables meant more customers. *On the Way* would become even more of an icon in Blackbridge.

Mai smiled as she carried the plates back into the kitchen.

The bell over the door rang and she hurried back out. "Hi, Aaron!" She'd left messages for her new landlord over the past couple of weeks, but he hadn't returned her calls. She hadn't seen him since his father's funeral when he'd inherited the building, and he wore the same black suit, still a little too big for his small body, his thinning grey hair combed perfectly in place. She hadn't heard there was a funeral in town today.

He took a step back. "Mai, I, ah, didn't think you'd be here."

"Jodie called in sick. What can I get you?"

"A sour dough loaf and a custard tart, please."

She took the loaf from the shelf and wrapped it. "Any update on when you're putting this building on the market?"

Aaron fumbled through his wallet. "How much?"

Mai frowned. "Did something go wrong with probate?" She boxed up the tart.

"No. It's sold."

It took a second for his words to sink in. "What?"

"I sold the building." Aaron shuffled away from the counter, staring out the window.

“*This* building?” Mai clenched the edge of the counter. “The building you promised to sell to me after probate went through?”

He nodded.

Mai shook her head, refusing to believe him. “Today is not the day to be joking, Aaron. I’ve been on my feet since one this morning.”

“I’m sorry, Mai. I got a better offer.” This time he briefly met her eyes, guilt in his expression.

Her breath left her like the air out of a failed soufflé. “Who? There’s no one in Blackbridge who’s interested.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s, ah, a Perth company.” He swallowed and handed over a twenty dollar note. “Shadbolt Property Developers.”

The words made her stomach churn. She stared at him. “You sold out to some money-grubbing city property developer?”

Aaron bristled. “It’s not like that, Mai. He offered to buy the building and the land behind it. You only wanted the building.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, give me the opportunity to bid too?” Her brain couldn’t quite process what she had heard, but anger seemed like the right emotion.

“You couldn’t afford it.”

“How the hell would you know what I can afford?” She shoved his change at him.

“Don’t be angry, Mai. It was a business decision.”

Mai breathed deeply as the anger in her head snapped and snarled to be let out. This pathetic little man had betrayed her, had sold her livelihood out from under her. Letting out the breath she tried to be rational. Perhaps nothing would change. She had a lease. “When does settlement go through?”

He winced. “Today.”

No wonder the slime ball hadn’t answered her calls. This is what she got for being patient, for not wanting to be pushy during Aaron and his family’s grieving process. She’d waited too long. “All right. Do you have some contact details? I’d like to speak to my new landlord.”

“Not on me. I’ll email them to you. I’m sure he’ll be in touch.” He shuffled towards the door. “I gotta go.” He fled.

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Mai closed her eyes.

“What does that mean?” Sylvia walked out from the kitchen where she’d been waiting and slid the apron back on, tying it around her curvy body.

“I don’t know.”

“They won’t shut the bakery will they?”

She had no idea. Property developers had a bad reputation in the south of Western Australia. “I doubt it,” she said with more conviction than she felt. “We have a lease.”

“Does it cover the owner dying?” Sylvia asked.

“I’m sure there’s a provision, don’t worry about it. I’ll call the new owner as soon as Aaron sends me his details and get it all sorted out.” Mai forced a smile on to her face. “I’m going to whip up some more shortbread biscuits while we’re quiet. Give me a yell if you need a hand serving.”

Sylvia nodded and Mai escaped to the kitchen.

Her mind whirled as she got the ingredients out of her walk-in storeroom. This could not be happening. She had a plan – she’d received the pre-approval from the bank and was ready to take the next step in her career. Now, she could lose everything she’d worked so hard to build, not to mention her apartment upstairs. She could become jobless and homeless instantly. Her stomach twisted so violently that she dumped the ingredients on the stainless steel bench and closed her eyes, taking a couple of seconds to settle herself.

She shook her head. No need to jump to the worst possible conclusion. Just because a property developer had bought the place didn’t mean he would knock it down. The building had history, and yeah, it might need rewiring and the plumbing was occasionally temperamental, but it was still pretty good for a century-old building.

But Aaron had sold the block behind the building as well. It was full of weeds and building rubble and had been empty forever. It also stretched the length of the block. No one bought an empty plot of land without planning to build on it.

She inhaled the sweet scent of the vanilla bean as she added the seed to the mixing bowl and then turned on the mixer. The whir was like meditation music, calming her thoughts. She’d been through troubles before and come through them. The best

case scenario would be if the developer only wanted the block and she could buy the building from him.

Or perhaps he'd keep the building and honour her lease.

He couldn't knock it down. This was her home, she'd had her first taste of independence here, it was where she'd pursued her dream, and the place where she'd met Hannah, Kit and Fleur, back when it had been a lolly shop and she'd just moved to town.

It was full of life-changing memories.

Without the bakery she was nothing.

She removed the mixture from the bowl and gently formed it into a ball, the soft, creamy dough almost sensual against her fingers. She rolled it out and used the heart-shaped cutter to make the biscuits before putting them on a tray and in the fridge to cool. After quickly cleaning up, she scanned the shop where Sylvia was serving Gladys and her young grandson. Mai hurried out and offered the boy a melting moment from the jar they kept for children.

"You'll never make any money if you give your biscuits away." Gladys handed over the exact change.

Mai grinned. Gladys said the same thing every time she brought one of her grandchildren in. "Everyone deserves a treat." She waved as they left the bakery.

Sylvia took off her powder blue apron and folded it. "I'm off now."

"All right." If only she'd been able to stay back for an hour to close up. "Have fun on your date tonight."

Sylvia grimaced. "Maybe. Dating at my age is like playing Russian roulette."

Mai chuckled. "Forty-five is not old."

"No, but there aren't any decent eligible men in town." She waved as she walked out the door.

With the last of her staff gone and the bakery thankfully empty, Mai slid into a seat to rest her aching feet. It was never very busy at this time of the day. If she closed early, she could get some more baking done now, because tomorrow would be bedlam.

The idea was way too tempting.

With a groan she forced herself up and then went around the

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small eating area, pushing in the chairs and checking the sugar bowls.

Sylvia had already cleaned the sticky fingerprints off the cabinet glass and rearranged the treats so the cabinet didn't look so empty. Mai loved making all of her products, breads, cakes, biscuits and pastries, but tonight would be long and hard as she had additional special orders for New Year's Eve.

Her plan to hire another baker would have to wait until she'd cleared up the mess Aaron had left her in.

With the front of the bakery clean and inviting, Mai headed back to the kitchen. She'd do the Florentines next because she could leave the mixture if she was interrupted by customers.

The bell on the front door rang.

Speak of the devil. "Be right there."

The man standing in her bakery talking on his phone was not her usual clientele. Despite the thirty degrees temperature outside, he wore a dark grey suit that fitted him to perfection. The jacket framed his shoulders, hugged his waist and stopped just short enough to show how his pants defined his butt nicely. Mai took another look just to make sure.

He was probably in his early thirties but flecks of grey shot through the dark brown at his temples. Still he was a nice piece of eye candy and definitely not from around here. She would have heard about a guy this gorgeous by now.

She cleaned the coffee machine as she waited for him to hang up.

His voice was low, but she caught some of the words.

"Let me know if I can do anything to help," he said. "I can be back in Perth in a couple of hours. The project doesn't need me here." He was silent for a moment and then sighed. "All right. I'll talk to you later, Mum."

She liked a guy who called his mother.

As the man hung up he turned to Mai and smiled. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Holy cow. Whoever this guy was, he had a killer smile – friendly and open and a little bit flirty. Be still my heart. She called dibs – she'd spotted him first.

Mai cleared her throat. "Nothing to apologise for. What can I get you?"

“What do you recommend?” That smile again. She willed her pulse rate to slow.

“Do you prefer sweet or savoury?”

“I’ve always had a bit of a sweet tooth, though I try to control it.” He brushed a hand over the front of his suit. “I don’t get to exercise as much as I’d like.”

His body looked plenty fine to her.

She mentally rolled her eyes. That was the kind of comment Kit would have made. What was wrong with her? She scanned the sparse cabinet. “If you want something small, the jelly cakes are light and fluffy,” she said. “Or if you want to be more decadent, then the bee stings are divine.”

“The bee sting it is,” he said. “And I’d love an espresso as well.”

“To have here?”

“Yes, please.” He was silent as she set the coffee machine going. “I was actually hoping to catch the owner, if she’s available.”

Mai put the bee sting onto a plate and slid it in front of him. “What about?” She took the fifty dollar note he handed her.

“I’d prefer to talk directly to the owner.”

Everything clicked into place: the suit, the out-of-town vibe, the coyness. Hell. “You’re from Shadbolt Property Developers.”

He raised his eyebrows and gave a short nod.

Mai counted his change as her brain whirled. “The building’s new owner.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Aaron was just in. He mentioned it.” She turned to the coffee machine, brushing at the flour on her apron, then smoothed back the loose strands of hair that had fallen out of her bun. As she reached for the cup, she subtly sniffed at her armpits. Not too bad. Still it wasn’t the most powerful position to start from. She handed the man his espresso. “I’m the owner.”

“You’re Mai On?”

She nodded.

He held out a hand. “Nicholas Shadbolt. It’s lovely to meet you.” His smile was pure charm, his teeth perfect and white, and a vision of a great white shark baring its teeth popped into her

head.

She shook his hand, his skin firm and smooth, the type that used a computer for work. Not like her own that had calluses and burns from years of work in the kitchen.

“Do you have time to talk?”

She hesitated. She wanted to know his plans, but she also wanted to scream at him for daring to buy the building. The irrational, grumpy Mai was running on only a few hours’ sleep. She fought back the banshee. It wasn’t the kind of first impression she wanted to make. “It’s not a great time,” she said. “I’ve had an employee off sick and I’ve got a lot to finish.”

“What about tomorrow?”

She laughed. “New Year’s Eve is one of my busiest days.” She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Her brain wouldn’t cooperate, wouldn’t process all the work she had to do, but this had to be resolved as soon as possible. “If Jodie calls in sick again the only time I’ll have free is before work.”

“Fine. What time is that?”

“One a.m.” The burst of surprise that flashed over his face was intensely satisfying.

“You’re the baker as well as the owner?”

“That’s right.”

“All right. Shall I meet you here at one?”

Mai gaped at him. “Seriously?”

“I’m always serious about business.” He smiled.

Annoyance waged a war with respect. She shouldn’t have opened her big mouth and challenged him, but she could hardly back down now. She needed to know his plan, had to find out where she stood. Her chest squeezed and she breathed through the stress. “I can give you thirty minutes,” she said. “Knock on the front door and I’ll let you in. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” Without waiting for his response, she escaped into the kitchen.



The beeping alarm pierced Nicholas’s dream full of flames and accusations. He rubbed his face as his pulse rate slowed. It had been two months since the incident and yet it continued to plague his mind in an endless loop of how he could have done

things differently.

It was still dark outside, almost pitch black, but his phone gave him enough light to make it to the ensuite bathroom. He flicked the light switch and squinted at the glare from the glazed white tiles. He closed his eyes as he stepped under the warm spray.

He needed to have his wits about him with Mai this morning. And a middle-of-the-night meeting after a largely sleepless night wasn't the best position to start from.

Mai On was nothing like Nicholas had expected. He'd assumed the owner of the bakery would be much older, someone who'd been in the industry for years and was ready for a change. The money on offer for them to vacate the premises should have been snatched up without an issue. But no, Mai was younger than him, and she wasn't happy.

So much for his assumption she was a sales girl. He'd taken in her petite frame, the most gorgeous, almond-shaped brown eyes, and for the first time being exiled to Blackbridge had seemed like a good thing. But she wasn't the sales girl – she had a whole lot more emotionally invested.

Shadbolt normally didn't deal with small fry. 'Go big or go home' was their motto, but Nicholas's father had needed some way to get rid of him and still save face.

Guilt hit him hard. He was lucky he still had a job. If it hadn't been for his mother standing up for him...

He'd fucked up badly. He deserved worse than this.

Nicholas prayed for the pressure in his chest to ease and then twisted off the taps.

He needed to focus on the job at hand. Everyone had a price, and Mai was a small town business owner. He'd charm her, convince her he offered a solid deal that would be good for her business in the long run. And part of the process meant getting up at the witching hour.

The warmth of the night surrounded him as he reviewed his wardrobe. The full suit held little appeal, but he wouldn't give her any excuse to refuse him. He wouldn't fail his father a second time.

The drive from his parents' holiday home to the bakery only took five minutes. The dark hid the flaking paint on the building

he'd bought. Instead of looking decrepit, the building had a majesty about it, the façade solid and decorative, a pillar of the community that had seen the town grow.

It would be a shame to see it go.

He parked at the front, noting the bright lights shining at the back in the kitchen and as he walked up to the front door, the shop lights switched on and Mai strode to the coffee machine. She wore white chef's pants and a white T-shirt, with her hair tied back in a tight bun. She appeared a lot more alert than he felt.

Nicholas tapped on the glass and she turned, her eyebrows lifting as if she was surprised to see him there. She'd learn that when he made a promise he kept it.

She held up a hand and went back into the kitchen, returning a minute later with a bunch of keys. As she opened the door, the comforting scent of baking bread floated out. "I didn't think you'd show."

He snorted at her bluntness. At least he knew where he stood with her. She had no faith in him – that club had a lot of members. "You said it was your only free time."

She grunted and locked the door behind him. "Free time is a relative term. I've been here a couple of hours already."

He followed her behind the counter, ignoring the rumble in his stomach at the pastries on display. The bakery had such charm, from the pretty blue product name tags, to the big rounded glass jars filled with biscuits and the bread baskets waiting to be filled.

"Coffee?"

"If you're having one." He didn't need to give her any more excuses to be irritated with him.

She quickly made two cups – his an espresso just the way he liked it.

"Thanks."

"This way." Mai dragged a chair from a tiny office, which was barely big enough for the desk and floor safe, and rolled it over to him. "Take a seat."

He sat as he scanned the kitchen. There was nothing tiny about this space. Two huge ovens billowed heat into the room and through their glass windows he could see bread already

beginning to rise. Three big stainless steel tables were in the middle, one already stacked with bread pans and a mixer whirred in the corner. Mai wasn't just alert, she'd been working for hours.

She spread flour liberally over the table and then as if timed to perfection, the mixer stopped and she dragged its dough onto the table, the muscles in her arms bunching as she did so. He'd never realised muscled arms were sexy.

He sipped his drink. "This is great coffee."

"Yes it is." She barely glanced at him. "We've got twenty minutes before Penny starts, so I'd like to get down to business. Did Aaron mention he and I had a verbal agreement for the purchase of this building?"

Shit. His insides clenched. That information hadn't been in the project notes – unless he'd missed something again. "No, he didn't."

"I didn't think so. I've got pre-approval from the bank for the loan. How much do you want for it?"

Nicholas frowned. "For the building?"

"Yes. I'll buy it from you." She stopped kneading and glared at him as if daring him to disagree.

He shook his head. "It's not for sale."

"Look, I know you bought the land behind," she said. "Surely you don't want to have to deal with an old building with its dodgy wiring and plumbing. I'll take it off your hands and you can concentrate on whatever plans you have for the block."

Her tactics were good – acting as if it was a done deal was what he would have done. She really wasn't going to like his response. He shifted in his seat. "That won't work. The building is being demolished."

Mai grabbed the edge of the bench as she swayed. "What?"

Hell. Nicholas leapt to his feet and propelled her into his chair. "Sit down." He didn't need her collapsing.

She sat, leaning forward, her eyes closed, chest heaving.

What a bastard. He should have broken it to her gently.

She needed water, where could he find a glass? He hurried into the cafe area, finding a mug next to the coffee machine and filling it from the tap. After he handed it to her, he gave her a minute to recover.

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When the mug stopped shaking in her hand he said, "There's a new development replacing the building."

"But I've still got three years on my lease."

"There's a relocation and demolition clause in it."

She shook her head. "What does that mean?"

He hated the concern in her eyes, but he steeled himself and took an envelope out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to her. "There are a couple of options," he said. "You can choose to find different premises for your bakery, or you can take one of the shops in the new development when it's completed."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" she demanded. "Between you demolishing my business and rebuilding?"

"You'll be compensated for it."

Her look of disgust piled an extra foot of guilt onto him. She got to her feet and pushed past him to finish kneading. "Do you know how many businesses that are forced to close down actually reopen?"

"This will be a planned closure."

She shook her head. "Have you got shire permission for the redevelopment?"

"That's just a matter of time." He preferred the business woman to the fragile person she was a second ago.

"You think so?" She chuckled. "You're not from around here, are you?"

He didn't like the confidence with which she said that. "My parents have a holiday home in Blackbridge. I've been coming here for years."

"For what, a week at a time?"

He nodded.

"Then you know squat. What are you planning to do? Knock this beautiful old building down and put up some generic supermarket?" Her gaze pinned him and he fought the urge to squirm.

Why did this woman make him feel guilty about something he did every day of his life? "Didn't you say it had dodgy wiring and plumbing?"

"That's part of its charm." She winked and his heart

stuttered, an uncomfortable sensation.

He couldn't be attracted to her.

Bad things happened when he let his personal feelings influence his business decisions. He'd learnt that the hard way. "The development will contain eight units."

"And be one of those white, soulless concrete monstrosities?"

It wasn't how he would describe it. He nodded.

"Do you really think it will suit a town like Blackbridge?"

"It will provide more opportunities to the town's residents. It's called progress, Miss On. Perhaps you've heard of it?" He regretted the words as soon as they came out. He didn't normally get defensive.

She laughed then, the sound light and rich and it stirred something in his chest. He squashed it.

"Sure I have," she said. "Progress enables me to make as many biscuits, bread and pastries as I do. I'm quite fond of it in fact." She put the dough in a large container and went into another room where he heard the thud of things being moved about. Her voice a little muffled, she said, "I'm also fond of history. Did you know this building was built in 1895 and was the first grocery store in the town?"

He shook his head.

She returned to the room carrying a huge bag of flour. "It was also the only store left standing when the bush fire of twenty-two swept through, destroying half the town. It provided the essentials the town needed to start rebuilding."

As she spoke, Nicholas could see the development falling down around his ears. If the building did indeed have that kind of history, there was no way the shire would let Shadbolt knock it down. Was his father setting him up? Did he want him to fail again? "Be that as it may," he said, "it's my building now."

Mai nodded agreeably. "And since you're the landlord, the back steps need repairing. The safety rail is holding on by a nail – literally – and the toilets keep blocking. I'd appreciate it if you could fix them as soon as possible."

Gritting his teeth, he made a note. "I'll see to it." He didn't need someone falling and hurting themselves. "Do you want to show it to me now?"

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“You won’t see a lot; the back light over the car park is also broken.”

Of course it was.

At that moment a woman in her mid-forties walked in, similarly dressed in white pants and T-shirt. She yawned.

“Morning, Penny,” Mai called.

Penny looked at him, her curiosity clear. “Good morning.”

“I’ve got about a dozen special orders for tonight’s celebrations so we’ve got a lot to do,” Mai continued.

“Right. I’m on it.”

“Before you start, can you let Nicholas out?” She glanced at him. “We were finished here, weren’t we?”

Not by a long shot, but he knew when to regroup. “All the information is in the envelope,” he said. “Call me when you’ve read it. I’m sure you’ll have questions.”

She nodded.

Nicholas followed Penny out the door. He couldn’t stuff up another development.

But Mai On was not going to be easy.



Mai’s chest was tight, making it hard to breathe, as Nicholas walked out the door. He couldn’t take her bakery. She wouldn’t let him. She’d worked too damned hard over the past few years to let it all go.

She figured she had a maximum of three days before Nicholas realised she’d been lying about the history of the building, but at least it would give her time to figure out what to do. She couldn’t let him knock it down. She’d met the musketeers here and her whole life had changed for the better – she’d discovered hope for the future. It was her home and her refuge.

“Who was that?” Penny asked as she returned to the kitchen.

Mai swallowed hard. “Our new landlord.”

“What?” Her eyes widened.

“Aaron sold the building to him, despite our agreement.”

“What a bastard!” Penny glanced to the front door. “That explains why he’s wearing a suit at this time of the morning.”

Yeah, Nicholas hadn’t missed a trick. Mai had given him a

fifty-fifty chance of turning up, but the fact that he had and was dressed for business meant he was serious.

Penny got to work and Mai's mind wandered.

Aaron's betrayal had completely blindsided her. He could have hit her over the head with a two by four and she'd have been less shocked.

What on earth was she going to do now?

She'd had plans to expand and suddenly she might lose it all.

Her throat tightened.

No, she couldn't think like that. She needed to plan.

There weren't any empty stores near the main drag. She could hardly be *On the Way* bakery in the middle of nowhere. Besides, she didn't want to leave. This was her place, she'd worked until she was exhausted to build it into an institution.

Moving, even temporarily, felt so much like having to start again.

And that was too depressing to even contemplate.

She'd almost given up several times over the past couple of years – too tired to go on. If it hadn't been for the support of her friends she would have.

The bakery was part of who she was.

Could she really go through it all again?

If she wasn't close to town, she wouldn't get the foot traffic of tourists wandering the town and she'd no longer have the view down the hill to the river. People would get their bread at the local supermarket, rather than from her.

What if it signalled the beginning of the end? What if she couldn't recover? What if she failed?

She bit her lip. She'd put everything on the line to become a baker. She'd disappointed her mother, and endured working odd hours and lack of sleep for the past eight years. The very idea of having to start from scratch made her want to weep. There was simply nothing right about Nicholas's proposal.

She had to convince him that renovating the building was a better business decision than knocking it down.

He was *not* taking her bakery from her.

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