

Nothing to Hide

A Blackbridge Novel

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BANTILLY
PUBLISHING

First published by Bantilly Publishing in 2018

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Nothing to Hide: The Blackbridge Series

EPUB format: 978-1-925696-21-9

Mobi format: 978-1-925696-20-2

Print: 978-1-925696-22-6

Cover design by Lana Pecherczyk

Edited by Ann Harth

Proofread by Teena Raffa-Mulligan

DEDICATION

*To my friends at the Vintage Motocross Club of Western Australia.
Thank you for your support, encouragement and patience, especially when
I was still being lapped on the track.*

*And to my husband for introducing me to it all, especially the swinging –
sidecar swinging that is!*

Chapter 1

Will's muscles tightened as he stepped from the white Parks and Wildlife Services four-wheel drive. The high-pitched whine of the motorbike engine set his teeth on edge, and the sharp smell of two-stroke fuel irritated his nose. Why the council had agreed to let a motocross track be built on the edge of the national park, he didn't know.

This was the last place Will wanted to be. He wasn't good with confrontations and the chance that the motocross rider tearing around the track would care about the endangered orchids he'd found, or his proposal was slim. The conversation would end up in a shouting match — no not a match, that meant he had to take part. Will would be shouted at while trying to convince the other person to at least listen to him. That's how it usually went.

But the orchids were important, and he wouldn't let this biker stop him from saving them. This was the perfect opportunity to discover who was in charge. He hadn't expected the gates to be open, or for someone to be riding around on a fifty-year-old motorbike.

He crossed his arms and leaned on the chest-high metal fence that separated the track from the spectator area. The rider wore a dirt-bike helmet, but little else in terms of safety gear — blue jeans, black boots, and a loose blue T-shirt. Sure, it was thirty-two degrees in the shade today, but safety was important, especially on bikes. If he fell off, he'd have a hell

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of a gravel rash. The bike disappeared as the track twisted away from the spectator area and was hidden by bush, but its whine still polluted the air.

Will took stock of the facility. To his left was a clearly marked pit area, though the bays were cobbled together out of sheet metal and recycled posts and looked like they would blow over in a strong breeze. A white Hyundai with a small trailer was parked in front of one of the bays. Behind him, towards the entrance gates sat a clubhouse — a large, deep green corrugated metal building, with its door open. It had a verandah of sorts, nothing more than a concrete slab and a couple of wooden posts that extended the roof a few metres. The whole building had to be a sweat box in summer.

The roar of the bike grew louder again. The rider took the final corner and barrelled towards the finish line. Will stood straight and raised a hand to get his attention.

The bike didn't slow.

Will coughed as the dust kicked up by the bike floated over him. The rider hadn't seen him or didn't care.

Maybe someone was in the clubhouse.

The heat inside hit him like a wave and he grimaced. It was the type of heat he was used to back home in Goldwyer which was two thousand kilometres north of the small coastal town of Blackbridge, Western Australia. No one was inside, but another door to the right was closed. "Anyone here?" His voice echoed.

Mismatched chairs and tables were stacked along one wall and on the other were kitchen facilities — a sink and oven, deep fryers, a couple of fridges and a kettle. Everything was second-hand and ancient, much like his own furniture.

An engine stuttered outside, and Will turned to the door as the rider pulled up outside the clubhouse.

Nerves prickled his skin.

This was it. He'd rehearsed his speech. He would simply outline the situation clearly and hope to get through the conversation without being called a tree-hugging hippy or worse.

The rider killed the engine and dismounted, and then leaned the bike against one of the wooden poles. He took off

his helmet.

Correction — *her* helmet.

Fleur Lockhart.

Every thought, every prepared sentence was wiped from Will's mind. He took in her flushed cheeks, neat brown braid, and sparkling blue eyes. She pushed wayward strands of hair from her damp forehead as she smiled at him. "Hey, Will. What can I help you with?"

How could he have mistaken her for a man? The blue T-shirt clung to her small breasts, defining her lean figure and those denim jeans hugged her legs like *Hardenbergia* on a tree. Wow.

"Will?"

Crap, he was staring at her like a love-struck idiot.

He swallowed hard. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm the president of the motocross club," Fleur said. "I had to get a few things ready for our busy bee this weekend and thought I'd squeeze in a ride while I was here."

The president. Of course she was.

She tilted her head. "Can I help you with something?"

His mouth was drier than Goldwyer in summer. "Ah, yeah, the orchids." Damn it. Could he sound more like an idiot? This was not going to plan.

Her lips lifted. "Orchids?"

He cleared his throat and tapped his thigh. "I, uh, discovered some endangered orchids on the fence line between the national park and the track." And unfortunately they were more track side than park side.

Fleur frowned. "Do you want permission to dig them up?"

Will shook his head. This was the tricky part. "They're critically endangered because they're difficult to propagate. We need to protect any areas where we find them."

"Can you show me?"

He moved towards the track and Fleur fell in beside him, her stride matching his, the only sounds the scuff of their boots on the dirt and the distant tweet of a wren. She was so close, and despite the fact she'd been racing around the track, she smelled like roses. His fingers brushed her soft hand and he snatched his hand back, rather than hold on to hers like he

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longed to. The urge was absolutely ridiculous. He barely knew her, had met her that one time in hospital when they'd both visited Mai and Nicholas who were recovering from the bush fire a few weeks back.

He didn't believe in love at first sight, but that one meeting had definitely hit him in the chest. He hadn't built up the nerve to ask her out. How could he? He'd not seen her since. No way would he waltz up to her front door, or into the emergency room where she worked and ask her out.

The very idea was nightmare-worthy.

He'd say the wrong thing, or she'd laugh at him for even daring to think she might be interested in him.

"Did the bush fire cause much damage to infrastructure in the park?" Fleur's voice was loud in the silence.

"Some." He could do better than that. If he ever did ask her out, his usual one-word answers weren't going to cut it. "A couple of picnic areas burned down. We're going to need to replace tables and signage."

"Is that something you do?"

He nodded. "A few trees will need to be lopped as well."

"Must be a lot of work."

"Not really." He didn't mind the work, it kept him out of the office and away from people, just the way he liked it.

As they crossed the track and strode into the ankle-high grasses on the other side, the tension in his shoulders lessened. This was his element. Snakes were unlikely with the vibrations Fleur had been making with the motorbike, but he kept a sharp eye out anyway. When the boundary fence came into view he put a hand on her arm to stop her. "Wait." Her skin was warm, and he snatched his hand back. Heat rushed to his cheeks and he avoided meeting her gaze, instead scanning the ground for the tell-tale thin leaves and the damp hollow he'd seen from the park.

There they were, five plants scattered over an area of about two square metres, almost indistinguishable amongst the grass. He moved closer, watching where he placed his feet to make sure he didn't accidentally squash one.

He squatted down and examined the orchid, its yellow flower almost spent. It could be the Tall Donkey Orchid. He

pulled out his phone and took a couple of photos to send to the service's botanist.

"What is it?"

He startled at Fleur's voice and almost fell forward on to the plant. Swearing, he landed hard on a sharp stone, his wrist twisting at an awkward angle.

"Are you all right?" The thud of her footsteps was loud.

"Stay there!" he growled, pushing himself back to his feet, and grimacing at the throb in his wrist.

Fleur scowled.

Crap. He'd snapped at her. "Sorry, I'm fine." He gently rotated his hand, wincing a little at the tenderness, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

"Let me take a look. I'm a nurse." She moved forward again.

"Not here!" Damn it, she could squash a plant. "Over on the track." He shooed her away.

Fleur turned, her movements stiff, her posture straight.

Way to go, Will, you sure know how to impress the ladies. "Ah, the orchids are difficult to spot." He followed her.

Fleur's hands were confident as they examined his wrist, her white skin a direct contrast to his own brown tones, and he gritted his teeth at the pleasure her touch sent through him.

"I don't think it's sprained, but keep it elevated for a bit just in case."

"It's fine." Still he placed his hand on the opposite shoulder.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Thank you." He needed to get away from her before he said or did anything else stupid. "Can I document the orchid population?"

Her nod was sharp. "Go right ahead. It's the off-season, so not many people are using the track. You shouldn't have anyone disturb you."

The first good news of the day. "Thanks. I'll fence off the area. I don't want a bike to runoff and squash them."

"Wait a second." She held up a hand. "What kind of area are you talking about?"

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“About four metres, just to be sure — from the track to the boundary fence.” He could picture it in his mind already. “I can do it today. I’ve got the hessian in the back of my car.”

She shook her head. “We’re not allowed any structures within three metres of the track. It’s not safe.”

Damn it. He was so close to getting what he needed. “You said it’s the off-season.”

She bit her bottom lip. “We’re having a busy bee here this weekend and the only way we get people to turn up is to promise them a chance of tuning their bikes.”

Fleur couldn’t seriously think that letting some bikers use the track was more important than saving an endangered species. She’d seemed so nice. “Reroute the track.”

“We can’t. We don’t have the equipment or manpower.” She scanned the area. “Mark it out for me.”

Will carefully paced out the area he wanted to enclose.

“It’s on the outside of a corner so it’s easy for the guys to overshoot here if they haven’t slowed enough. I’m surprised no one has squashed the orchids yet.”

That wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“Still,” she continued, “the regulations allow us to build a tyre wall in front of permanent structures like trees, so we could do that in front of your fence.”

“You’re agreeing to it?”

“Yeah. I’ll build the wall myself on the weekend, if you do the enclosure before then. Some of the guys might not appreciate the significance of the plants.”

His lips twitched at her wry response.

“I can give you a hand setting up now if you want.”

Maybe she’d forgiven him for yelling at her. This was a chance to get to know Fleur. His heart thumped in his chest. “That would be great.”

A familiar shrill short bird call had him scanning the surrounding trees until he found an adult black cockatoo sitting on the branches of a gum tree. Nearby was a hollow and a chick, some of its feathers still fluffy, stood at its entrance. He touched Fleur’s arm and pointed. “Look at that.”

She grinned. “It’s so cute.”

“It’s a Carnaby Cockatoo. They’re endangered because they need hollows like that to nest in. A mating pair will generally go back to the same nest year after year.” He’d have to check his records as to whether this nest had been documented.

The chick flapped its wings, testing them out, and the adult sat on a branch to its left encouraging it. This could be its first outing from the nest. “Come on, little mate. You can do it.” The chick chirped at its parent and after fluttering its wings another couple of times, it launched itself from the nest and made an awkward flight to the branch. Will let out a breath. “He made it.” He turned to find Fleur watching him, not the bird. Crap. Had he done something stupid?

“You care, don’t you?”

He frowned.

“You really cared if the baby bird made it. You care whether these orchids survive.”

“Yeah.” Was that considered geeky?

She smiled. “I’m glad the world has people like you in it.” She gestured him to follow her. “Come on. Let’s get that fence set up.”

She couldn’t have given him a nicer compliment. With a lighter step, he returned to his four-wheel drive and Fleur held out her hand. “Give me your keys. I’ll drive it over. The whole track needs grading and some of the jumps are a bit steep and uneven.”

Will hesitated. He wasn’t supposed to let anyone drive his work vehicle.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “I’m a capable driver and you should keep your wrist elevated a little longer.”

Of course she was. He took the keys out of his pocket and tossed them in his hands. His brothers always teased him for abiding by the rules to the letter, but he’d seen how quickly skirting the rules could get someone with his dark skin into trouble. Still, this was her property, she was doing him a favour. He handed her the keys and got into the passenger side, winding down his window. She didn’t say anything and he couldn’t find the words to fill the silence.

He hadn’t stopped thinking about Fleur since he’d met her

at the hospital. Something about her, maybe her friendliness, her appearance, her confidence, had stuck with him. He'd imagined a universe in which he actually had the courage to ask her out, a universe where she would say yes.

In his dreams.

"This is the fire break." She drove onto a sandy path which ran along the fence line of the property. "It will be easier to access your orchids from here."

"Thanks." He should ask her something about the club, anything to get her to talk. The warm breeze blowing through the window was nice but talking about the weather was lame. Suddenly he caught a whiff of something sharp, acrid. "What's that smell?"

Fleur's incredulous glance had him stammering. "No, I mean — stop the car. I can smell chemicals."

Fleur braked and he got out, sniffing the air.

Nothing.

But he hadn't imagined it.

He walked back the way they'd come and yeah, a definite sharp, acrid smell came from the bush between the fire break and the track. "What's through there?"

"Nothing." Fleur walked over and screwed up her nose.

"I don't believe you." He strode into the bush, following his nose, but being careful where he trod in case there were other rare plants around. As he walked around the shrubs blocking his view from the fire break he swore.

A dozen or more five-litre clear plastic chemical tubs had been dumped haphazardly in a depression in the ground. The labels identified drain cleaner, caustic soda and brake fluid and a couple of the lids had come off and the remains of their contents were draining into the soil, killing the grass around it. Anger welled up in him. How could people treat the land like this? It was bad enough that there were climate change deniers, but if people didn't even care on a local level, how the hell could they fix the world?

He spun around to Fleur, his eyes narrowed. "You call this nothing?"



Fleur stepped back at the fury in Will's dark eyes. She peered around him to see what he was so worked up about and her mouth dropped open.

Son of a bitch. Someone had used the track as a dumping ground.

"You might own this land, but that doesn't give you the right to use it as a rubbish tip." He was so animated, so angry. "The chemicals can seep through the ground, they could kill those orchids."

Fleur gaped at him for a moment while her brain caught up. "You think I had something to do with this?" What a jerk. She met his anger with some of her own. "I have enough trouble maintaining the track without having to deal with some idiot doing this. If it's one of the members, I'll ban them from the club." The rubbish tip was only a couple of kilometres further down the road. She took two steps down the incline to gather up the containers and Will grabbed her arm.

"Wait."

She shook him off. He didn't get to touch her. "They're leaking into the ground."

He took a deep breath. "If it wasn't you, we have to call Sergeant Zanetti."

"Lincoln? Why? It's just some dickhead who didn't want to pay the extra tip payment." She was mad, but she didn't need to go to the police about it. They hadn't been able to stop people breaking into the track to ride, so they wouldn't be able to stop this either. She'd just have to deal with it.

Will shook his head. "I've seen containers like this before."

Suddenly she remembered the chemical containers Mai had found a month back. She'd mentioned Parks and Wildlife had been called and it had been drug related. Her eyes widened. "Like by the river?"

"Yeah."

Fleur got out her phone, took a photo of the mess, and then called Lincoln.

"What can I do for you, Flower?"

His use of her nickname soothed some of her anger.

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“Someone’s dumped rubbish at the back of the track. Will said to call you.”

“What kind of rubbish?” he snapped.

Talk about instant reaction. “Chemical containers — drain cleaner, brake fluid, caustic soda and a whole bunch of matchboxes.”

Lincoln swore, loud and ripe. “Don’t touch anything. I’ll be there shortly.”

This was serious. Fleur hung up. “He’s on his way.”

Will scowled at the scene, and shuffled his feet, not acknowledging her. She doubted she’d get an apology. His khaki uniform might mould to his dark skin, defining his broad chest, and perhaps he’d been kind of cute when he’d stuttered, but good looks definitely weren’t everything.

“Why don’t you go set up your fence and I’ll walk back and wait for Lincoln?”

A nod. He turned to go, stopped and ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry.” He grunted and walked away.

Talk about a split personality. She couldn’t work him out, seemingly shy one minute and angry and cold the next. She scanned the area. The rubbish could have been there for months because the track was used infrequently during the summer. The depression was far enough away from the track that no one would see the bottom if they were on a bike anyway.

Walking back towards the fire break, she scanned the boundary fence. No signs of it having been cut, but that was no surprise. It was easy enough to drive through the unlocked front gates.

Could the same creepy guy who had threatened Mai last month be responsible for discarding the waste? Lincoln had said he was a guy for hire and he’d had a gun he wasn’t afraid to use.

The bush next to her rustled and she whirled around. A blue wren, its bright blue plumage contrasting against the olive-green leaves.

All these thoughts of drugs and thugs were getting to her.

With a sigh, she headed back to the clubhouse.

It was a good half an hour before Lincoln arrived with Senior Constable Ryan Kilpatrick. Fleur had loaded her bike onto the trailer and filled the clubhouse fridge with drinks for the busy bee on the weekend.

“Where are they?” Lincoln asked as he got out of the police car.

“Nice to see you too, Slinky.” She smiled. “Hi Ryan. How are Felix and Hannah?”

“They’re great. Hannah’s talking about doing a musketeers’ night sometime soon.”

Fleur beamed. “That would be great.” She hadn’t seen her best friends much lately, particularly since Hannah and Mai had found the loves of their lives. She walked over to the police car. “We might as well drive. This thing should handle the sand around the fire break.” She hopped into the back seat. “It’s towards the back hill.”

Lincoln drove onto the track. “Did you say Will Travers told you to call?”

“Yeah. He discovered an endangered population of orchids near the track, and we were driving out to set up a fence for them when he smelled the chemicals.”

“Lucky he was here. You didn’t disturb anything, did you?” Lincoln asked.

“No. Stop here.” She led them to the hollow and Lincoln swore.

“I’ll call Albany.” He took his phone out as Ryan snapped some photos.

Will had been right — it was serious.

When Lincoln was done he said, “Detectives are on the way and when they’re finished, this will need to be professionally removed. I want to keep this discovery quiet. You can’t tell anyone what you found here.”

It was all very hush-hush. “What if it’s a member and not related to drugs?”

“Who said anything about drugs?”

“Will did.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not stupid, Slinky. You wouldn’t call Albany if this was a case of littering.”

“I can’t tell you anything,” he said.

“Fine. If you want to keep it secret, you’ll need to clean it

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up by the weekend. It's the busy bee and there will be people all around the track."

"Damn it." He ran a hand through his hair. "Can you postpone it?"

She laughed. "Not a chance. You know what everyone's like."

"All right." He sighed. "I'm going to need to ask you and Will some questions."

"Sure. Go ahead."

When she'd finished answering Lincoln and Ryan's questions, she went to check the fence Will had erected around his precious orchids. The hessian was attached to big star pickets and the fence was bigger than she'd anticipated, but she wouldn't make a fuss.

Will was at the end of the block searching for more specimens. She almost hoped he didn't find any. Then she wouldn't need to deal with his demands again.

Whether she wanted to or not, she needed to talk to him, tell him to shut the gates if he was the last to leave. She was done here and had to get to work.

She strode down the fire break, so she didn't get told off for potentially squashing any plants. He didn't so much as glance up as she approached.

"Will."

He whirled around, eyes wide.

Either his hearing sucked, or he was *really* focused on what he was doing. "I'm heading off," she said. "If you're last to leave, can you shut the front gates?"

"Does it need locking?"

"No point. People cut the chains if they really want to get in. Just slide the bolt shut." She turned to go.

"The fence is all right?"

"It's fine. I'll get some old tyres delivered later this week and build a wall in front of it over the weekend."

"I can help, if you'd like."

She raised her eyebrows. He wanted to be helpful?

He shifted his gaze to his toes. "I appreciate you letting me do this."

Did he think she was completely lacking in empathy? “I won’t be responsible for the extinction of a species.” While she was perfectly capable of building the wall, it would be one less thing on her mountainous to do list. “All right. I’ll be out here from eight on Saturday and Sunday. Drop by whenever suits.”

“Can I have your number?” The words were said in a rush. “Ah, in case something comes up.”

“Sure.” She rattled it off and he fumbled with his phone, almost dropping it before he managed to key it in.

“Thanks.”

She nodded and walked away.

She gave him two days before he’d send her a text rescinding his offer to help.

But she could do it without him.

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