

Nothing to Lose

A Blackbridge Novel

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DEDICATION

*To my tech support gurus, Pedro Gonçalves and Evan Wilkinson.
Thanks for all your help.*

Chapter 1

Kit van Ross was going to kill him.

No, she'd fire him, *then* she'd kill him. She'd given Paul plenty of chances, even an official warning, and he still hadn't got his act together. She opened the throttle on the dirt bike, needing speed to channel the anger pulsing through her body.

It was hard enough to run a farm with two people let alone when one went AWOL regularly.

Paul should have returned to the yard an hour ago, not be out on the boundary fence doing who knew what. Nothing needed fixing, but the white ute was parked there and Paul was nowhere in sight. Maybe he was taking a nap.

She would definitely kill him.

As the bike bumped over the field, her gaze locked on the ute, waiting for Paul to hear the engine and sit up in the tray and wave.

Nothing.

He had to be there somewhere.

Probably too much of a wimp to face her. He knew how pissed she'd be. She hadn't held back her temper the last time she'd warned him to stop slacking off. And while she'd yelled, he'd stood there with a bored expression and told her to chill.

He used to be her friend once, not just her employee.

She clenched her teeth. She'd given him enough chances. In order for her farm to thrive, he had to go.

She searched the sky for Paul's black drone, which would give her some indication he realised she was there.

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Nothing but a few puffy white clouds in the otherwise bright blue sky. She should be enjoying the fine weather while it lasted instead of chasing after an unreliable farmhand.

Kit roared to the ute and cut the engine.

Silence.

The tray was empty.

“Paul! Where the hell are you?” She kicked the stand into position and got off the bike, shading her eyes to scan the nearby bush that marked the boundary between her land and Foley’s.

No one.

Stalking around the side of the ute, she saw a foot stretched out on the ground, then a leg.

“Paul, what the hell—” Her footsteps faltered and vomit rose to her throat. She shook her head as if it would change the vision, and her hand came to her mouth. No, no, no.

Her muscles tightened, and she took two steps away, squeezing her eyes closed, wanting to erase the picture.

Get a grip, girl. She needed to see the truth.

Slowly she opened her eyes.

Her gaze found the rifle first. The one she kept locked in the shed, only used if she had an injured animal that couldn’t be saved.

Next his boots, the mismatched socks — one blue and one black — and then his outstretched legs, tanned from the summer sun. He leaned back against the vehicle, positioned so much like her father had been. Then she’d been in time, she’d been able to rip the gun away from her dad, convince him life was worth living.

Not so for Paul.

Flies buzzed around the perfect round hole in the centre of his forehead. On the door behind him was a red spray of blood and other matter. No saving Paul.

Her stomach heaved and she spun around, retching, choking on this morning’s cereal.

When her stomach was empty and the heaving finally stopped, she wiped her eyes and turned back to Paul.

How long had he been sitting here? He’d been gone all morning, had taken off as soon as he’d entered some data into the computer. He’d snapped at her for coming into the office. She’d snapped back.

That had been the theme of their relationship over the past few months.

She'd known something was wrong, but he wouldn't confide in her and she'd got tired of asking. Some friend she was.

Hands shaking, she dug out her mobile phone, dialled the number she knew by heart.

"Kit, the full moon is bringing out all the crazies, can it wait?" Even the annoyed timbre of Sergeant Lincoln Zanetti's voice brought a measure of comfort.

"Paul's shot himself. He's dead."

Lincoln swore. "Don't touch anything. I'll be right there. Where are you?"

"The back paddock." She hung up and her breath whooshed from her. It would be all right. Lincoln was coming, he'd know what to do.

A fly crawled over Paul's eye and towards the hole in his forehead. She wanted to swat it away, but she couldn't mess with the scene. Even if it was a suicide. She paced away, glad she'd left the dogs back at the shed.

Tears pushed their way into her eyes and she blinked them back. She couldn't cry now. Emotion wouldn't get the better of her. She would be calm, not a hysterical female when Lincoln arrived. Taking a deep breath in, she continued walking, heading away from the vehicle. Her chest tightened and her throat burned. No, she couldn't break down, not here, not now. There would be time later, when she was at home, alone, with no one to see her, where no one would witness her weakness. If she cried now, she wouldn't be able to stop.

Changing direction, Kit headed to the fence line, peered into the bush. A few tall eucalypts interspersed with small prickly shrubs. The road that intersected her property from Foley's farm next door was almost within sight.

Why this spot?

Had Paul felt a sense of belonging here? She'd found him here often enough when he should have been working elsewhere, when he'd added to her workload and risked her livelihood by not doing his tasks. Anger crept its way through her sorrow.

It was just like the selfish bastard he'd become to commit suicide on her land.

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The anger soothed the burning in her throat and she clung to it. She couldn't think about the good times they'd had together.

Lately all he'd been was an inconsiderate prick.

And now he hadn't had the decency to kill himself at home. This would cause a shit-tonne more work for her.

Kit strode back towards the ute, her gaze flitting back to Paul and sorrow flooded past the anger as if it was a leaf on a stream. She reached for it but the anguish battered her aside and the tears she'd been holding back flooded in, racking her body with sobs.

Sinking onto the rough, dirt ground she grieved.



The rumble of a car engine perforated her grief and Kit glanced up. The police sedan drove through the gate at the opposite end of the paddock.

Lincoln was here.

Comfort settled over her shoulders even as her stomach tied itself in knots. She stood, dusting off the dirt and wiping her eyes on her singlet. She inhaled a deep shuddery breath. Time to get a hold of herself.

Walking back to the ute, the faint scent of blood reached her nose. Her stomach protested, and she gritted her teeth. She would not vomit again.

Senior Constable Ryan Kilpatrick shut the passenger side door as Lincoln got out of the driver's side, his tall, lean frame unfolding as he stood. His blue police uniform was pristinely pressed, but his chocolate brown hair was dishevelled the way it was when he ran his hands through it too many times. His dark eyes showed their concern, and she longed to throw herself into his arms and weep. She clenched her hands to stop herself from reaching out to him. She couldn't show him how much she still cared for him, couldn't handle another rejection. Tears pricked at her eyes again and she blinked them back, turning her attention to Ryan. She swallowed hard. "He's behind the ute."

"Are you OK?" Lincoln stood only a metre away and the distance might as well have been a mile. They no longer had the easy affection they'd once had, not when they were alone together. If she'd been any of her three best friends, he would have swept her up in a hug, comforted her. But those days were

gone, and she only had herself to blame.

Kit nodded.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Ryan asked.

“I came out looking for him when he didn’t return at lunch. I found him like this.”

“Have you touched anything?” Lincoln asked.

“No. It’s clear he’s dead.” The image flashed into her mind and she blocked it.

“How close did you get?”

They tag-teamed the questions.

“Just around the front of the ute.”

“We’ll take a look. Do you want to sit in the car?” Lincoln asked.

Kit shook her head, her hand tapping her thigh. She couldn’t be still. Stillness allowed stray thoughts into her mind, memories she couldn’t confront.

Lincoln sighed and then he and Ryan walked around the vehicle to the body. It was easier to think of it that way — the body, not Paul. Lincoln swore under his breath, a twitch above his eye showing he wasn’t as unaffected as he appeared. After a short, murmured conversation between the two cops, Ryan pulled out his phone and Lincoln walked over to Kit. “Whose gun is it?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s mine.” And if it was, it was one more thing to blame Paul for. It helped to blame him rather than herself.

Lincoln’s eyebrows almost disappeared into his hair line.

She shrugged. “It’s the same make and model, and Paul has — *bad* access to it. It’s usually stored in a locked cabinet in the shed.”

“I’ll need you to confirm that.” He hesitated. “Scrap that. Don’t touch the cabinet.”

“Why not?”

“Please, Kit, for once in your life just do what I ask without questioning it.” He ran a hand through his lush hair.

Her anger spiked. She had to take her frustration out on someone. “Why, because I might tamper with the evidence? He committed suicide!”

Lincoln pursed his lips and rocked back on his heels.

Uncertainty filled her. “Didn’t he?”

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“Forensics will confirm that.”

A non-answer if she'd ever heard one, but she expected nothing more from Lincoln. No one wanted Paul dead.

He withdrew his notepad as Ryan came over. “Calls are made.”

“We'll take your initial statement now,” Lincoln said. “There's not a lot more we can do until the others arrive.”

“What do you need to know?”

“Tell us about your day. What have you been doing, where was Paul meant to be? How did he seem?”

It was standard questioning, but Kit didn't like it. She explained her tasks, expanding when they wanted more information.

“You mentioned you were angry, that you were going to fire Paul,” Ryan said. “Why?”

She glared at him. “Because he'd become an asshole. He did none of his work, he disappeared for hours at a time and ignored my attempts to help him.” She glanced at them both. “The farm is suffering and I need staff I can rely on.”

“And Paul wasn't reliable,” Ryan said.

“Not since Christmas. He's been twitchy and secretive since his friend Gordon died a few months ago. He mentioned he had shit happening in his life, but he wouldn't tell me what.” She should have pushed him harder for answers. Maybe she could have stopped this. People with problems didn't always open up, didn't always tell the truth.

She'd had first-hand experience.

“Is there anything else?” She wanted to get out of here, away from the body, and the blowflies now swarming around it.

They exchanged glances and Lincoln said, “Not for the moment. We'll be over later to check the gun cabinet and will need to get a full statement from you.”

She nodded and got on her bike, her hand shaking as she pressed the ignition button. The engine's loud growl was music to her ears. She needed noise, needed speed, needed to forget everything. She twisted the throttle and quickly changed through the gears, accelerating across the bumpy paddock, fleeing the scene.

Her chest squeezed again as the image of Paul flashed through

her mind.

No, she wouldn't think about it now. She had work to do. The bull calves needed to be weighed and prepared for sale. That was why she'd gone looking for Paul. Now she'd have to do it by herself.

The farm was the only constant in her life, always there for her, never leaving. Birth or death, rain or drought, it carried on.

And so did she.



Lincoln passed his hand through his hair as Kit tore off over the paddock. She was one tough cookie, finding Paul like this and not breaking down. No one was as strong as she was.

"This wasn't suicide," Ryan said.

He nodded. "But it's meant to look like it." He examined the body, shutting down his own emotions. He hadn't been close to Paul, but it was hard to see anyone dead. "The gun's in the wrong position and the angle of the shot, there's no way he could have pulled the trigger holding it there."

But who wanted Paul dead?

And why shoot him here, out on Kit's property? Could Kit be in danger?

Lincoln scanned the surroundings. A good place to meet someone. The road the other side of the bush led onto the main highway. And it was close to Foley's shed that had burned down a couple of months ago. That had been drug-related, and they were still tracking down all the players.

Was this connected?

It was possible. Paul had been upset about Gordon's death, and Gordon had been killed as a result of his involvement in the drug ring. Paul could be involved as well. Perhaps he'd been scared he would be next.

If not that, then what else?

No one said anything bad about Paul. He was popular around town, played in the local cricket and football leagues, had worked out here with Kit for the past few years.

Kit was the only person mad at him, but her bark was worse than her bite. "How long until Albany get here?"

Ryan glanced at his watch. "About half an hour. The Perth

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guys will be a lot longer.”

More than four hours to the capital city and the forensics experts. “I’ll tell Sue and Adam what we’ve got.”

He made the call to his other officers and then helped Ryan set up the barricade tape to protect the crime scene.

They weren’t going anywhere for a while.

When the Albany detectives arrived, they took over, as Lincoln had expected. Janice Bosch and Navid Khan knew their stuff but tended to think his local team didn’t.

And that grated.

He ran the gun’s registration and confirmed it was Kit’s. Shit. This would get messy.

“Ryan and I can examine the gun cabinet,” he suggested to Bosch.

“Where is it?” she asked.

“In the shed.”

She raised her eyebrows in question.

“I lived on the farm for a couple of years.” Back when Kit was still at high school and had point blank refused to move to Perth with her parents. She’d needed a responsible adult to stay in the house with her, and he’d wanted to move out of his parents’ place. It had worked well — until it hadn’t.

“You too close to this?” Khan glanced up from his camera.

Lincoln shook his head as a twinge of guilt pinched him. No way was he getting kicked off this case. “I’ve lived in Blackbridge most of my life,” he said. “I have a relationship with many people in the town. If I couldn’t segment, I couldn’t do my job.”

“All right.”

Lincoln gestured to Ryan, and they got back into the police car and headed across the paddock.

“You sure you’re OK with this?” Ryan asked.

He glanced at his best friend. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Kit had opportunity, and she was angry at him, Lincoln. She’s got to be a suspect and she won’t like it.”

“She didn’t do it.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Neither of us believes she’s capable of it, but she discovered the body, the gun is hers and Paul had irritated her. If she’s not on our suspect list, we’re not

doing our job.”

Damn it, he was right.

And Kit *would* be pissed.

He sighed. “I’ll deal with her.” He was used to her outbursts, could handle anything she threw at him. He called the station to ensure nothing urgent had cropped up and then directed Ryan to park outside the big silver machinery shed that housed the tractor and other large vehicles.

Kit was working in a nearby yard with the latest herd of year-old calves. She barely glanced at them as they approached. “Give me a second.”

Defly she moved the calf through the gates onto the scales, then sprayed something on its back. She moved with confidence, no concern for the size of the calves, some of which were close to her own height.

Her red plaid shirt was unbuttoned, and she wore a white singlet underneath, damp with sweat. Even working hard, her steel-capped boots covered in dust, her denim jeans clinging to her curves and her hair a mess, she looked sexy.

He couldn’t prevent the shock of unwanted lust. Kit was off limits. Experience had taught him anything more *would* ruin what was left of their friendship.

Kit slapped the rump of the calf she was working on and it ambled out of the way. She walked over to them. “What do you need?”

“We need to check your gun cabinet,” Ryan said.

She stepped back. “It was my gun.” Her voice was flat.

Lincoln nodded.

She closed her eyes briefly, bit her lip, the only sign something was wrong. She was more affected by this than she appeared. But why pretend with him?

Kit climbed over the metal fence and jerked her head towards the dairy. “It’s this way.”

“When did you last open the cabinet?” Ryan asked.

She hesitated. “About two weeks back. A yearling got through a fence Paul should have repaired and slipped near the river. Broke its leg, and I had to put it down.” Her words were clipped, her tone no-nonsense, but her hand trembled a little as she pushed open the shed door.

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Maybe still inside her was the seventeen-year-old who had wept in his arms when she'd first put an animal down.

She walked into an office and halted, causing him to crash into her soft warm body. He inhaled, smelling a hint of cinnamon. Focus. He glanced over her head to the gun cabinet in the corner, its door ajar.

"I didn't leave it like this."

Lincoln nudged her aside so Ryan could get past. "When were you last in here?"

"This morning after milking. I wanted to check Paul was entering the latest data. The safe door was closed, and I presumed locked. I don't check it regularly."

"Where's the key kept?"

"There's one on the ute keyring and one in the house."

The ute key was the most likely, but he said, "Can you confirm the house one is still there? But don't touch it if it is."

She nodded. "I'll go now."

"Thanks."

He followed her from the building so he could get their things from the car. Kit didn't acknowledge him, just strode off across the dirt to her motorbike, her blue heelers, Montoya and Roberts at her heels. At her command one jumped on the motorbike tank and the other on the seat behind her and they tore off towards the house. He caught himself staring after her. He needed to be careful. Any sign he was emotionally involved and the detectives would dump him from the case.

His insides twisted. To do things properly, he should declare his conflict of interest now. But his feelings for Kit were unrequited, so they didn't count. What was important was helping Kit through this and protecting her if a murderer was on the loose.

He'd already failed to protect her three friends. He wouldn't fail her.