



OBSESSION

PATRICIA BRADLEY

NATCHEZ TRACE  PARK RANGERS

Praise for *Standoff*

“Bradley has done it again with her unique brand of mystery and intrigue, penning another gripping tale of greed and betrayal, as well as redemption and hope. Brimming with action, romance, and page-turning thrills, *Standoff* will hook readers. What a fantastic start to a brand-new series!”

Elizabeth Goddard, award-winning author
of the Uncommon Justice series

“An explosive start to a brand-new series by Patricia Bradley that suspense lovers won’t want to miss. Full of family secrets, a mysterious old flame, and murder.”

Lisa Harris, bestselling author of the Nikki Boyd series

“With a plot as twisting as the villain’s schemes, Patricia Bradley’s *Standoff* spins a tale that will keep the reader racing through the pages and wondering ‘Who is the killer?’ until the thrilling conclusion.”

Lynn H. Blackburn, author of the Dive Team
Investigations series

“Patricia Bradley’s latest release, *Standoff*, is an action-packed Christian suspense novel. Patricia Bradley is an amazing romantic suspense writer. The whole novel was well-written and engaging from beginning to end.”

Urban Lit Magazine

“My first ever Bradley book, and I very much enjoyed it! I really wish that I could give it more than 5 stars. Her style of writing is astounding! I’m a fan for life.”

Interviews & Reviews

“*Standoff* is an engaging and suspenseful read that you won’t be able to put down! If you love romantic suspense, this one definitely needs to be on your to-read list!”

Bookworm Banquet

“Patricia Bradley knocks it out of the park with the first installment of her new series! Twists and turns, romance, action and suspense galore keep readers glued to the edge of their seat until the very last page.”

Write-Read-Life

Books by Patricia Bradley

LOGAN POINT SERIES

Shadows of the Past

A Promise to Protect

Gone Without a Trace

Silence in the Dark

MEMPHIS COLD CASE NOVELS

Justice Delayed

Justice Buried

Justice Betrayed

Justice Delivered

NATCHEZ TRACE PARK RANGERS

Standoff

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To Jesus, my Lord and Savior,
who walks with me
on the writing journey.

The January warm spell had definitely ended in South Mississippi. Emma Winters zipped her National Park Service jacket against the biting north wind as she hiked the quarter mile from the gate to the Mount Locust Visitor Center on the Natchez Trace. A hike that wouldn't have been necessary if she hadn't forgotten the gate key. Or the folder she needed to finish a report due by midnight.

Forgetting things wasn't like her, but her mother's resistance to tracking down her brother had Emma off-center. Her cell phone broke the silence, and she checked her caller ID. She wasn't sure she was ready for her mother's reaction to the email she'd sent and let two more rings go by. In fact, she was tempted to not answer her mother's call at all because she just didn't want to hear her objections. But just before it went to voicemail, Emma punched the answer button. "Hello," she said, forcing a cheery note in her voice.

"Oh, good, I caught you," her mother said. "I received the flyer you emailed."

"And? What did you think?"

"Honey, I think you'll get a lot of nutcases if you send it out. Like you did before when you offered money for information on Ryan."

"But someone might know some—"

"Your brother's choices in life are his. I hate to see you throw good money after bad."

"It's my money," she muttered. As each year passed, finding her twin brother pressed deeper into her heart, but she should have known her mother would kick up about the flyer. If she knew the whole story . . .

"What are you doing? You're breaking up."

"Walking to my office."

"You're . . . Mount Locust . . . night?"

"Mom, we have a bad connection," she said. "I'll call you when I get home."

Emma ended the call and shrugged off the sense of failure that seeped into every fiber of her body whenever she thought of Ryan. But it wasn't so easily shrugged off. She glanced toward the sky just as a pale sliver of moon broke through the clouds, giving off enough light to cast eerie shadows on the ground.

A shiver ran over her body. Maybe next time she would ask someone to come with her. Or bring a gun. Not likely. She'd never desired to be a law enforcement ranger and was quite satisfied being on the interpretive side of the National Park Service.

In spite of that, the hair on the back of her neck rose as she approached the stone and wood building. *Come on. Don't get all spooked.* She worked here, and Mount Locust was as familiar as the backyard where she'd grown up. And it wasn't like being here after dark was something new. From November until the days got longer, she locked up every day in the dark. Besides, she'd never been afraid of the dark. Even so, she scanned the area, trying to shake the sense she wasn't alone.

Nothing moved as she scanned the grounds, her gaze stopping at the lighted maintenance building a quarter mile away and visible through the bare trees before moving to the tractor shed a few yards away. Probably should check on the ground penetrating radar machine that had arrived earlier today. Tomorrow she

was supposed to begin the preliminary mapping of the historic quarters and the adjoining cemetery.

She'd left word for the new district law enforcement ranger on the Natchez Trace to have someone swing by every few hours to check for trespassers. Now would be a good time for a ranger to arrive . . . as long as it wasn't Samuel Ryker. Emma hadn't seen her once-upon-a-time fiancé since he returned to Natchez and had avoided talking directly to him on the call for assistance. But eventually she would have to face him, and she might as well make peace with it.

Something rustled to her right. Emma froze with her hand on the doorknob. She turned just as a bottle rolled from the open passageway separating the office from the restrooms.

"Who's there?" She tried for commanding, but the tremor in her voice destroyed the effect.

A bedraggled gray-and-white tabby walked around the corner and sat down, its doleful stare almost as pitiful as its meow. Emma released the breath caught in her chest and leaned against the door. "Where did you come from?"

The cat couldn't be over three or four months old. It stretched and then rubbed against her leg, and Emma stooped to pick it up. She could count the poor thing's ribs. With it still in her arms, she turned and unlocked the door. There was half of a roast beef sandwich in the mini refrigerator she'd recently purchased so she could eat at her desk when she worked alone at the visitor center. Maybe the cat could eat the meat.

As she bent to retrieve the beef, Emma spotted the file she'd come for. Beside it, the landline blinked with a message. She would feed the cat first, then listen to the voicemail. Emma shredded the meat and set it on the floor. The cat sniffed the food, then tore into it, making little growling noises as it ate. When it finished, the cat sat down and looked up at Emma as if to say, "Where's the rest?"

"That's all I have," she said. Funny how having another living

thing with her made the place seem less scary. “I’ll bring you something in the morning—how about that?” she asked and punched the play button on the phone. “Or maybe I’ll take you home with me tonight.”

The cat wound around her ankles as a voice that belonged on the radio echoed in the empty room.

“Emma, where are you? You’re not answering your cell phone. Give me a call before you begin your excavation.”

She groaned. Corey Chandler would be the death of her. Not the attorney exactly, but his client, whoever that might be. Corey wouldn’t tell who objected to the excavation of the slave quarters and the survey of the cemetery. Emma straightened her shoulders. It would take more than a phone call to stop the project. Besides, it wasn’t like she was going to dig up the cemetery. That was the purpose of the GPR machine—to locate and determine once and for all the number of graves there.

Conflicting reports had abounded for years that bodies had been missed in the research project conducted in 2000, and that bothered Emma. Her goal was to find every grave and make sure each person received the dignity and recognition that had eluded them in life.

It was hard to understand why anyone objected to the research project anyway, but she didn’t have time to worry about Corey’s client tonight. “Come on, Suzy,” she said, deciding the tabby was female, and then grabbed the folder and stuffed it in her backpack.

Suzy shot out the door, and Emma followed suit, locking it behind her. A screeching sound jerked her attention to her right, and she fisted her hands. Another gust of wind whistled through the trees, followed by the screeching sound again, and she identified the source. A branch scraping against the window on the side of the building. Adrenaline left as fast as it had come.

What was wrong with her tonight? If Brooke Danvers were here, she would have a ball teasing Emma. But Emma was the

first to admit she wasn't as brave as her best friend. A tree frog seemed to agree as he serenaded her with his song and then was joined with a chorus of other males, each one vying to outdo the other. Poor things were singing for nothing. The last two weeks of warm weather had them confused and singing to the female frogs who were not in the mood to answer them in the middle of January.

Another sound overrode the frogs, and Emma cocked her head toward it. Someone was operating machinery. Had the maintenance supervisor come back after supper and started some of the road equipment? She doubted it, since the noise appeared to come from the inn area, not the tractor shed or the maintenance building.

Maybe it was those kids she'd run off earlier. Just before closing time, she'd caught three teenage boys pulling up the flags she'd staked out where the slave cabins used to be. Had they come back and hot-wired one of the backhoes?

"Stay here," she said, as if the cat would. After she set the backpack beside the door, she flipped on her flashlight and walked up the brick path that led to the inn, which was really just a four-room log cabin with a dogtrot in the middle for ventilation in the summer. If it was the teenagers, this time she would get names and call the parents.

Instead of remaining behind, Suzy followed her to the deserted log structure, and they climbed the steps together. Emma walked through the dogtrot to the back porch and cocked her ear again. The sound had quit. She swept the light toward the maintenance building. The equipment looked untouched. Then she flashed the light against the trees, revealing only stark trunks and bare limbs except for the occasional live oak.

Wait. On the other side of the trees in the slave cemetery, the light revealed a yellow backhoe. Yep. Had to be those kids, since the maintenance supervisor wouldn't have moved the equipment. While she wasn't afraid of the teenagers, there was such a thing

as common sense, so she checked her cell phone for service. One bar and it looked iffy.

She would try 911 anyway and let whomever the dispatcher sent deal with the boys. Preferably anyone but Sam.

When the operator answered, Emma could only make out a couple of words. She identified herself and asked for a patrol ranger to come to Mount Locust, hoping the operator understood the call.

When the operator didn't respond, she checked her phone again. The call had dropped. She'd have to walk either to her office or the visitor center for better reception.

A rifle report split the night air as Emma hopped off the porch. She froze as a bullet splintered the wooden post where she'd just stood. Then she dove for the ground and scrambled under the house. Her heart stuttered in her chest as another report sent a bullet kicking up dirt a few yards from her hiding place.

Why was someone trying to kill her?

Like that mattered at this moment. She had to move or be trapped in the crawl space under the house. Frantically she looked for the cat. If it had any sense at all, it had high-tailed it back to the visitor center.

Emma scanned the area, looking for a way to escape. She couldn't go back the way she'd come—it was too open—but there was ground cover from the side of the house to the edge of the woods only thirty feet away. Emma belly-crawled to the nearest tree, scraping her hand on a rock.

A dry twig snapped to her left.

Emma hoisted the rock and flung it away from her before she darted in the opposite direction toward the tractor shed. Another shot rang out, and the bullet embedded in a nearby tree.

With her heart exploding in her chest, she ducked under a live oak limb that dipped down to the ground and pressed against the huge trunk. Her lungs screamed for air. Heavy footsteps stomped through the dead leaves, and she pressed closer to the trunk, biting back a cry as the bark gouged her back.

A faint siren reached her ears. The 911 operator had understood her!

The footsteps halted. The shooter had heard it as well. But where was he? She dared not peer around the tree and remained absolutely still, surprised that he couldn't hear the pounding of her heart. Seconds later, footsteps retreated toward the service road. Then a motor roared to life, and the car sped away.

Emma's knees buckled, and she braced against the tree, her fingers shaking as she dialed 911 again.