

JUSTICE BURIED

PATRICIA
BRADLEY



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Patricia Bradley, *Justice Buried*
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To our heroes in blue
who put their lives on the line 24/7
to keep us safe
and to their families.

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1

IT WASN'T TOO HOT FOR 10:00 P.M. in the middle of May unless you were about to climb over the ledge of a fourteen-story building in downtown Memphis. Kelsey Allen peered over the edge of the building, the distance to the street dizzying.

She ignored the tantalizing aroma that floated up from Tom Lee Park, where ninety contestants were grilling all night for the World Championship Barbecue Contest. Instead, she turned and concentrated on securing a small, motorized winch to the edge of the roof.

Once it was anchored, she attached the cable to her harness and then paused to take a deep breath. Slowly she released it, but her heart still thumped in her ears. She was about to break in to the building next to her stepfather's company. If Sam found out . . . She didn't want to go there.

Time to refocus, to calm her nerves. Kelsey glanced toward the lighted bridge over the Mississippi River and the double arc reflected in the water below. Overhead, the quarter moon vied with stars that glittered against the night sky. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. *I can do this.*

Her cell phone vibrated in her backpack, and she jerked it out. Sabra.

“I’m kind of busy.”

“I know. Just checking on you. Where are you in the scheme of things?”

“About to go down.”

“You don’t have to do it, you know.”

She never should have told her sister what she was into. A siren raked Kelsey’s ears, sending her heart into double overdrive.

“What’s that?” Sabra asked.

“A patrol car.” Her heart slowed as the flashing lights sped toward the park. “Looks like a problem at the cook-off.”

“I *told* you there’d be more security. That barbecue contest draws a lot of people. Just turn around and leave. Now.”

Kelsey grunted, and her gaze swept the hordes of people below her as she took her tablet from her backpack. “It’s one of the reasons I chose tonight. There’s a wall of people from Beale Street to the river. It ought to keep the police busy, so don’t worry about me.”

“But I do. We might not be blood sisters, but you’re the only sister I have.”

“Thank you, but I’m telling you, I’ll be fine.” She’d never thought of Sabra as anything other than a sister either, especially since Sam and her mother never made any difference between the two of them.

There was a sigh on the other end. “Have you hacked into the security system?”

“I’m doing it now.” Kelsey tapped the tablet, and with a few clicks, she was into the security company’s control panel. “That’s funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“The security cameras are off, but they were on earlier when I checked.”

“That’s a sign you should call it off.”

“No. I have to do this.” Sabra didn’t understand because *her* father had never done anything wrong. And she wasn’t the one trying to get her security business off the ground.

Sabra was silent a few seconds and then said, “Is anything else off?”

Kelsey checked the infrared grid for the eighth floor. “No,” she said and inserted code to turn off the grid on that floor. The grid had to be returned to normal as quickly as possible. “Gotta go. I only have an hour before the next security check.”

“You sound nervous.”

“I don’t like heights.”

“Then you picked the wrong field for that.” Sabra chuckled. “No, for you it’s all about seeing how close you can get to the fire without getting burned.”

“Not true.” Kelsey set her jaw. It wasn’t about the danger or the adrenaline racing through her body. It was about redeeming her family name and being able to get a job in her chosen field.

“You can’t undo what your dad did.”

It was like Sabra had read her mind. “You’re right, and that’s why I’m testing security systems—to protect businesses against thieves like him. It’s not like I’m breaking and entering, since Mr. Rutherford hired me to check the building’s security.”

“Then why doesn’t he correct the newspaper reports that make you sound like some kind of thief?”

“He will.” She just didn’t know when. “Talk to you later.”

Kelsey slid the phone into her backpack and pulled on a

black beanie cap, tucking her short hair inside it, then felt to make sure none of her curls had escaped. Should have bought a tan one to match her ash-blonde hair. She felt fairly confident that if anyone saw her, they would assume she was male.

She tested the cable one last time before climbing over the side of the building. This was the part she really didn't like—dangling fourteen floors above the street with only a cable attached to the electric winch to keep her from plunging to the alley below. At least it wasn't forty floors, like the last time.

The news reports stated she had nerves of steel, but if those same reporters could hear the drumbeat of her heart pounding against her chest, they would know better. But if she passed this test and Rutherford hired her for his other buildings, more jobs would roll in. She forced the air out of her lungs and breathed in again.

Don't look down.

No worry there. She was too busy keeping her body from bumping against the side of the wall as she lowered herself to the corner window she'd discovered unlocked two days ago. The building had been built in the 1930s and still had functioning windows.

Her cover as a temporary secretary got her into the buildings Rutherford had been hired to keep secure, this time giving her access to Turner Accounting. After poking around for a couple of days, she penetrated their firewall and then found the window.

The window rose easily. She slid inside and slipped out of the harness, letting it fall to the floor. The winch weighed fifteen pounds, enough to keep it from going anywhere while she left her calling card. There were four desks in the room, one that had been hers in her temporary employment.

The camera in the corner of the ceiling drew her attention even though she knew the guards only saw a video of an empty room. Habit made her hug the wall as she crept to the door that opened into the hallway, then walked to the CEO's office. She pulled a small black case from the backpack and chose a pick. It took her fifteen seconds to unlock the door.

Once inside the office, she padded across the thick carpet to the desk. Walnut. Expensive. Nice computer too. Kelsey placed a business card on the keyboard and then retraced her steps. In the beginning, the cards were for publicity, but now they were her trademark. She didn't want Rutherford to have any doubts about who breached the security.

Back at the window, Kelsey slipped into the harness and climbed through the casement. As she dangled above the street, she pressed the red button on the winch and shifted the gear to ascend.

Three floors up, she bumped against a window and stopped the winch. Suddenly the whop-whop-whop of a helicopter threw her body into panic mode. She looked up and saw strobe lights streaking the sky.

Kelsey gripped the cable. What if they saw her? Images of handcuffs and the back seat of a patrol car hit her at warp speed. Seconds later the chopper swung toward the river, and she breathed again. Probably a news helicopter taking video of the festivities, but she needed to get on the roof and inside the building before it returned.

Kelsey adjusted the harness and glanced into the office. The skin on the back of her neck prickled. She didn't remember a light in any of the rooms, but right here, right now, she was staring at a dimly lit room.

Movement caught her attention. A man? Could it get any worse? Her blood pulsing in her ears muffled all other sounds,

and she barely heard the chopper as it made another sweep of the area.

She narrowed her eyes at the silhouette of a large man in front of the light source. *What if he sees me?* No sooner had the thought taken root than he turned and faced the window. The backlighting made it impossible to distinguish his features, but the tilt of his head made her feel as though his eyes were boring into hers.

Then for a second, light flashed in the room, illuminating him. She blinked, and the room darkened once more. Had the light even happened?

The silhouette moved. Coming to the window. She punched the button on the winch, and like a snail, it inched upward. Kelsey unhooked from her harness and grabbed the cable. Using her rock-climbing skills, she half pulled and half walked up the side of the building. One misstep . . .

Just as she swung over the ledge, she heard a muffled pop, and a bullet whizzed past her ear. A chip from the concrete grazed her cheek. He was shooting at her? *Go!*

Kelsey scrambled to get the winch loose from the ledge, but it wouldn't budge. She kicked the hook and finally it released, and she crammed the winch into her backpack. How much time had passed? He'd been three stories below her. *If* he was familiar with the building and knew how to reach the roof, any second now he'd burst through the door on this side of the roof. The one between Kelsey and her escape route.

It looked like a mile to the door she'd left propped open. She scanned the roof. There were several heating and cooling units large enough to hide behind, and she darted behind the nearest one just as the door to the roof opened and a light flicked past the unit.

Kelsey had counted on the darkness hiding her, never considered that he might have a flashlight. She flattened against the metal wall as the beam swept past the air-conditioning unit again. *God, if you'll get me out of this, I'll never do it again.* When the light disappeared and his steps tapped away, she breathed a thank-you.

Seconds later, she inched from behind the unit and checked his location. He was bent over, examining the ledge. His back was to her, and she dashed to the next unit, her sneakers barely making a sound. Two more and she could make a break for the door.

Silently she inched along the wall and almost lost her balance when her foot hit something solid. Unable to see in the shadows, she knelt, and her fingers closed over a brick. The light flashed in front of the air-conditioning unit where she'd hidden, then flicked behind her. His footsteps neared. She tossed the brick, and it landed with a thud on the other side of the building. The light swung away, and the sound of him running across the roof was music to her ears.

Kelsey raced for the door and jerked it open, dislodging the block of wood she'd wedged under it to keep the door ajar. She yanked it shut and lowered the security bar that would keep it from being opened from the outside. Then she leaned her head against the metal.

Fists pounding on the door made her jump back, and she froze at three sharp pings. Was he crazy? Bullets would never move the bar. She turned and flew down the steps. At the first landing she halted, aware of an eerie silence.

He's left.

Probably planned to catch her when she went out the alley door. Wouldn't he be surprised when she didn't exit? She'd left her car on the fourth level of the parking garage

and walked up to the roof. The adrenaline that had flowed through her veins dropped, leaving her legs shaky, and she held on to the steel rail as she sank to the bottom step. Home free.

Or she would be as soon she reversed the changes to the security system. Kelsey's wrist shook as she checked her watch. Still ten minutes before the next check. She slid her tablet from the backpack and flexed her fingers, then opened the program and quickly restored the system. Her cell phone buzzed, and she retrieved it from the backpack, glancing at the name on the ID. "I'm out."

"Good," Sabra said. "What took so long?"

"You won't believe me." Quickly Kelsey filled her sister in on what had happened. "I'm on the way to my car."

"I told you not to break into that office!"

"It's what I was hired to do." Kelsey didn't have time for this. "I'll call you once I get out of the parking garage."

"You can't do that! You'll be a sitting duck if he's waiting for you."

Kelsey should have thought of that. The guy had rattled her more than she'd thought.

"You need to call the police."

"And say what? Someone shot at me as I made my getaway after breaking into the building? They would arrest me first and ask questions later. And probably not even look for him—great way to get my business off the ground."

"Would Mr. Rutherford vouch for you?"

"Yeah, but the bad publicity might cost me the job. He wants to find the weak spots in the security and fix them, not tell the world they're there."

"But what if the man killed someone?"

"I never heard any gunshots except the ones aimed at me,

so he probably thought I was a criminal.” She relived the muted pops, the bullet whizzing by her ear. “Oh my goodness. He was using a silencer. Why would he be in that building with—”

“I’m coming after you. You can get your car tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at the front door in five minutes.”

But would Sabra be safe? Kelsey tried to think. The shipping crew should be changing shifts now. Hopefully, whoever had shot at her would think Kelsey was leaving work, and more than likely thought she was a man as well. He wouldn’t be looking for a woman to come out the front door. “Okay. Call me when you turn on Front Street.”

Grabbing the backpack, Kelsey hurried down the steps, shedding the black sweater and ski cap, and ran her fingers through her short hair to lift the flat curls. All the guards knew her, and once she reached the lobby, she would chat up whoever was on duty, tell him she’d come from the barbecue festivities through the shipping room to use the facilities.

Weak. But it’d have to do.