



COUNTER ATTACK

*A PEARL RIVER
NOVEL*

PATRICIA BRADLEY

PEARL RIVER • 1

COUNTER ATTACK

PATRICIA BRADLEY



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2023 by Patricia Bradley

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bradley, Patricia, 1945– author.

Title: Counter attack / Patricia Bradley.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] |

Series: Pearl River ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2022035648 | ISBN 9780800741624 (paperback) | ISBN

9780800743093 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493441259 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.R34275 C68 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220728

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022035648>

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my sister, Barbara,
who journeyed with me 1,120 feet below the earth
so I could see what being in a cave felt like.

And to Bryan and Carole,
who never complain about my deadlines . . .
at least not to my face.

But most of all,
to my Lord and Savior, Jesus.
Thank you.

Phame fingered the White pawn and opened the Tor browser from a USB drive. It took a minute to scroll through the sites before finding the right one on the dark web.

Good. So far over five thousand gamers had played the new video game. Half a mil in cryptocurrency . . . None of the other video games had ever brought in this much money. But then none of the other games were like this one. The murders had been a stroke of genius. And focusing on similar victims killed two birds with one stone.

Phame shuddered at the cliché. Phillip had hated clichés.

“Still, you’d be proud of me.” The words dropped into the quiet room held a catch.

Revenge for Phillip’s death was sweet, but it’d always been about the money. The potential to make millions of dollars relied on new victims. Retribution for Phillip’s death made the choice of victims easier.

Minutes later, new additions to the game that would bring in even more money were up and running. That so many would pay to be a killer, even vicariously . . . Phame had to laugh.

Getting away with the first murder had brought such a

sense of power that outsmarting the police had become very addictive. Soon, everyone would know about Phame, and one police officer in particular. The officer would pay—not by her own death but knowing her actions had caused the deaths of many.

Undercover detective Alex Stone twirled a strand of hair around her finger. Her spidey sense tingled from the back of her neck to the small of her back, where a belly-band secured her small backup pistol.

Someone was watching her, hopefully the person the media had dubbed the Queen's Gambit Killer. She clenched her jaw. Leave it to the media to link a killer to a TV program because a White pawn had been found in the hand of each of the five victims. She'd give anything to know who leaked that information to the public.

Her neck prickled again. Was the killer watching her every move?

Alex swiveled the barstool, casually scanning the Lemon Tree Bar and Lounge and making brief eye contact with a man who nursed a drink at the other end of the bar. One of the two Chattanooga, Tennessee, police detectives covering her in case the killer took the bait. The other officer sat at a nearby table.

Alex smoothed the short skirt that revealed way more leg than she liked. But the style was similar to what the victims had worn to the bar. She glanced down at the red three-inch heels. What she wouldn't give to slip on her running shoes.

When homicide requested her for the undercover operation, she'd insisted on Detectives Watkins and Parker as her backup. She trusted them, and the three of them were a team, one that she would hate to break up if her request to transfer to homicide came through. Homicide was the only department in the Special Investigation Division she hadn't worked in. If she was able to lure the killer into a trap and he was captured, that would surely help the transfer to go through.

She sipped a nonalcoholic Tom Collins—fizzy water with a wedge of lemon—as her gaze shifted to the stage, where a lanky kid with peach fuzz on his chin crooned of lost love in the smoky haze. Then she watched a young waitress as she wove around the tables delivering orders. Kayla. That's what she'd said her name was when Alex ordered her drink. The girl didn't look old enough to be admitted to the bar, much less serve patrons.

Alex continued her scan of the room, and a man caught her eye. He raised his glass as if inviting her to drink with him. Should she take him up on his offer? Although he was the right age, Alex doubted he was the killer—the FBI profile indicated the killer was an introvert, and this man seemed anything but. She decided to ignore him for now.

He was the third man to hit on her. Alex wasn't sure exactly what she was looking for—maybe someone showing interest but not in a way that drew attention to himself.

She realized Kayla had stopped by her barstool and was speaking to her. Alex leaned toward her. "I didn't catch what you said."

"Ready for another drink?"

Alex glanced at her almost-empty glass. "Oh, sure."

"Tom Collins mocktail again?"

Alex nodded, and the girl disappeared. She'd been watching her work the crowd off and on all night, and when Kayla

returned, she handed the girl a twenty and took the glass. "Keep the change." A broad smile made the waitress look even younger. "Are you in college?"

The smile dampened. "No. My dad died a while back, and between his hospital bills and my mom losing her job, there was no money. I had to drop out with only half my credits toward a degree in social work." Then she smiled brightly. "But I'm not letting that stop me. My financial aid advisor is helping me find grant money, but it probably won't be this semester. Next year for sure, though."

Even though she'd just met Kayla, Alex had no doubts about the waitress getting her degree. She seemed the type to not let anything stand in her way.

"You haven't worked here long, have you?" Alex didn't remember seeing Kayla's name in any of the case reports.

"Off and on for five years next month."

Alex blinked. A person had to be eighteen to work in a bar, so the girl was a lot older than she seemed. Had she been working at the Lemon Tree during the times of the murders and slipped through the cracks? Or was she not working there at the time of the murders? "Did you know Trinity Collins?"

"The woman who was murdered after she left the bar?" Kayla shook her head. "That was so sad, but I was working the afternoon crowd back then, and she never came in during that time."

That explained why there was no statement from Kayla in Trinity's file.

"Was she your friend or something?" the waitress asked.

"Something like that."

Victims four and five, Maria Brooks and Trinity Collins, had been at the bar earlier on the nights they were killed, and Alex had almost made the fatal mistake of sounding like a cop. And now she didn't dare ask if Kayla knew Maria Brooks.

Kayla jumped as someone called her name, and Alex followed her gaze to the same man who'd raised his glass to Alex earlier. "Houdini probably wants another scotch and water," she said with a shudder.

"Houdini?" She was surprised Kayla even knew who the dead magician was.

The girl giggled. "Yeah. He comes for a while then he disappears for a month or so."

"Get it," Alex said. "And I'll take it to him."

"You don't mind? He gives me the willies, but I have to be nice to him since he's a friend of the owner."

"I don't mind at all." Houdini was sounding more interesting by the minute.

Alex slid a hose-clad leg from the barstool and stood, straightening the leather skirt while she covertly checked the small Sig at her back. Normally she wore it attached to her sports bra, but the low-cut blouse ruled out that option. At least the top hung loosely past her waist. She glanced down, making one last check to verify the top didn't reveal too much cleavage.

With a pasted-on smile, she took the drink Kayla handed her and walked toward Houdini's table. There was a small chance he was the person she was looking for.