

NATCHEZ TRACE  PARK RANGERS

STANDOFF

PATRICIA BRADLEY



Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2020 by Patricia Bradley

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
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: Standoff / Patricia Bradley.

Description: Grand Rapids : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,

[2020] | Series: Natchez Park Rangers; 1 |

Identifiers: LCCN 2019035671 | ISBN 9780800735739 (paperback)

Subjects: GSAFD: Romantic suspense fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3602.R34275 S73 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019035671>

ISBN: 978-0-8007-3867-9 (casebound)

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.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the men and women
of the National Park Service.
You do a wonderful job
of sharing the parks with us
and keeping us safe.

PROLOGUE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

What had he gotten himself into?

Brandon Marlar leaned back in his chair and chewed his thumbnail. His dad had warned him the last time he'd caught him hacking. "*Son, breaking into someone's files you have no business being in is wrong, and it's going to get you in trouble. Just don't come crying to me when it does.*"

But hacking was as addictive as the heroin he'd been hooked on two years ago, and when he'd found an open port in the Boudreaux Enterprises system, Brandon couldn't help himself, not after he cracked the password in less than two minutes. Didn't make it right, though.

Brandon jiggled his legs, hesitating as the keyboard lured him. Now that he'd found one secret file, he might as well go all in. Sucking in a breath, he hunched over the computer again, his fingers flying across the keys as he unlocked another file. A spreadsheet popped up on the screen, listing banks he'd never seen in his job as bookkeeper for Justin Boudreaux. He straightened his back and massaged his tight muscles.

Just to make sure his assumptions were correct, he copied a

number in one of the columns and opened Google. Sure enough, the search engine returned hits for Fidelity Trust in the Cayman Islands. He repeated his search with numbers from another column. Another financial institution, this one in Switzerland. He totaled the accounts. At least thirty.

Brandon pulled up another file that listed dates, locations, and deposits. When he brought up both files side by side on his screen, it all clicked into place. He was looking at a classic case of money laundering. The company he worked for was blending funds and then depositing the laundered money in offshore accounts. Brandon drew in a shaky breath. “Oh, boy.”

Maybe all of this was legitimate. And maybe the Golden Gate Bridge was for sale. Justin Boudreaux was a powerful man. Even with these files, who would believe a twenty-two-year-old ex-heroin junkie? And if—he mentally erased the *if*—*when* Boudreaux discovered he’d hacked into the company’s computer system . . . Brandon didn’t want to think what might happen.

His dad.

He’d take the information to him, and he would know what to do. Brandon removed the flash drive and shut down his computer. He could be in Natchez in three hours.

NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI
FOUR WEEKS LATER

Brooke Danvers checked her watch. Her dad had said six and it was almost that. She quickly twisted her hair into a ponytail and then buckled her Sig Sauer to her waist. While she hadn't been sworn in as a law enforcement ranger yet, Mississippi was an open-carry state, and her dad had okayed her wearing it.

She hadn't stopped smiling since he'd asked if she wanted to ride along with him tonight. It didn't even bother her that he'd chosen Sunday night because there wouldn't be many cars out and about.

Brooke glanced toward the flat-brimmed hat that she'd worn all day at Melrose, the almost two-hundred-year-old mansion where she'd led tours. At times it felt as though the August heat and humidity would cook her head. She wouldn't need the hat tonight, though, and left it sitting on her childhood bed.

Returning home after fifteen years while contractors finished the remodel on her water-damaged apartment was proving to be an experience. She'd always heard grown children shouldn't return to the nest, and now she knew why. At her place, she came and went as she pleased without anyone asking questions. But now it was almost like she'd stepped back into her teenaged

years. Not that she wasn't thankful her parents had offered to let her move into her old room, but it would be good to get back in her own apartment in a couple of weeks. The chimes from the grandfather clock sent her hurrying down the hall to her dad's home office.

It was empty. He'd said he had work to do before they left . . . She quickly walked to her mom's studio.

"Where's Dad?" she asked.

Her mom turned from her easel. "He got a call and left. Said to tell you if you still wanted to do the ride along, text Gary to pick you up."

Disappointment was swift, and Brooke ground her teeth to keep from letting it show.

"He said something about you riding with him tomorrow night."

That brightened her mood slightly. Her phone dinged with a text. Gary, the retiring ranger she was replacing.

Are you riding with me?

She quickly texted him.

Yes. What time?

Give me an hour and I'll pick you up.

She sent him a thumbs-up emoji and hooked her phone on her belt.

"Come see what I'm working on," her mom said.

Brooke edged into the room. It wasn't often she got a chance to see an unfinished work by her mother. The painting was of her very pregnant sister. "Oh, wow," she said. "That's beautiful. She'll love it."

"I hope so. Meghan's feeling kind of . . ."

“Fat? That’s what she told me the other day,” Brooke said. “I tried to tell her that wasn’t true, and maybe this will show her.”

“I’m glad you like it. I should have it finished in time to take with the others to Knoxville next month.”

The baby’s due date was a couple of months away, just after her mom’s gallery showing of her work ended. They both turned as the doorbell rang. It couldn’t be Gary already, and besides, he would just honk. “I’ll get it,” Brooke said and hurried to open the front door.

“Jeremy?” she said, her stomach fluttering at the sight of one of Natchez’s most eligible bachelors. Had she forgotten a date?

He looked behind him then turned back to Brooke with laughter in his eyes. “I think so.”

Heat flushed her face, and it had more to do with the broad shoulders and lean body of the man on her doorstep than the temperature. “I wasn’t expecting you. I don’t have a lot of time, but do you want to come in?”

“Since it’s a little hot and humid out here, coming in would be good,” he teased. “And I apologize for dropping by without calling, but I was afraid you’d tell me you were busy.”

Brooke steeled herself against the subtle citrus fragrance of his cologne as he walked past her. She’d had exactly two dates with Jeremy Steele and hadn’t figured out why he was even interested in her. She was so not his type. The handsome widower tended to lean more toward blondes.

“Hello, Mrs. Danvers,” Jeremy said to her mother, who had followed her to the living room.

“How many times have I told you to call me Vivian?”

“I’ll try to remember that,” he said with a thousand-watt smile.

“Good. A thirtysomething calling me Mrs. Danvers makes me feel old,” she replied. “And since I know you didn’t come to see me, I’ll go back to my painting.”

“Good to see you . . . Vivian.” Then he turned to Brooke and glanced at her uniform. “Are you working tonight?”

“Sort of,” she said. “I was going to ride along with Dad on his patrol, but he cancelled and turned me over to another ranger. Why?”

“I know it’s last minute, but I was hoping you’d have time to join me at King’s Tavern,” he said. “I have a hankering for one of their flatbreads.”

Her mouth watered at the thought. Brooke hadn’t eaten since lunch, and she could do last minute, at least this time. But the question of why *her* kept bobbing to the surface. Ignoring it, she said, “That sounds good. I’ll text Gary to pick me up later.”

“Gary?”

She grinned at him, tempted to describe the aging ranger as a hunk but instead settled for the truth. “He’s the ranger I’m replacing when he *retires*.”

Red crept into Jeremy’s face. “Oh, that guy. Are you even sworn in yet?”

“No, that’s next week. I talked my dad into letting me get a little early practice.” It helped having a father who was the district ranger, even if he wasn’t overjoyed about her becoming a law enforcement ranger. Then she looked down. “I need to change first.”

“You’re fine like you are,” he said.

Maybe to him, but she was not about to go on a date wearing a National Park Service uniform and a Sig strapped to her waist. “Give me five minutes.”

After Brooke changed into a lavender sundress and slipped into sandals, she gave herself a brief once-over. While the dress showed no cleavage, it accentuated curves the NPS uniform hid. She freed her hair from the ponytail and put the elastic holder in her purse. In this heat, she might have to put it up again.

Brooke checked her makeup. She rarely wore anything other than pink gloss. Thick lashes framed her eyes and the sun had

deepened her olive skin to a nice tan. Brooke wasn't sure where she got her darker complexion and hair since her mom and sister, and even her dad, were fair and blonde, but she wasn't complaining.

Tonight she wanted something more and added a shimmering gloss to her lips. Then she took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. Didn't do much good with her heart still thudding in her chest.

Why was Jeremy pursuing *her*? The women usually seen on his arm were ones who could mix and mingle with the rich and famous. Women who could further his career. Jeremy was a Mississippi state senator with his sights set on Washington like his daddy, while she was a National Park Service ranger who didn't care one thing about leaving Natchez.

Her heart kicked into high gear. Had the M-word just crossed her thoughts? Impossible. It wasn't only that she wasn't his type, he definitely wasn't hers. She was a simple girl with a simple lifestyle—nothing like the Steeles.

In the 1850s, half the millionaires in the United States lived in Natchez, and the Steeles were among them. A hundred and seventy years later, the family's holdings had increased substantially, not to mention the Steele men had a long history of public service.

Jeremy's dad was the retiring US senator and his son was poised to take his place in the next election. His photo appeared regularly in the *Natchez Democrat*, often with a beautiful woman on his arm. And never the same one.

She sighed. If they lived in England, he would be royalty, and she would be the commoner who ended up with a broken heart.

Brooke chided herself about being melodramatic and hurried to her mom's studio. "Jeremy and I are grabbing something to eat," she said.

Her mom laid her brush down. "What about your ride along?"
"I'll catch up to Gary later," she said.

When she rejoined Jeremy, his eyes widened, and he whistled. “Nice,” he said.

Jeremy Steele knew how to make a woman feel special. As they stepped out of the house, she immediately noticed the ten-degree drop in temperature from when Jeremy first arrived and nodded at the thunderheads that had rolled in. “Guess that means we won’t leave the top down.”

“I think we can make it to the tavern before it starts.”

Ten minutes later Jeremy escorted her into King’s Tavern, where the original brick walls and dark wooden beams added to the mystique of the inn that had been rumored to have a ghost. The tantalizing aroma of steak drew her gaze to the open grill, but she had her heart set on one of their wood-fired flatbreads.

“Inside or out?” Jeremy asked.

“The backyard, if you don’t think it’ll rain,” she said.

“If it does, we’ll simply come in.” He gave the waitress their drink order, sweet tea for both of them, and let her know where to find them. They had their choice of picnic tables and chose the one on the hill. Once they were seated, Jeremy reached across, taking her hand. His touch and the intensity in his brown eyes almost took her breath away. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too,” Brooke said, trying not to sound breathy. The question worrying around in her head wouldn’t wait any longer. “Why me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you interested in dating me? We don’t travel in the same circles.”

“But we do. We’ve gone to church together since we were kids.”

“And you sit in your family’s pew clear across the sanctuary.”

His eyes twinkled. “We don’t have a family pew.”

She laughed. “I’d hate to be the one who sat in your mom’s seat some Sunday.”

“You’re funny,” he said. “That’s one of the things I like about you.”

“But I’m so different from the women you usually date.” There. She’d said it.

He lightly stroked the heel of her palm. “That’s what I like best. You’re real . . . not saying anything bad about anyone I’ve dated, but honestly, sometimes I think the aura of the Steele name is the attraction. That and Dad’s money.” Then Jeremy smiled, popping dimples in his cheeks. “But you were never like that. Even in high school you were never afraid to tell me like it was.”

Heat infused her cheeks. She’d been accused of that many times, usually by someone who didn’t want to hear the truth. “I’m working on not being so blunt,” she said. “I hope I never hurt your feelings.”

“I won’t say never,” he said with a wink, “but you never said anything that didn’t need saying.”

Okay, she’d been rude and hadn’t fallen all over him because of who he was . . . Before she could ask *why* again, the waitress approached with their drinks, and Brooke pulled her hand away from Jeremy’s, missing his touch immediately. Maybe she should let go of her questions and let their relationship play out.

Once the waitress left with their orders, Jeremy took her hand again. “I’ve looked a long time for the right person.”

His brown eyes held her gaze. He surely didn’t mean her. Did he? “What about Molly? I’d hate for her to get attached to me and then we stop seeing each other.”

“I don’t plan for that to happen. And Molly is already crazy about you.”

Brooke couldn’t keep from smiling. His six-year-old daughter was a sweetheart.

“How about if we take it slow?” he asked. “Get to know one another?”

“No pressure?”

“No pressure.”

Her phone dinged and she glanced at the screen. A text from Gary.

Pick you up in an hour?

Brooke hesitated, torn between wanting to spend more time with Jeremy and getting practical experience on her job. If the text had been from her dad, it wouldn't even be a question—she had so much to learn from him, but Gary, not so much. She'd known him all her life and he'd always been laid-back, never wanting to climb the ladder within the park service. But if her dad thought she should ride with him . . . With a sigh, she looked up from her phone. “Can you have me back to my house in forty-five minutes?”

“Do I want to? Nope,” he said. “But I can.”

She texted Gary an okay, wishing it was her dad she would be riding with. Then Brooke stared at her phone a second. What had been so important for her dad to stand her up?