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CANDICE SUE
PATTERSON



Preserving Liberty

TWO LOVE STORIES. ONE HISTORIC TREASURE.
AN ADVENTURE TO PRESERVE THEM ALL.

Preserving Liberty

Candice Sue Patterson

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Preserving Liberty

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Dedication

For Levi, Silas, and Hudson--you are my greatest
adventure.

To every man and woman who has fought to preserve
the freedoms and quality of life for this great nation--
thank you for your service.

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To my galley readers, I appreciate you more than words express.

Adam, thanks for your constant love and support.

And last but certainly not least, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ--all glory is yours.

What People are Saying

Candice Sue Patterson knows how to write. Period. This author's descriptive abilities are phenomenal, as is her insight into matters of the heart and emotions.

~Delia Latham on *Silver White Winters*

Fans of Denise Hunter and Becky Wade will be delighted with Candice Sue Patterson's *How to Charm a Beekeeper's Heart!* From the adorable cover to the quotes about bees and Scripture verses that begin each chapter, this is a solidly written novel sure to charm the hearts of readers for years to come.

~JoAnn Durgin, USA Today bestselling author

Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. And it requires no very high degree of education to convince them of this. They are only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.

—Thomas Jefferson

1

Liberty Carmichael had just committed her fifth offense against the federal government. She secured the latch on her leather carryall and hurried past the gilded mirror of the Rare Book and Special Collections Reading Room in the Thomas Jefferson Building, Library of Congress. She couldn't stomach the sight of herself right now. Like the Founding Fathers, Liberty had done what others considered wrong in order to stand for what was right. And she'd succeeded.

After all, who would suspect the president's daughter of theft?

Inhaling a shaky breath, she walked on trembling legs to the stairs that descended to the first floor. If she could clock-out and make it to her car where her Secret Service Agent would be waiting, she would have accomplished her mission of protecting important pieces of American history, pieces no one else seemed a bit concerned about. Including her father.

But Liberty knew the threat was real, and she would prove it. Then maybe the world would take her seriously instead of passing her off as another privileged branch on the Carmichael political family tree.

She stepped into the Main Reading Room. The circle of desks, enough to seat two hundred and fifty, sat empty beneath the ornate dome, the lamps resting for the night. The view always gave her comfort, knowing she'd had a part in preserving books for

future generations. Tonight, however, her squeaky boots on the tile echoed through the dome, seeming to draw attention to her and the priceless treasure stashed in her carryall.

As if they had eyes, the books peered at her from the stacks as she passed, making her quicken her pace. Which was ridiculous, because books didn't have eyes, and no one else knew what she'd done.

Placing a hand on her stomach, she took a deep breath and exhaled her absurdity. She was a grown woman, not a child. Her parents had taught her to fight for what she believed in, and that was exactly what she was doing. This was a noble act, not thievery.

Liberty tugged at her loose flannel shirt, glad she'd chosen comfort over style. She started her exit again, breezing through the Bibles Gallery, guilt slicing through at the knowledge of breaking one of God's commandments. Even though it held purpose.

As she neared the doors, a shadow converged with her own on the polished tile. She startled and whirled around, slapping a hand over her mouth to cover the scream. She dropped her hand to her chest. "Mr. Arnold, you...scared me." Chest heaving, Liberty berated herself for such a dramatic reaction. So much for playing it cool.

The man stepped from the dark corner where a staircase led to the ground floor. He leaned against the long dust mop handle for support. "I'm s-sorry, Miss C-Carmichael." His words released broken and slow.

Liberty wasn't sure what type of mental handicap Mr. Arnold possessed, but he'd proved to be the kindest, most gentle person she knew, and she was honored to call him friend.

"That's all right, Mr. Arnold." She let out a

nervous chuckle. "It's my fault. Something has me a little spooked tonight. No more reading Frank Peretti during break."

Mr. Arnold raised a bushy eyebrow that puckered the skin above his thick glasses. With stiff movements, he leaned the dust mop against the railing, noticing her carryall. His gaze lingered. Surely, he didn't know. He'd come from the ground floor at the same time she'd left the second.

She was being paranoid.

Liberty cleared her throat and stepped away, holding up the badge attached to the lanyard around her neck. "I should go. You know how the government feels about overtime." Her words were louder than intended. She winced at their echo. "Don't work too hard tonight, Mr. Arnold." She grinned at the black-haired custodian and before he could respond she swiped her badge to clock-out and then barged through the main exit.

The early October air relieved the sweat she didn't know had beaded around her hairline. She breathed in the crisp scent of fall and stared across First Street to the U.S. Capitol Building, silhouetted by a pink sliver from the setting sun.

Liberty loved her country, the people. This city. She wouldn't fail now.

Determination relaxed her tense muscles on the way down the granite steps to Neptune's Grotto below. Water jets splashing in the shallow pool marked her halfway point. She'd just turned left toward the corner of Independence and First Streets when a large-framed man, dressed in black, blocked her path ahead.

"You're supposed to wait at the car, remember? To give me the illusion my life holds some semblance of

normalcy." Though all things considered, Liberty was relieved to have her agent's protection ahead of schedule. She tucked the lanyard in her carryall.

Ricciuti frowned. "Give us the book, Liberty."

She halted. How did he know? "What book?"

"The book you stole tonight. It belongs to us. Hand it over."

Us.

Not the library or the people. Or even the government. *Us.* The only ones with a personal interest in the book besides herself were the Truth Seekers. Surely Ricciuti wasn't...

"Give up your bag and the location of the other books, and I'll take you home safely as I do every night."

Or what? He had to be working against her, or else he wouldn't have threatened her safety. All confidence withered like the leaves littering the city. This man had been with her since she was seven years old. He was like a second father to her. He wasn't capable of betraying her family after all these years of faithful service. Was he?

"Now, Liberty."

His steely tone contradicted the strong but gentle man she'd known him to be.

Tears pricked her eyes. "Ricciuti?" Bile burned a path up her throat. "You're one of them?"

He held out his hand.

Betrayed. Anger churned with hurt and swirled inside her heart. "No."

Ricciuti dropped his hand and straightened as if surprised by her boldness, which shocked her as well. "Then I'll have to carry out orders, and I don't want to do that, Liberty. You're a good kid."

"I'm not a child." A stupid fact to argue over in such a predicament, but she wanted him to know she was well aware of the gravity of his betrayal. "Your orders come from my father. Not a group of cowards who slink around the country defacing history, people trying to push their own agenda." Her voice grew in intensity with each word.

Ricciuti's gaze darted over their surroundings, checking for dangers, memorizing details. The natural precautionary gesture she'd always taken comfort in now put fear in her bones.

"Give me the bag."

"How could you, Ike?" Liberty let her tears fall, knowing how much he hated them. Ike grunted, the way he always did when she got emotional around him. His iron features twitched. In that second, Liberty sprinted the direction she'd come, back up the library steps.

Ricciuti yelled her name. If she could make it back inside, she could lose him in the maze of materials, then turn him in to the authorities. Liberty pulled at the door handles.

Locked.

Heavy footfalls slapped the stone behind her.

She weaved through the archways on the piazza and descended the steps on the other side. She told herself not to play the stupid female victim and glance behind her, but the temptation was too great. She misjudged the last step and hit the cement with a *whack*. White-hot pain shot through her forehead and elbows. The metallic taste of blood registered on her tongue.

Ike's steps grew closer, breaths louder. Scrambling to her feet, Liberty raced down the sidewalk that

stretched the northeast side of the library along Capitol Street to the employee parking lot.

Ricciuti was never without a weapon.

Liberty expected to dodge bullets any second. If God had mercy on her, another human would be nearby to call on for help.

“Liberty!” Ike’s labored tone filled the void between them. His heart attack two years ago immediately filled Liberty’s mind. No one had suspected such a crippling event, especially since he’d had the stamina and muscle mass of a twenty-year-old. His cholesterol, however, was every day his fifty-six years. For months Liberty had fussed over him. How could he betray her like this? Her family? Their country?

Her lungs burned, and her legs threatened to give out, but she refused to quit now. Not even if Ike was in trouble. She darted into the employee parking lot. Two more men wearing black emerged from a small cluster of cars, obviously prepared to take what they wanted. The normally busy streets were empty tonight. Had everyone evacuated the city since lunch?

As Liberty neared the Folger Library, she spotted a figure across the street, barely visible from the dim lamppost, straddling a motorcycle in front of the Lutheran Church.

“Help!”

The man, dressed in a leather jacket and jeans, went on full alert. “What’s wrong?”

She reached him and nearly collapsed.

He steadied her, his gaze zeroing in on the men giving chase.

Her lungs were so strained she didn’t know if she could even manage the words. “Men...” She wheezed,

her vision growing dark at the edges. "Attacking me...help."

He gave her upper arms a firm yet controlled shake that kept her focused. "Get on and hold tight."

Liberty obeyed, her brain fuzzy with exhaustion and shock. Before she realized what was happening, the bike roared up Second Street, surrounded by the spark of bullets on pavement.

Cole Harding flinched as a bullet zinged past his head and shattered the rear window of a car parked along the curb. He swerved to avoid the glass shards and to keep their heads from being the next round's target. A muffled whimper mixed with the air rushing past his ears, and his passenger's arms went lax around his waist. Keeping his eyes on the road, Cole twisted his neck enough for the wind to carry his voice. "Are you hurt?" he yelled.

A sob. "No." The woman's head dropped where his neck and shoulder met, and her grip weakened further.

"Don't pass out on me." Cole grabbed her arm and yanked it tighter around his waist. "I need you to hang on."

If she lost consciousness and tipped the bike, they'd be eating pavement into eternity.

The hold around his middle tightened. Relieved she hadn't been hit, he opened the throttle and zipped past houses filled with families settling in for the night. A stoplight glowed yellow up ahead. They blew around an SUV and a black sedan yielding the intersection and turned right onto Maryland, not

slowing until they reached Stafford Park.

Cole braked beneath a copse of trees and killed the engine. He tried to lean back, but the woman plastered to him restricted his movement. "You all right?"

She shuddered. "Yes."

The woman was long-legged. With her limbs wrapped around him, her knees reached him mid-thigh. Of course, she was sitting as close as she could get. He'd wanted her to hold on, not permanently attach herself.

"Do you think you can stand up?" He needed to find out why the Seekers were after her, and fast. They weren't safe here for long.

She trembled against him. "I'm...so...cold."

Shock.

He wasn't likely to get answers until she settled down. Cole unlatched her vise-like grip from his abs, maneuvered off the bike, removed his jacket, and draped it over her shoulders. She grabbed the lapels with her left hand and pulled it closed. Polished nails. No rings. A half-inch leather bracelet on her wrist. He kept his ears tuned for any approaching sounds. So far, only typical city noises and shadows. "Who were those guys?"

"I'm not sure."

"OK. Then why were they chasing you?"

She straightened and dabbed her cheeks with her sleeve. The park was somewhat secluded, and with leaves still covering most of the trees it was hard to get a good assessment of her in the moonlight.

"I...have something they want."

Obviously, but was she a Seeker gone rogue, or an innocent bystander?

The woman sniffed and then sighed. "Thank you

so much for your help." She wriggled from his coat and folded it across the seat. "I don't know what I would've done otherwise." Pushing against the bike, she swung her leg over and stood. Swayed.

Cole steadied her by the shoulders. A strap crossed the front of her body and attached to a bag resting at her hip. "You're welcome." Five-foot-seven. One hundred forty pounds. Medium-brown hair, ending three inches below the shoulders. Brown eyes?

Cole released her and shifted in hopes the moonlight penetrating through the trees would allow him a good glimpse at her face. "Whatever you have in that bag must be important if men with pistols are hunting you down in a city swarming with law enforcement."

"It is. But it's important to me for an entirely different reason. Thank you again."

She spun to leave but Cole caught her by the elbow, catching the scent of peachy perfume. "Where're you going?"

"Someplace safe."

"Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

She jerked away. "I need to go."

"My head could resemble Swiss cheese right now because of you. At least tell me your name."

She crossed her arms. Hesitated. "Libby."

"I'm Griff. At least let me take you where you need to go."

"I can't." She retreated a step.

"Why?"

"Because..." She looked left to right. "I don't know who I can trust and who I can't."

Cole didn't miss the hitch in her voice. He was the best person to trust at this moment, but she didn't know that yet. "You said I saved your life. Don't you think you can trust me?"

He felt more than saw her battle between instinct and rationality. Cole pegged her as both naïve and highly intelligent.

After a long pause, Libby shook her head and backed into an area highlighted by the full moon. A single tear dripped down her face. "Nothing is as it seems anymore."

Recognition burst Cole's mission to smithereens. He gaped at the American icon before him.

Liberty Carmichael—First Daughter.

2

Cole swallowed a curse. How on earth had Liberty Carmichael gotten involved in this? He had to get the story out of her now. Then get her home. If something happened to her on his watch, the president would personally handle his execution.

The moon shone on her like a spotlight on a dark stage. “Libby wouldn’t be short for Liberty, would it?”

She closed her eyes and tipped her face to the sky, revealing a busted bottom lip.

He wasn’t sure if she was silently giving God an earful or praying. “What do you have that those guys want?”

She studied him a moment. “Griff, if you really want to help me—help your country—you’ll drop me off at Union Station, no questions asked.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? No way am I dropping the president’s daughter at a train station, alone, when a group of thugs are out for blood.”

She tipped her head to the side, eyes narrowing. “How do you know it’s a group?”

Smart woman. “Two guys were chasing you. It’s a group.”

“No. *Two* is a couple. Three is a few. Four or more is a group.”

Cole threw his palms up. “Are we seriously having this conversation? Two or fifty, those guys tried to kill you.” He moved closer, and she stepped back.

“No doubt, they’re hunting us as we speak. I’m taking you home.”

“You can’t.”

“Because you don’t trust me? I just saved your life.” He grasped her upper arm in a controlled grip.

She dug in her heels. Literally. “Because if you do, I’ll go to prison.”

He let his arm drop. Liberty Carmichael was full of surprises. “What did you do?”

She moved toward the bike. “You’re right. We need to get moving.”

He blocked her path. “If you want Union Station, you’ll tell me what’s going on.”

The blare of a distant train echoed.

Liberty remained quiet. She was wise for not confiding in a stranger.

But he was her best bet. “You said this was an opportunity to help my country. I take that *very* seriously.” He pushed his sleeve up to his elbow, revealing the U.S.M.C. insignia tattooed on his forearm. “Let me help you.”

Her lips screwed into a cute little pucker. “I stole something of importance to keep it safe from a radical group plotting to destroy it.”

Not good. “How do you know they want to destroy it?”

Liberty protested by shaking her head.

Cole leaned over the bike, removed the key, and buried it in his pocket. He would get answers.

Her mouth fell open. She exhaled. “I’m a Historic Preservation Specialist in the Library of Congress. I saw evidence—cryptic emails, messages hidden between books, things that prove they’re after what I’ve got. I’m positive there’s a mole in my department.”