

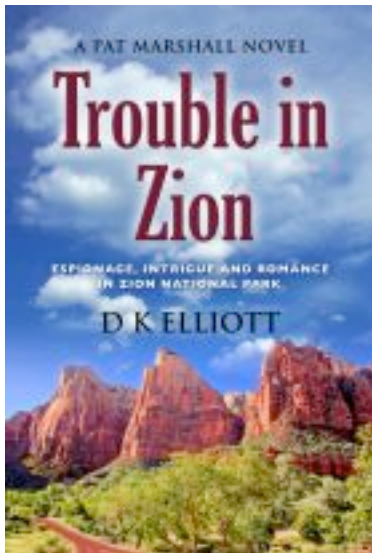
A PAT MARSHALL NOVEL

Trouble in Zion

ESPIONAGE, INTRIGUE AND ROMANCE
IN ZION NATIONAL PARK

D K ELLIOTT





A counterterrorism thriller that challenges citizen recruits the FBI, and Homeland Security to overcome threats from embedded spies and insurgents.

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by D K Elliott

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TROUBLE IN ZION

D K Elliott

Also by D K Elliott

The Canyon Caper

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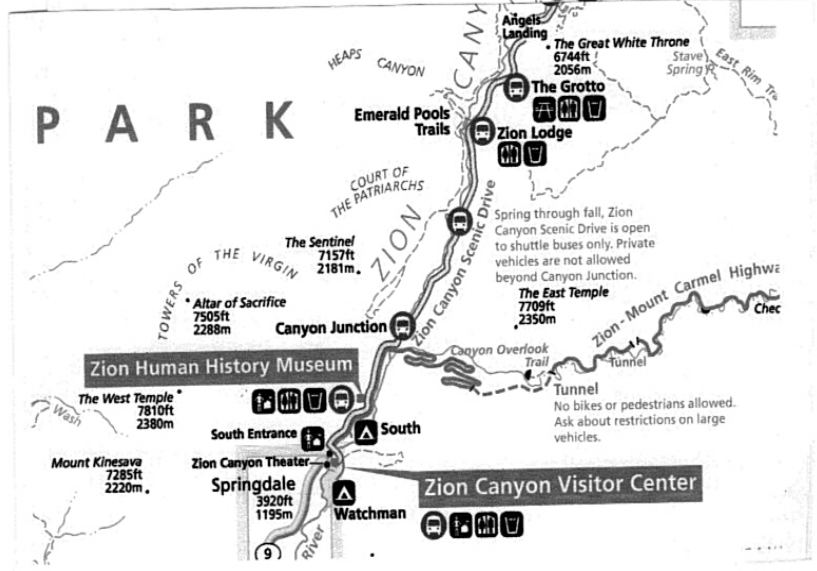
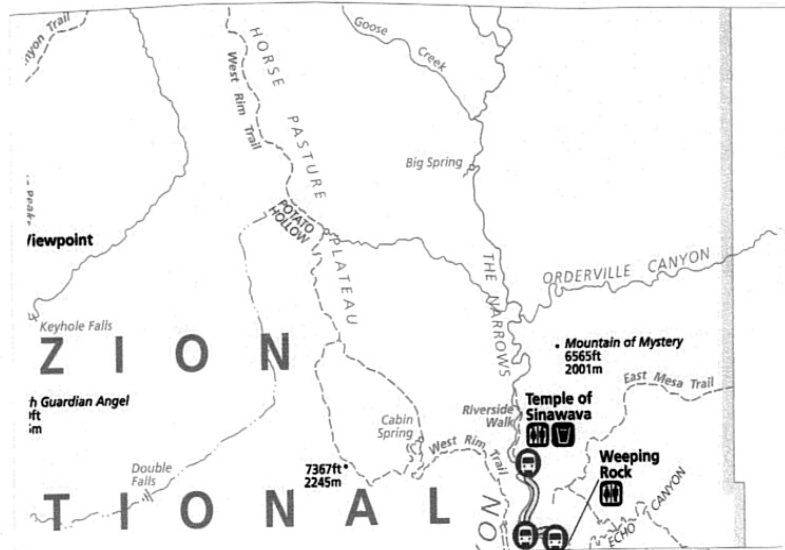
For Rick, Irene, Bill, Kerry, Jeanne
and the grandchildren, who bring joy
to a family rich with life and love.

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TROUBLE IN ZION



II

Center City Philadelphia

Pat Marshall bolted upright and quickly devoured the contents of her darkened bedroom with confused darting glances. The room was void of any incarnate or spectral creature. She breathed deeply and fell back on her pillow. It was Jimmy's voice, no doubt about that. But I buried you in the family plot a year ago, little brother. Why are you back and what were you trying to tell me?

She focused on the dream sequence that had shaken her. Thanking me for avenging your untimely death... and telling me to stay away from any more involvement with the dark and dangerous escapades in the underbelly of international intrigue. You sure have a way with words, Jimmy. So, little brother, looking out for me from the heavens and not from the netherworld, I hope.

She thought about Arizona, thoroughly disgusted with the way she and Harry Hamilton, her PI protector, had been used by the FBI and the State Department a year ago. Harry almost died, and I was lucky to avoid having been shot and possibly killed, thanks to Harry. And Jimmy served as a State Department undercover agent and died in the service of our country. Now, State has the audacity to ask for help with more of its shenanigans—its death-defying games to manipulate world events. And I'm to serve again as a tribute and obligation to you, dear brother? Ha! Hasn't our family done enough?

Thank you, Jimmy, for coming back in spirit to reinforce my decision to reject State's proposition. She smiled. I looked out for my little brother all his adult life, and now he's looking out for me from afar. She rolled over and drifted off to sleep.

The shrill of an alarm clock announced the start of a day Pat wished was over and done. She lay in bed dreamy-eyed and thought about Harry Hamilton... and about Scott Cantrell, her friendly park ranger stationed in Grand Canyon National Park. She smiled as she recalled how Harry had reawakened her to romantic love—he and Scott Cantrell. Maybe I'm a bit too modern, but I'm honest about who I am. My parent's generation would say I'm a loose woman, but life's different now. I'm glad I left the stoic, socially aloof Pat Marshall behind. I like fun-loving, sexually active Pat Marshall. She chuckled.

I'm sure Harry would like a lot more bed time, but now that we're back in Philadelphia, I'm too involved getting my industrial design business up and running after that lengthy absence in Arizona. Scott wrote, hoping to entice me back there and away from Harry. If I do visit him it's sure to be another attempt to keep me there permanently... in wedded bliss. She smiled. I'm still not ready for that, yet I can't reject it outright. Maybe some day in the future when the stimulation of running a successful consulting business no longer energizes me.

She threw off the bed sheet and nightgown, dropped Harry and Scott from her thoughts, and headed for the shower. A quick check to see if the five-foot-eight body showed any signs of time. Looking good, Patricia. However, the hair needs a shampoo. She reflected on how she had often been complimented as the face of Nefertiti reincarnate.

While she showered, she mentally rehearsed how to let the man from State who called, "What was his name?" know what she thought of the way the Department had used her and Harry Hamilton in the canyon caper last October. The government led us to believe we were instrumental in a covert operation to secure critical information for our country's vital interests. Instead, they set us up as pigeons in a sham production to distract conspirators and potential killers from the actual operation. She gritted her teeth. Now, State's back looking for more blood from me.

Furious, she snapped a towel from the rack while still lathered up, laughed, rinsed down, stepped out of the shower and roughly dried off. She wrapped a towel around her still moist body and headed to the kitchen for a quick breakfast of OJ, coffee and

English muffins with cream cheese. Have to keep the body beautiful. Sated, she returned to the bedroom, dropped the towel and slipped into bra and underpants.

She stood in front of her wardrobe and contemplated the outfit to wear for the meeting with State. Although I've no intention of accepting their proposal, I feel an obligation to your memory, dear brother, to hear them out. After all, you're a true patriot in my eyes, Jimmy. It's the least I can do to honor you. We weren't particularly close, but I did love you and cared for your well-being as an elder sister ought to. I still can't get over how different you were from what I assumed until I dug into your life after your death—an undercover agent, a lover, a compassionate friend of the underdog and the disadvantaged. The latter cost you your life. Misty-eyed, she recalled the dream and his warning.

A white, open-neck blouse, blue skirt and a red blazer are just what I need. She smiled. "Okay boys, here I come, the all-American girl." She picked up her keys and purse and marched out the door of her condo with a confident stride, head held high. She left behind a domicile enriched with first-class, eclectic furnishings from elegant shops in and around Philadelphia.

She drove her silver BMW 325 through downtown to the Federal Courthouse Building at 601 Market Street, parked in the nearest garage and walked to the building. Cleared through security, she took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, found the room, boldly entered and inventoried the setting with a quick scan of her designer eye. It was a typical conference room: an oblong table, straight-back chairs lined up around the table, a marble tiled floor and walls papered in a relaxing ecru shade.

A few chairs were arranged off to the side for more intimate discourse, occupied by four individuals. They rose when she entered the room. A glance at the three men and one woman assured her they were unfamiliar. At least State was sufficiently circumspect to not send anyone from the Arizona debacle. She relaxed.

A tall Afro-American man spoke first, focusing on Pat with an expression of sincere esteem. "Ms. Marshall, I presume?"

She nodded.

“My name is Ralph Cummings. I’m the person who called. My associates are Bill Davidson, Tom Lester and Dawn McBride.”

Each stepped forward to shake Pat’s hand. She acknowledged them without returning their attempts at engaging smiles.

Cummings stepped forward and took her hand. “We greatly appreciate you meeting with us, Ms. Marshall. Shall we sit?” He released her hand, and they sat in chairs arranged in a circle.

Pat picked up the message. It’s a meeting of equals. I’d better set a timetable. “My schedule allows me no more than an hour, as I mentioned when you called. We need to stick to that.”

Cummings responded, “Absolutely, Ms. Marshall.” He leaned back in his chair, folded his hands under his chin and fixed his eyes on her. “Few individuals in all my years with the State Department have exhibited the courage and intellect you exhibited last October in the Grand Canyon when you and Mr. Hamilton helped our country accomplish an extremely important and risky operation.”

Pat tensed. Here it comes, bouquets and challenges designed to call me back to duty.

Cummings continued with a candid expression. “I know all about that operation and how we used you and Mr. Hamilton. Let me, here and now, apologize again for our behavior, necessary as it was. We’re back again because we need help from exceptional citizens, such as you—people not identified with any government agency or program, or with any political force or adversarial coterie. However, until you agree to help your country again, I can’t reveal the full nature of the activity. All I can tell you is that it will involve a commitment of around two full weeks plus meeting time here in Philadelphia.” Cummings glanced at his colleagues, each of whom nodded.

“The assignment will entail some slight risk to your physical well-being, albeit minimal. The four of us are involved in the operation, and we’ll carry the major burden for its success or failure. Without help from someone of your capability and character, however, our odds of success shrink considerably. We’ll answer any questions you may have, exclusive of the limitation I mentioned.” He sat back, crossed his hands in his lap and gazed at Pat.

She had not moved a muscle during Cummings's oration. She remembered the caution the FBI and State laid on her and Harry Hamilton last year at the conclusion of State's venture in the Grand Canyon: This operation never happened. You will not be identified with it, with the FBI or with the State Department. You are advised to put it out of your heads.

Pat wondered if that anonymity was a set-up so she'll be available for future operations. So they want someone who has no connection to any government activity. How convenient.

She studied Cummings as he spoke and tried to get behind the deep-brown eyes focusing on her. Why has he singled me out for his operation? He's attractive, articulate and a sincere spokesman for the group, but I've made up my mind. There's no need for me to be concerned about trust or integrity because I won't be depending on him or any of the other three. I'll toss out a few questions to buttress my decision.

"What form of compensation will I receive to forgo my business activity for the time you'll require of me?"

Cummings looked to Davidson, who frowned and responded. "We don't have a figure to offer, Ms. Marshall. If compensation will get you on board, let us know what you consider fair remuneration for your time, and we'll request approval from the Secretary's office."

Pat's lips twitched in a half smile. "Given the time you're asking of me, the risk you alluded to and the government's ability to pay, I think one-and-a-half million will be fair compensation."

Davidson looked to Cummings and shrugged.

Cummings turned to Pat, expressionless. "We'll have to look into that, Ms. Marshall. Any other questions?"

Pat studied the four, one by one, as she responded. "What kind of protection will I be afforded? Who will I be working with?" She stopped at McBride.

McBride looked to Cummings, who nodded. She turned to Pat. "You'll be working with another individual similar to yourself who we have yet to recruit. That individual will be your primary protection, as he'll be armed. If your situation should ever become risky, we can provide you with a vest for body protection."

Pat was certain her surprised expression spoke volumes before she said a word. “I see. My escort and I will be on our own. Sounds challenging. Do you think you can recruit Brad Pitt?” Her attempt at humor clearly did not sit well with the four, but she ignored their sour expressions. “Thank you for considering me for a starring role in your production. However, I don’t see how I can possibly tear myself away from my other commitments. Good luck in your recruitment efforts. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to end this discussion and get back to my business.”

She stood up. The four of them rose simultaneously. Pins in a bowling alley. She smiled inwardly.

Cummings reached for her hand, holding to his calm demeanor. “Thank you for considering our request. We are, of course, terribly disappointed you rejected it, but we fully understand. We all knew your brother Jimmy and were devastated by the way he was killed in the line of duty. It happens so infrequently that you’re never inured to the loss of a colleague you admired and respected. Well, good day, Ms. Marshall. Here’s my card if you should ever wish to get in touch with me for any reason whatsoever.”

Pat took the card, dropped it in her pocket and left the room. She walked away in silence and choked down an emotional sob as she visualized Jimmy’s body in the morgue that horrible day last fall.

Driving to her office, she was not as proud of her performance at the meeting as she thought she would be. The persons from State were pleasant and considerate, and they made no attempt to pressure me as the government agents had for the canyon caper. She felt flushed. You ought to be embarrassed, Patricia, with your flippant comments and summary dismissal of their request for help.

Despite the frightening, near-death experience with my involvement in State’s operation in the Grand Canyon, I never regretted taking that path because I owed it to Jimmy and our parents. I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d not made every effort to learn the mystery of Jimmy’s death. Perhaps I should have given Cummings more consideration—asked more relevant questions to find out if I might entertain his request for help. Oh, well, that’s water over the dam. No sense replaying that meeting. I

have business that needs my full attention.

On Wednesday, the week after her meeting with State, Pat received a telephone call at work. She picked up and heard a familiar voice—a very familiar voice.

“Hey, Pat, it’s Harry. Have I caught you at a bad time?”

She smiled. “No, you haven’t. So, what’s on your mind? You’re not getting itchy pants, are you? I told you we’d get together in another week or so. Have a little patience.”

He laughed. “You’re too quick for me. No, my libido did *not* impel me to call. I wanted to tell you of my new client and the case I’ll be working on.”

“Since when does a private investigator discuss his cases with disinterested third parties? I thought you boys were more circumspect than that.”

“I’m not spilling any beans. I think you’ll be astounded when you hear who the client is. I’m back working for the State Department. They have need for someone they can trust who is an unknown in the policy and security arenas. Because I was an anonymous hero the last time they used me, I’m eligible again. Best of all, this time I’m getting a fee for my services. What do you think about that?”

Pat hesitated. Should I tell him about my meeting with State? “That’s news. I guess our experience in the Grand Canyon obviously hasn’t soured you on linking up again with State’s venturesome escapades. Don’t tell me you’re in the mood to take another load of lead for a chance at heroism?”

“No, I’m not in the mood to be a target for some trigger-happy assailant. I can’t tell you anything about the case, except to say it’s a lot less risky than the canyon caper. I thought you’d find it ironic that I’m back where we were almost a year ago.”

Cummings’s card was still in her desk drawer. For some reason, she was reluctant to toss it away. This new aspect of State’s request for help was puzzling. She had thought about possibly reconsidering their request. “Will you be operating alone, or will you be working with others?”

“That’s a strange question. I’ll be working with others. Why do you ask?”

“Anybody other than State Department personnel?”

“I get the feeling you know more than you’re willing to reveal. Am I right?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“They’re busy recruiting another operative to partner with me. Are *you* interested?”

She stalled. Do I really want to trade-off another leave of absence from my business to help Harry survive State’s chicanery? That’s taking friendship a lot further than common sense suggests. Oh, well. “Maybe. I have to confess; they tried to recruit me, but I turned them down.”

“Wow! You turned them down? Well, good for you. I can understand why. Will you *really* reconsider? We did make a great team back in the Grand Canyon.”

She smiled. “Yes, we did, didn’t we. I have to think about it. Right now the idea of getting back in the saddle with State is more than I’m prepared to deal with. I’m right in the middle of some business negotiations. I’ll get back to you in a couple of days. *Please*, do *not* mention me to anybody from State just yet. I have Cummings’s card, and I’ll call him if and when I decide to come aboard.”

She hung up, leaned back in her chair and thought about her dream. Well, Jimmy, it seems I’m about to do something I may regret. I’ll probably kick myself for not heeding your advice.

By Thursday evening, Pat had not made up her mind whether to sign on to the State Department project. In a way, I feel I ought to take Jimmy’s place in serving our country, but why should I? After all, didn’t I fulfill that obligation last October? Besides, I have a business to run, and I can’t serve it well running around the country as some kind of amateur agent for the State Department. On the other hand, Harry had put his life on the line for me, and we work well together as a team. He needs someone of my intellect to keep him from doing rash and foolish things.

The thought of working with Harry changed her perspective of another tour of civic duty. She visualized him and their relationship. I can understand women being attracted to Harry—well-built, six-foot, black wavy hair, dark-brown eyes, and a face

not only well proportioned, but also full of character. His smile and devilish eyes send tingling sensations down my spine. I not only enjoy his looks, but also his company. Face it, Patricia, you warm to images of him in your reveries. That night in bed, she drifted off to sleep while reminiscing about the joy she found when she rediscovered her sexuality a year ago with Harry Hamilton.

Friday morning, Pat woke refreshed and clear-headed—no visits from Jimmy during the night with warnings about getting involved with his old employer. She thought of her and Harry working as a team, facing high adventure again. It has an appeal I'm not likely to find in my business activities, as much as I enjoy the latter. I need more information before reconsidering the challenge Cummings presented. I'll call Harry and explore the nature of the project. He'll trust me sufficiently to provide some description of the task we'll face if I climb aboard. She leaped out of bed, tossed off her nightgown and headed for the shower, humming some silly tune she could not quite place.

Meanwhile, Harry Hamilton sat in his briefs at a 1950's style kitchen table in his tired apartment on South Twenty-sixth Street in Philadelphia. His usual morning repast of coffee and stale Danish lay there half consumed. He still missed the cigarette companion, having at least the sense to abandon that habit years ago. He often wondered why he still noticed its absence, not that he was tempted to start down that path again. He smiled. I guess old habits never completely disappear. One habit that will never go downhill and disappear is my hots for Pat.

They got together periodically since they had returned from Arizona and after he had fully recovered from the gunshot wound to his chest. They dined, went to shows and occasionally bedded down at her place afterward. He reflected on their relationship. The sex is still as satisfying and light-hearted as it was in Arizona. The fact it's playful and not obligatory is what makes it high-spirited—not only in the saddle, but afterward. No greater commitment is expected or desired. Harry, you are one lucky guy.

I always thought I was meant for bachelorhood, but I'm not that sure about Pat. In fact, lately, I'm somewhat doubtful about

myself; ever since I fell in love with her when we were in Arizona last year. She's approaching thirty, and the ticking clock may influence her attitude about marriage and family before long. I'm sure Cantrell hasn't given up on his pursuit of her. Well, maybe she'll join me on the State project. That'll help keep Cantrell at bay for a while longer and give me more time to test the waters.

Harry had an active case keeping tabs on a john who was thought by his wife to be playing around. He never bothered to keep count of how many of these cases he handled since becoming a private eye. The cases interested him as a source of hard cash and, on occasion, as a source of new female conquests—sometimes the girl friend and sometimes the wife. I always feel a tinge of sympathy for the johns, knowing I'd have been one of them if married to many of their wives. Still, I have to make a living, and at least it's honest work. And PI work is a lot more rewarding than the insurance investigator job that launched my career.

Harry threw on slacks and a rumpled shirt, not having an acquaintanceship with irons or ironing boards, and left for his office. His beat-up Mazda Miata still chugged along. He smiled and patted the dash. Just keep on going. I got better uses for income than replacing you, ol' Betsy. Besides, it gives clients the impression my fees are reasonable. The only wealth he had ever accumulated was the equity in his apartment when it went condominium, and he, along with Wachovia bank, bought in. In the ten years since that transaction, he saw his investment quadruple in value.

After he arrived at his office, he was at his beat-up desk less than ten minutes when the telephone rang. He picked up. "Hello, Harry Hamilton, private investigator, how may I be of assistance?" It was no prospect, but he was not disappointed.

"Hi, Harry, it's Pat. Do you have time to chat?"

He smiled. "For you, my dear, I always have time. What do you wanna chat about?"

"I'm still reluctant to commit to the State Department for any activity, undercover or otherwise. Before I rule it out, however, perhaps you can enlighten me on the nature of the project."

Now, Harry had a problem. How much can I reveal without

violating my security obligations to State? He searched for the right words he hoped would swing her aboard. “Well, I can tell you it doesn’t involve assassins or insurgents. The risk of having to face threatening individuals is minimal. It does involve foreign dignitaries visiting in the good old USA by invitation of our government. My role and yours, if you join me, will be to shadow the foreign guests and report what we learn to State Department agents who head up the project. I can’t say more until you’re on board.”

“Sounds like undercover work to me. Am I correct?”

“Not really. It’s more what I do for a living, tailing johns, and no more risky than that.”

“Oh, really. Don’t some of your so-called johns carry protection?”

He laughed. “Only in the paperback novels. I’ve yet to run into one who did. If they *are* running around on the little woman, they’re smart enough to not have weapons lying around the house, but we digress. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Uh... yes... but I know you can’t give me more specifics. How will we be cast in our role as observers?”

“I don’t know, maybe as a loving couple living a normal, carefree life. Do you think you can handle that?”

She laughed. “That will take some *real* acting on both our parts. Well, thanks for the info. Now, the ball’s in my court. You’ll know in a day or two what I’ve decided. ’Bye.” She hung up.

Harry sat back in the chair and propped his feet on the cluttered desk. What will she do? He had never sought a steady relationship with one woman in his adult life after having tried it as a teenager and found it stifling. There were too many good-looking gals ready to play games, and he was a prize chess piece for them. Variety was the spice of life for Harry Hamilton. While dating a lady, he never tried to deceive her into thinking he was available as a permanent partner. If that turned them off, he moved on to the next one. Pat, however, was a different story.

She’s the only woman I ever viewed as a true love. It kills me that she’s attracted to Cantrell. Who am I to fret over that, however. It amazes me that I can date other women and have it not affect our relationship. We’re true friends as well as lovers; a rare

association outside of marriage. I cannot envision life without my best friend, Pat.

Pat had called Harry from her office. She smiled and shook her head as she visualized him sitting in his dingy business accommodations. Pat Marshall operated out of one of the newer office buildings in Philadelphia, luxuriating in her modernistic furnishings. Of course, she had need for the upscale office to reinforce her image as a top designer with her clients. They were both fair and above board with the services provided to clients and with their fees. This quality flowed over into their relationship with each other, cementing their friendship over the past year.

Pat's warm feelings for Harry surfaced as she sat and mulled over the question, "Should I or shouldn't I?" She glanced at Jimmy's image on her desk, remembered him as the younger brother she cared for when their parents died, and made up her mind. She picked up the phone, took out Cummings's card and dialed his number.

Cummings and his associates were in his office rating several prospects to team with Hamilton when the telephone rang.

McBride picked up. "Hello. Dawn McBride here." She covered the mouthpiece and turned to Cummings, eyebrows raised. "It's Marshall. She wants to talk to you."

Cummings took the receiver, moved to the edge of his chair and nodded to the group. "Hello, Ms. Marshall. This is Ralph Cummings. I hope this call means you're willing to reconsider joining our little group?"

"I've decided to sign on to your project if you still need me, providing Harry Hamilton will be my partner. I'm ready to meet with you whenever it's convenient."

Cummings leaned back. "That's great news Ms. Marshall. I can't thank you enough for accepting our request to join the team. Yes, Mr. Hamilton will be your partner throughout the operation. I can't say more over the phone. Can we meet here in my office Monday morning at ten?"

"Yes. I'll be there at ten."

“Thank you, Ms. Marshall.” Cummings hung up and turned to his associates. “Well, it worked. Getting Hamilton on board was a stroke of genius, Bill.” He shook Davidson’s hand. “Now, let’s be sure we forget about our little deception. It never happened, *correct?*” The other three smiled and nodded.

Pat found it hard to concentrate on her client work for the rest of the day. She was about to start down a road on a journey of unknown purpose and unknowable outcome. She felt her muscles tense up and her throat become dry. She searched for insights that confirmed her decision to get involved in another furtive government operation, in spite of feeling her family had done enough for their country. She struggled with her cognitive dissonance until she decided to call Harry late in the day and share her concerns. Maybe he can help me overcome my reservations about joining in State’s project. She dialed his office number—the answering service picked up. She dialed his home number—a similar result. Next try was his cell phone.

“Hello, who’s calling?”

He had told her he never gave his cell phone number to clients, only to a select few associates and friends. She knew he was not in the business of holding client hands twenty-four seven. She responded, expelling a heavy breath. “It’s me, Harry. Got a minute?”

His voice perked up. “Sure, Me, what’s goin’ on?”

She proceeded to tell him of her call and scheduled meeting with Cummings.

“Are you calling to tell me you’ve decided to sign on to the operation, or is there something bothering you?”

She hesitated for a few seconds. “I’m not sure. One part of me is being pulled into their project and another part is being pulled away. I made a date to meet with them, but I can easily change my mind. I don’t want to go into the meeting if I’m not fully committed.”

“You’re right. Don’t meet with them unless you’re committed. How can I help, if that’s why you called?”

She bit her lip. “I’m looking for help, but I don’t know what to ask for. It’s not that there’s one or two specific questions I need

answered. I guess I'm confused, or maybe somewhat frightened about what I'll be getting into."

"Don't worry. All your concerns will be cleared up after you meet with them. I'm actually looking forward to the job. It promises to be a lot more interesting and rewarding than tailing johns. I bet you'll feel the same way once you get into the game. Let's have dinner Monday night after your meeting so we can compare notes. What d'ya say?"

She picked up on his tone, knowing him as she did. "I'm guessing you're sitting in your favorite watering hole, The Irish Pub, nursing a Scotch on the rocks—your typical TGIF routine. Have I got you pegged or what?"

He laughed. "Am I that transparent?"

"You bet you are. How many have you had?"

"Only on my third. They help me relax after a busy week . . . and before I go to dinner."

"Yeah, and they also cause you to be a bit overconfident about your opinions. Okay, I'll buy your act. Pick me up at my office six-thirty on Monday."

She hung up, sat back in her black leather, reclining desk chair and stared at Jimmy's picture, deep in thought. Well, brother dear, look what I've got myself into. I pray your warning was to shelter me from the cruel world—merely a reversal of roles and nothing more.

She left her office, drove home and decided to put aside concerns about the State Department and possible consequences of her decision to go ahead with its project. Once home, she fixed a dinner of lamb chops, baked potato and salad. She ate, sipped an expensive Merlot and watched the evening news. After dinner, she relaxed in a lounge chair and read *The March* by E. L. Doctorow until her eyes drooped. Then, it was into her nightgown and under the covers. She was fast asleep in a matter of minutes.

Harry left the bar after finishing his third Scotch and wandered to the Down Home Diner for a quick meal of strip steak, French fries and green beans. He preferred the chef's green beans because he prepared them southern style. A cup of java, a wedge of apple pie and he was set for the evening. He left the diner and walked

back to the bar, looked over the action, and saw nothing worth pursuing. Upon reaching his car, he checked for parking tickets, found one, tore it up and drove home to his flat.

He watched sports highlights on ESPN until midnight, his butt planted in a worn-out vinyl recliner and feet propped on a beat-up hassock. He often thought his place had all the charm of a floozy's frock at four AM. Feeling drowsy, he got up, dropped his outer garments and slipped into bed in his briefs. He lay there for several minutes remembering the relationship he shared with Pat Marshall last year in Arizona and fully expected it to be repeated in a new adventure. The memories brought forth a warm sensation he fought before he drifted off to sleep.

Meanwhile, the calm in Pat's apartment was shattered. She was caught in a grip of sheer terror. Hands reached out, grabbed her and pulled her out of bed. She struggled desperately and tore at the faces and clothing of her assailants. All she saw were dark figures with indistinct faces. She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Where are they taking me? What have I done? What do they want to do with me? She was not in her apartment, but in a vast wilderness in the dead of night. She bolted upright in bed as the nightmare faded from view and slowly regained control of her emotions. Oh, my God, Patricia, you have to get hold of yourself. You have to decide to go ahead with State or back off. You can't wander in limbo, worrying whether you should or shouldn't. She hyperventilated, lay awake for the next hour, and slowly built resolve to stay with her commitment to fulfill her brother's role in serving their country.

III

Pat Marshall awoke at six on Monday morning after a relaxing weekend cleaning her apartment and catching up on bills. She showered, slipped into a towel and broke the night's fast: Special K with banana, OJ and coffee. The radio energized her with light rock-n-roll as she prepared for the day's business. Humming along with the music, she felt invigorated, brought on by having resolved her uncertainty about the meeting scheduled for ten. She reflected on her tendency when faced with a troubling decision. I may fret and worry, lose sleep and even have night frights, agonizing over a client issue, but once I've made up my mind, I'm upbeat and ready to kick ass.

Grabbing the Philadelphia Inquirer left at her door each morning, she scanned the highlights for local, national and international news. I wonder which of these topics will become more interesting to me later today. Having finished breakfast, still wrapped in a towel, her next task was to decide what to wear for the meeting. After slipping on her bra and underpants, she sorted through her wardrobe. The gun-barrel-gray slacks, the light-blue blouse, and the navy-blue Eton jacket will be just the right combo. She added a black neck scarf. Standing in front of the mirror fully dressed, she shook her head. No, not the black scarf—the red one. There, that's better. Satisfied, she grabbed her purse and left for the meeting.

Pat arrived at the Federal Courthouse Building promptly at ten o'clock, cleared through security, made her way to the appointed room, reached for the door handle and paused. Expelling a deep breath, she firmed her jaw. Okay, Patricia, here we go, chin up and alert. She opened the door and strode into the room. Cummings and the three musketeers were waiting for her. They rose

simultaneously from their chairs. Pat grinned. Are they tied together in some way? They greeted her warmly with smiles and firm handshakes.

Cummings opened the meeting. "Permit me to repeat myself, Ms. Marshall, and say how delighted we are you agreed to join us in our project. Bill Davidson will outline the nature of the project. Dawn McBride will go over the specifics of your role. Thomas Lester and I will add insights when needed and assist answering your questions. Before we begin, do you have anything you care to say?"

"Only one thing, why choose me when there are millions of people you could have approached?"

Cummings responded, "Because you've proven yourself, as I mentioned when we first met. Anyone else will be a much greater risk to the success of the mission. It's that simple."

Pat hid a smirk behind her hand. So, I'm a combat veteran ready to pick up my gun and go back to work. "Thank you, Mr. Cummings. You may proceed."

Cummings nodded to Davidson, who took up the baton. While he spoke, Pat listened intently and vetted the four individuals before her. She had a talent for mentally dealing with two diverse subjects simultaneously in staccato cadence, snatching and processing bits of information as they flowed to her sensory receptors.

Cummings had all the characteristics of a career government operative: smart, articulate, confident, and smooth. She judged him to be in his late forties and about five-foot-ten. He wore a gray business suit, white shirt, red tie, a wedding ring and a school ring, but no other visible jewelry. His black hair was close-cropped, and he was clean-shaven.

Bill Davidson reminded her of her late brother, albeit much older. He was laid-back and came across as a dedicated team player. She judged he was in his early fifties and about five-foot-eight, with soft gray eyes. He was pleasant looking with gray hairs sprinkled among dark-brown tresses. He wore glasses and both wedding and school rings. His mustache was neatly trimmed in the manner of 1940's movie stars. He wore a comfortable pair of

khaki slacks, a tweed jacket and an open-neck sport shirt. Pat visualized him standing in front of a college class lecturing.

Dawn McBride appeared to be in her mid-thirties. She was no more than five-foot-five and somewhat filled out, but not obese. Her demeanor was all business, ready to take notes on the meeting, and alert to every word and movement from the participants. She reminded Pat of a marmoset she saw once in a zoo, her eyes darting from one person to another as they spoke or shifted their legs or arms. Her hair was a light-chestnut and her eyes, robin's-egg blue. She was quite attractive and dressed smartly in a rust-brown skirt and bolero jacket, open to a light-tan blouse. Her low-heeled shoes matched her outerwear. She sported a pearl necklace and at least three rings, but no wedding ring as far as Pat could tell.

Thomas Lester was judged by Pat to be the junior member of the team, close to her age—late twenties or early thirties—and about five-foot-eleven. He was blessed with ordinary looks, but had an engaging expression that promised an enjoyable encounter if met one-on-one. He sat back in his chair, hands on his knees, seemingly in deep thought about something pleasant or amusing. Pat wondered whether his preoccupation had anything to do with her. He wore an inexpensive, gray business suit and white shirt with a yellow and gray print tie. He wore no noticeable jewelry and was clean-shaven. His jet-black hair was cut slightly below his ears and complemented his deep-blue eyes. A lock fell above his right eyebrow. Pat found nothing in any of the four that raised questions or concerns about her joining the team. Whatever anxiety she had about the players was dispelled by their appearances and mannerisms.

Davidson outlined the project in carefully worded phrases. “A group of foreign dignitaries have been invited to tour our natural resources and national parks. The purpose of the tour is to assist them in managing natural resources in their homelands. The departments of State and Interior are jointly conducting the program. Some of the dignitaries will come from countries we have problems with of one sort or another. I need not go into those problems right now.”

Pat absorbed every word and, periodically, closed her eyes and nodded her head to signal she understood and he can continue. She

noticed he studied her with a searching demeanor, as if looking for evidence she was reconsidering her commitment.

He continued, “The dignitaries will be escorted by government representatives during the tour. The officials selected as escorts will make every effort to be friendly, helpful and nonintrusive. They will have as their agenda to create positive attitudes toward our country. In other words, they will act as goodwill ambassadors.” He paused, apparently inviting Pat to raise questions. She offered none and calmly nodded.

He smiled. “On the other hand, we suspect there’s a chance one or more of the foreign dignitaries may have hidden agendas of their own, specifically, to contact spies or terrorists already here. Therefore, we’ll have, in place at each site, factors to unobtrusively observe the dignitaries in the event of an attempt to make such contact. That’s where you and Mr. Hamilton enter the picture.”

Cummings interjected. “Has anything you’ve heard cause you concern, Ms. Marshall? In other words, are you still fully committed to this project? We need to know before we go further into the specifics.”

Pat pondered the question for several seconds and weighed the obligations she imagined—to her brother, to her country, to Harry Hamilton, to her business.

Cummings looked at her with a, “Well, what’s your answer?” expression.

Pat lowered her head. Okay, enough debating the merits of your options. You know what you have to do. She looked at Cummings with resolve. “Yes, I have no concerns. I’m committed to see this project through to its conclusion.”

Cummings smiled. “Good. Okay, Dawn, it’s your turn.”

McBride moved to the edge of her chair and sat erect. “As Bill said, Ms. Marshall, this is where you come into the project. The schedule of stops on the tour has been worked out by Interior. The final stop will be Zion National Park where we’ll conduct a week-long seminar with the guests as the capstone to the tour. When I say we, I mean State and Interior. We want you and Mr. Hamilton to be the factors at that location.”

McBride relaxed and eased back in her chair. “By having different factors at each stop, we expect to limit any chance the guests will become suspicious. Your cover... and Mr. Hamilton’s... at Zion will be your professional status. We will arrange for the two of you to be there for two weeks on business. Presumably, you’ll be looking into design improvements in Zion facilities. The Interior Department, via the National Park Service, will arrange for this assignment with the staff at the park.

“No one on the park staff other than the Superintendent will know that you and Mr. Hamilton are there on a surveillance project. You’ll go to Zion the week before the tour meeting for two reasons. First, so you can establish your roles as design consultants before the meeting starts. Second, so you can become thoroughly familiar with the park and its facilities, and, thereby, be better prepared for your surveillance assignment.”

Pat was satisfied with the arrangement, but still had that one nagging question. “Why me... and Mr. Hamilton? What about Homeland Security? Aren’t there enough people in the government who are professional at undercover surveillance?”

Cummings answered, “Yes, but there’s a greater risk they’ll be exposed. You have no idea how confounded the espionage business is these days. We never know where the next double agent will surface. Also, should any of the guests being observed become suspicious, we’ll introduce you to them as curious private citizens.”

“That’s pretty clever.” Pat remembered her and Harry’s experience with double agents a year ago in Arizona. “Mr. Hamilton told me you’re paying him for his services. You haven’t mentioned that subject.”

Davidson responded, “We were turned down on the one-and-a-half million, Ms. Marshall.” The four chuckled, and Pat smiled. “Nevertheless, we’ll pay you a fee equivalent to that you charge for your design consulting services. Let us know what your typical fee is for such work.”

“If you can give me a better idea of the nature of the design requirements I’m to use as my cover, I can do that,” said Pat.

McBride raised a hand. “I can get that from Interior in a couple of days and deliver the specs to you. I’ll call when I have them.”

Cummings scanned his three colleagues. “Have we covered everything for today?” Each nodded. He turned to Pat. “Do you have any questions, or do you care to say anything about what you’ve heard here today?”

Pat looked from one to the other as she spoke. “Although I’m proud to serve my country, I’m really doing this for two decent and courageous men in my life, my brother Jimmy and Harry Hamilton. I thought you ought to know that.”

They mumbled acknowledgment, each with his or her idiomatic expression.

Cummings stood and all followed. “We’ve completed the purpose of this meeting. Ms. Marshall, and you’ll be contacted in the near future regarding additional preparation for the project. Thank you for your commitment, and we all look forward to your participation in our endeavor.”

While driving to her office after the meeting, Pat felt lingering anxiety about her commitment to the project. The idea she and Harry were to be only observers, with no active role in any risky ventures, seemed too pat an assumption, given her experience in Arizona. She tried to dispel that feeling by concentrating on the positives. The fact I’ll be acting as a design consultant makes my part a snap—no need to rehearse, perfect typecasting. Who knows, I might even get a new client as a result. She was eager to tell Harry everything about the meeting and expected he’ll ease her lingering concerns.

When she arrived at her office, Pat called in her design staff to let them know she’ll be spending time away from Philadelphia in the near future with a prospective new client. “I can’t tell you who the client is because of political issues. I’m getting an exclusive entrée to bid on a job that ought to go out for competitive bids. The client doesn’t want this to become newsworthy.”

Next, Pat called Harry. He picked up after the third ring. “Harry Hamilton, private....”

Pat cut off his routine pitch, breathlessly propelling her words. “Harry, it’s me. Just wanted to let you know the meeting with you know who went well. When we have dinner tonight, I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Whoa! Slow down, Pat, you’ll have a stroke. Of course we’ll have dinner and, who knows, maybe an after-dinner drink or two.”

“Leave it to you to never miss an opening. We’ll have dinner... and maybe a drink or two... and then we’ll see. No commitments until I say so.”

He laughed. “Of course, Patricia. Pick you up at six-thirty, okay?”

She agreed, hung up, leaned back in her chair and wondered about the project. Was there something I may have overlooked or wasn’t told? It appears too simple and straightforward, and Cummings did mention there was some risk involved. I’m not that comfortable with McBride’s mention of a vest if things got dangerous. I suspect it isn’t to be that easy.

Harry Hamilton was no fool despite his rash and capricious tendencies that surfaced from time to time. He quickly figured State’s clever deception to get Pat on board by securing his participation in the project. Of course, I’ll not mention this to Pat. There’s no reason to, at least until the job is finished. He propped his feet on his desk and contemplated the turn of events. It’ll be great teaming up with her again, using our wits and skills to tackle an espionage assignment. I love that kind of work, so long as the risks to life and limb are minimal. I have no intention of being an anonymous hero. Once was enough.

The close association with Pat promised by the project provided the icing on the cake. Although they were still occasional lovers after they returned from Arizona, he missed the frequency of copulation with her that he so relished when they were out West. Intimacy with other women failed to give him the same satisfaction he found with Pat. Once we’re in Zion, her business won’t get in the way, and we’ll have lots of time together, for at least two weeks, anyway. That should be great. Well, maybe the dinner and drinks will put her in the mood tonight. I wonder if she’s as excited as I am about us teaming up again. If she is, tonight will be as good as it gets.

Pat wrapped up her client work for the day, left her office and drove home. On the way, she replayed the events of the past week

and a half that culminated in her decision to join Cummings's project team. Then, it hit her—Harry's role in the project was no coincidence. Damn it! Those SOB's at State did it again. They trapped me using Harry as bait. Oh, shit! Now, what do I do? She tried hard to control her frustration and anger. Traffic was heavy, and she had trouble dealing with it and staying focused. She mentally sorted through her options. I feel such a fool not seeing the whole game before this. Maybe I'll tell Cummings I changed my mind. It'll serve him right for being deceptive. Let him find some other dupe to play his games.

Pat parked her car in the garage and rode the elevator to her apartment, all the time mulling over the situation without thinking about what she was doing. When she opened her apartment door, she remembered her date with Harry. She looked at the clock. Harry will be here in less than a half-hour. Do I tell him I'm dropping out of the project? "Damn it!" This is turning into one nasty mess. He'll be let down if I drop out. Maybe I can convince him to drop out also. We did our share a year ago. We owe nothing to State. She undressed and showered.

Leaving the shower, wrapped in a towel, she headed for the kitchen to prepare a cup of tea. The doorbell startled her out of her pique. She glanced at the clock. Six-twenty. Harry's early. She opened the door.

It wasn't Harry. It was Thomas Lester.

She recoiled at the sight, unable to decide whether to shut the door in his face or to ask what he wanted.

Before she reacted, he spoke. "Sorry to intrude unannounced, Ms. Marshall, but I was in the area and curious to learn more about you. If this is a bad time, I'll excuse myself and drop by another day."

By now, Pat had recovered from the shock. "I'm getting ready to go out. This *is* a bad time for more reasons than that, however. Since when do you show up at a person's home unannounced and uninvited?" She was displeased and angry, forgetting for the moment her skimpy body covering.

Lester smiled and scanned her figure. "It seems I caught you at a most inappropriate time for a visit from a virtual stranger. Can't say I'm disappointed. Please accept my apologies. I do have a way

of ignoring conventional proprieties. I find I learn more about individuals I want to get to know better by spontaneous appearances than by carefully orchestrated arrangements. I'll leave you to finish your beauty bath and return another time, forgiven, I trust, and not forbidden. Good day."

Before Pat could tell him he was uninvited, Lester turned and was gone. She was still stunned and perplexed when Harry appeared at her open door.

"How did you know I was here before I rang the bell?"

She shook her head and looked at Harry with a disconcerted expression. "You will not believe what just happened." She recited the events of the past few minutes. "Can you believe Lester showed up like that? He acted as if he was privileged to invite himself into my home, no questions asked. The nerve of that jerk. I'll see what Cummings has to say about this."

Harry grinned. "I thought that was him passing me in the hall. He was in a rush. Well, I have to admit he did find out something about you he would not have discovered with conventional behavior."

She bristled. "You're no help. I opened the door because I thought it was you."

"Now that I am here, may I help you dry off and get ready for our date?"

She pointed to the kitchen. "You can help, all right. Get in there and brew me a cup of tea while I get dressed." He laughed and followed orders. Pat went to her bedroom, finished drying off and got ready to slip on her brief underpants when she was interrupted.

"Now, that would have really rewarded Lester for his boldness."

She whirled around to see Harry's grinning head poking out of his shell—her bedroom doorway. She raised an eyebrow. "If I had something handy to throw, you'd be rewarded for *your* boldness. What about my tea? You've seen enough of me for the past year to play the peeping tom."

He chuckled. "The view is never disappointing or boring, Patricia—never. I stopped by to find out if you want the Earl Grey or the orange pekoe."

“Orange pekoe will be fine. Now, beat it.” He pulled his head back into his shell and disappeared before she could slam the door on it. She finished dressing and chose a lavender dress with black trim, black high heels, and a lilac neck scarf. She strode into the living room where Harry waited patiently on the couch ready to serve tea.

“You look particularly stunning tonight. That usually means you have something on your mind you want to air.” He proceeded to pour tea.

She took the cup offered, sipped and looked sternly at him. “I want a truthful answer from you, Harry. Did you participate in the charade to lure me into State’s project?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Of course not. I had no idea you were approached before I was until you told me. So, you figured out their game, too. I became suspicious when they came here instead of bringing me to DC for a meeting.”

She continued to fix her eyes on him. “Okay, I believe you, but I better not find out otherwise. Now, here’s what I suggest. We both tell Cummings we’re out of the game. We assure him the meetings with his team never happened, to use their favorite phrase. If he asks why we’re aborting, we tell him we’ve had our fill of State’s deceptions. Besides, I don’t believe their operation is to be as simple as they say. We don’t need to get involved in another life-threatening situation. Lester’s behavior tonight reinforces my decision to bail out of their project.”

He stared at his cup of tea, clearly uncomfortable where she was headed. When she finished, he looked at her with a pained expression. “It won’t be that easy, Pat. I’m in too deep. I know too much. We don’t want to believe so, but our government has ways to make life difficult for those who cross up its official activities, particularly this kind of activity. You’re not in too deep yet, so maybe you can bail out, but I’d be careful about it if I were you.”

She looked incredulously at him. “In too deep! I thought this was merely a surveillance activity with virtually no risk. How can you be in too deep?”

He looked away. “Let’s not take this subject any further. If you wanna back out, that’s fine with me.” He faced her. “There’ll be

no hard feelings. You'll still be my best friend and the love of my life. Let's go eat." He stood up.

She remained seated, brow furrowed, deep in thought.

"C'mon, Pat, there's no sense letting this problem ruin our evening."

She shook her head, rose and shot him a hard glance. They left her apartment and hopped into her car, Pat on the wheel.

She was sullen during the drive to the restaurant despite his attempts at small talk. He told her he'd selected the historic City Tavern, one of their favorite places to dine in Philadelphia. At the restaurant, he ordered drinks for both of them, bourbon and water for Pat, Scotch on the rocks for him.

When the drinks arrived, she opened up. "Cummings *is* a clever guy, isn't he? I have to give him credit for that. So, what's on the menu for tonight?"

He brightened. "You mean besides you? Just kidding. I think I'll have a rare twelve-ounce New York strip steak. How about you?"

She smiled. "I'll take half that amount. Sorry if I disrupted your evening. I'll make it up to you after dinner."

He beamed. "With a promise like that, you can disrupt my evening every time we dine."

They spent the dinner hour sharing recent business and social activities and left aside the issue of State's project.

On the drive back to her apartment, she snuggled close to him with her head on his shoulder. He drove, one hand on the wheel and one on her knee. They listened to soft rock on the car CD player and hummed or sang along with the artist. When they arrived at her apartment, she made her way to the bedroom, and he went to the built-in bar. He entered the bedroom with a glass of Grand Marnier in each hand. She was in a diaphanous nightgown, reclining sideways on the bed.

He handed her a glass. "Your nightcap, beautiful lady," and followed up with a playful leer.

She reached out her hand and accepted the bribe.

Harry's playfulness during their sexual activity was the ingredient Pat relished, and the catalyst that drew her out of sexual repression following an unpleasant incident in college. This

evening he was in a rare mood. “How shall I present myself, my dear? Will you like me fully dressed except for the equipment, or shall I go native?”

She laughed. “I’ll tell you what, leave on your shirt, tie and jacket, and I’ll imagine we’re doing this on the table top at the City Tavern.” Pat usually outwitted him, but he occasionally managed a snappy comeback.

“Okay, my dear, as you wish. I’m sure Mr. Franklin would not object were he still alive and present at the affair.” He stripped from the waist down, pulled her close and warmly kissed her. She stroked his buttocks, pulled him over her and the games began. When it was over, they lay there breathing deeply.

Pat broke the reverie of après-sex contentment. “I’ve decided to go ahead with the project. Maybe Cummings was manipulative using you to get me on board, but he had a job to do and was clever enough to find a way to do it. Besides, I don’t want you to wind up with some dull-witted partner. I need to look out for you.”

He reached over and hugged her. “Please, don’t do this for me. I can handle myself. If I don’t trust the partner they pick, I’ll tell them.”

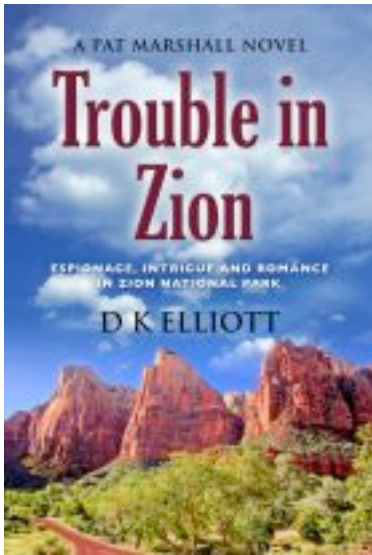
Pat kissed him. “It’s not only for you. It’s also for Jimmy. I still have the impression I need to complete the commitment he made to serve our country. Maybe everyone working in government isn’t altruistic, dedicated, and totally honest. Maybe some of them lack integrity and character, and are manipulative, but that’s no reason for me not to serve, just as it was for Jimmy. So, that’s settled. Now, you can go home and let me get a good night’s sleep.”

He squeezed her, kissed her and dressed. Before leaving, he turned to gaze on her one more time. “When God made you, Patricia, he broke the mold. You are one incredible lady.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I bet you say that to all the ladies.”

“Never, Patricia, never. See you, Love.” He turned and left.

Pat smiled as she thought how much she enjoyed Harry’s friendship... and the sex. However, her thoughts soon drifted to Cummings’s project and anxiety about what lay behind the door she was about to open. She turned out the light and tossed and turned until she surrendered to pressing sleep



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