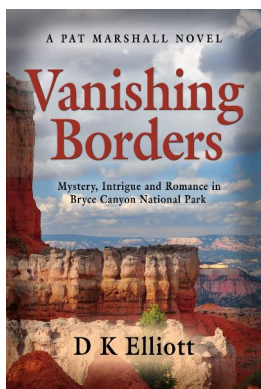


A PAT MARSHALL NOVEL

Vanishing Borders

Mystery, Intrigue and Romance in
Bryce Canyon National Park

D K Elliott



A park ranger auxiliary thwarts terrorist cells in the U.S.

Vanishing Borders

by D K Elliott

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VANISHING BORDERS

D K Elliott

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This work is dedicated to all the courageous men and women who serve to protect and defend our nation, its communities and its citizens.

Other books by D K Elliott

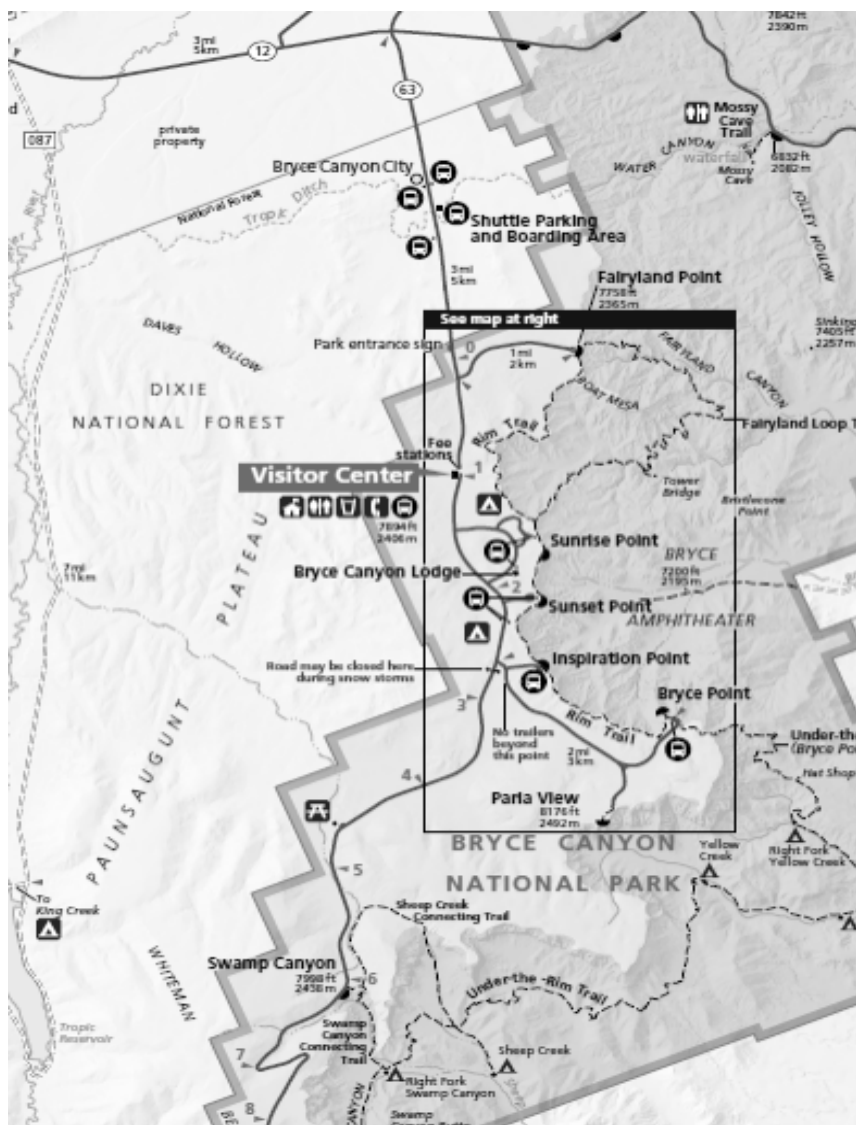
The Canyon Caper
Trouble in Zion

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The rangers in the National Park Service patiently answered my many questions about their duties and practices. If there are misinterpretations of NPS procedures, they are my responsibility. This story is fictional, and I have taken the liberty of inventing NPS operations that may be a variance with its policies.

My daughter, Kerry Kropp Watlington, has been an invaluable asset reviewing and critiquing my writings.



I

The wind-driven snow stung with the force of a thousand wasps. No attempt to orient her body from the storm's onslaught brought relief. Ironically, she welcomed its penetrating punishment, for the storm drove the agonizing pain in her leg—the broken leg that would not allow her to escape the storm—into the deeper recesses of her mind. She brushed the storm's icy deposits from her eyes and took stock of the rocky prison that prevented her from reaching her car and safety.

Twilight descended. Rescue became increasingly remote. The voice of the storm consumed all other voices raised—voices that besought deliverance—voices that appalled the hunted. She bemoaned her likely fate. Am I to die here in this beautiful canyon, to be devoured by the hungry ones, torn limb from limb, scattered among the rocks and gorges? God, I hope I'm past knowing before they find me—or will someone find me before they do? Have I been missed? Does anyone suspect I'm here? Who would know? Scott? Harry? Anyone?

Park Ranger Scott Cantrell pulled his parka tight around his neck to keep the biting wind at bay. Snow coated his parka and cap, stuck to his gloves and face, and blinded his sight. He and a half-dozen fellow rangers had probed every cove, cranny, and trail of Bryce Canyon National Park in search of tourists caught off guard by the unforeseen early snowstorm.

That day started sunny and crisp. Each breath of clean mountain air invigorated him. The few dozen tourists he met appeared to enjoy their exhilarating adventures among nature's hoodoos, slot canyons, monoliths and other geological wonders of the park.

By mid-afternoon, a mistral-like wind roared out of the north and carried a cargo of snow deep into the canyon. Most tourists on foot were a short distance from their cars or shelters and had reached safe havens. A few had trekked far from a safe refuge and were found huddled in

protective recesses of the canyon, frightened and chilled to the bone. Those that suffered hypothermia were rushed to the nearest hospital.

Unaware of all who had ventured forth that day, the rangers had no choice but to search until dusk every remote recess of the canyon. Their attempts to call out for stranded tourists over the howling wind proved fruitless.

Twilight deepened and Scott Cantrell joined his fellow rangers in the lodge after they completed their search of trails off Scenic Drive. Cantrell settled in a languorous position on a bench, worn out by the lengthy search. He casually drifted in and out of conversation with his fellow rangers until it centered on what to do about the missing driver and possible passengers of an abandoned car on the extreme southern end of Scenic Drive at Rainbow Point. Three trails branched into the depths of the canyon from this highest lookout of over 9,000 feet.

Ranger Joe Ryan, head of policing activities in the park, stretched and yawned. “Well, we’ve accounted for all other vehicle owners and their passengers, but a search of the trails at Rainbow Point came up dry. Maybe we should have looked farther, but you guys were frustrated and in need of rest and nourishment. You would hope anyone able to afford a silver BMW 325 had enough brains to stay out of trouble.”

Cantrell bolted upright as if struck by lightning and exploded off the bench. “With black upholstery?”

Ryan glanced at Cantrell with a wry expression. “Yeah. Thinking it might be on the market soon, Scott?”

The others laughed.

“Where is it?”

“Calm down, Scott. The owner isn’t dead yet, as far as we know.”

Cantrell grabbed Ryan’s shirtfront and screamed, “*Where* is it?”

“At Rainbow Point, Scott. What’s got you so hyped up?”

Cantrell released his grip on Ryan’s shirt and jerked his thumb up. “Let’s go. It’s Pat Marshall’s car.”

Ryan jumped up. “Wow! Sorry, Scott, we didn’t know. Okay, men, back to work. Everyone got a flash?” They all confirmed they did, packed up, and went out to rejoin Aeolus’ early winter visit.

Ranger Winston Brown hopped into Ryan's SUV. "What's with Scott and this Pat Marshall?"

Ryan sped along the Drive, glanced left and right, and checked for landmarks through the driving snowstorm. "That's a long story, Brownie, I only know the top line. He and Marshall have been an item for a couple of years. Both were involved in some scary operations with the FBI and the State Department. Heard she almost took a load of lead in the Grand Canyon, but a private eye took it for her. He survived. Scott was the ranger assigned to that operation. The three of them were also involved with the terrorist plot in Zion last year that nearly cost Scott his life. Guess you can say Scott and Marshall are bonded by destiny's script."

Brown nodded. "I can see why he reacted the way he did. Hope we find her before it's too late."

Pat Marshall drifted in and out of consciousness, thankful for the peace and security each retreat afforded, and tried to stay in that tranquil refuge from the storm that assaulted her. She was numb from the subfreezing conditions and had lost sensation in her extremities, except for the pain in her leg. She wondered what would happen to her. Is this how life ends, slowly creeping from the verges to the very core of my being? Why can't it be quick and merciful? If only I had the means to end it quickly. "Wait, what was that?" I must be hallucinating. "No! It *is* something." Are the hunters sensing I'm ready to be devoured? It's getting closer. "Oh, God, make it quick."

"Hello, Pat Marshall, you out here?"

She sat up. Oh, God, they found me. Her body trembled. She struggled to rise on her good leg. "Over here, behind the rocks. Please don't leave. I'm here. Don't leave." Her voice barely rose above a hoarse whisper.

She reached for a small stone with what little strength she still possessed. Her hand wasn't obedient to her will. She swung her arm. The stone dislodged, tumbled down an incline and rattled against the rocky terrain.

Again, the voice rang out above the fury of the storm. "Hello...anybody there?"

She pleaded weakly, “Over here. Don’t leave.”

Footsteps sounded nearby and recharged her biological battery. “Over here, behind the rocks.”

“Hello, anyone there? Pat, you out here?”

She garnered every ounce of strength left in her, fought the storm and shouted in desperation with quavering voice. “Over here, behind the rocks. Don’t leave. Please help me.”

Footsteps scrambled over the jumbled scree and grew louder. She cried out again, but her voice weakened and faded in the howling wind.

Joe Ryan leaned into the wind—two steps forward, one back. He close-hauled his body to reduce its exposure to the wind’s force and gritted his teeth. Got to be at least an 8 on the Beaufort scale. Remember that from my days sailing on Long Island Sound. He continued to call out above the howling wind and knew his voice carried only a few short yards. He hoped it was enough and stopped to catch his breath. Then he heard it—a stone clacking along the rocky terrain and strained to detect what it was. That an animal...or the wind? He charged up the slope toward a Kafkaesque assembly of large, geometrically diverse rocks and sent stone chips flying in every direction. Then he heard her cries, swerved to his right, climbed over an outcrop of rocks, and nearly landed on top of her. “Pat, my God! What happened?”

She broke down, sobbed hysterically and shook with emotion.

“Okay, take it easy. You’ll be fine.” Ryan knelt down and wrapped his parka around her quivering body. He felt her ice-cold hands and rubbed them gently. She regained her composure.

She smiled through sad eyes. “Thank God. I thought I was a goner. I’d given up all hope. My leg’s broken and really hurts. I couldn’t get out of here.”

“What happened, Pat? How’d you break it?”

She glanced aside. “Being stupid.”

He shook his head, more out of compassion than admonition. “Okay, let’s get you out of here. Brownie’s with me; he’s not far off. We’ll get the stretcher from my SUV and be back in no time at all. Will you be okay until we return?”

She looked around. “What about the hungry ones?”

“Don’t worry. They’re not on the prowl for food in this storm. You’ll be safe here. I’ll leave you my weapon, just in case.” He handed her his Glock 19 9 MM handgun. “Relax, there should be no need to use it.”

“Alright, but hurry back.”

He smiled and patted her cheek. “Will do,” and left.

Ryan located Brown, advised him of Pat’s condition and picked up the SUV. They moved as close as they could to where Pat lay off the Bristlecone Pine Loop Trail. Ryan used his two-way radio to advise the other rangers of Pat’s rescue. When Cantrell got the word, he reported he was two miles into the Riggs Spring Loop Trail.

By now, the snow had greatly diminished, and the force of the wind had slackened to a Beaufort 5—about 20 knots, or 23 miles per hour. Ryan slipped on his spare jacket, and he and Brown moved smartly to Pat’s refuge, toting a collapsible stretcher.

Pat greeted her rescuers with a winsome smile and a feeble wave. “Thank God, you found me. I owe you my life. Will you settle for a good meal and a bottle of wine?”

The guys smiled and shook their heads. They applied a splint to her broken leg, gently lifted her onto the stretcher, and carried her to the SUV.

Meanwhile, Cantrell had reached the Riggs Spring Loop trailhead in record time and spotted Ryan’s SUV on the Drive. He raced and reached it just as Ryan and Brown appeared with Pat. “How is she?” he shouted.

She raised her head a few inches off the stretcher and waved weakly.

Cantrell expelled a heavy breath that flushed tension from his body. “Oh, thank God!” He bent down and kissed her. “Are you alright?”

“Not too bad for a one-legged idiot.”

He was ever amazed at her wit, particularly under conditions that would leave most humans depressed or wallowing in self-pity. “Okay, what happened to your leg?”

“My leg...oh, it decided to retire at a most inconvenient time. Of course, I gave it every reason to quit.”

He shook his head. “Alright, let’s get you out of here.”

Ryan and Cantrell took Pat to Garfield Memorial Hospital in Panguitch, Utah. Brown picked up Pat's BMW and drove it to the ranger station. Gradually, the storm abated and died out.

Cantrell glanced out the car window. "We'll be busy tomorrow. The tourists will surely be out in the hundreds to photograph and sketch Bryce in its early wintry dress."

Upon arrival at the hospital, Pat was X-rayed, and the simple shinbone fracture was set and soft-cast. She was kept overnight, heavily sedated, as a precaution. Cantrell and Ryan put on their official personae and interrogated her for the required NPS report of her accident.

Ryan led off. "If you're up to it, Pat, start from the beginning. Why were you in the park, and what were you doing that led to your accident?"

The last thing Pat wanted at this moment was an inquisition. She regarded Cantrell with a pleading expression and hoped he would intercede. She truly loved him, but he had a trait she could never understand, nor become inured to. He had a dual personality. On the one hand, he could be a sensitive, loving and caring friend, but on the other hand, he could be a stern, cool and dispassionate professional. The latter Cantrell surfaced, unmoved by her silent petition.

She resigned herself to the onerous task of reliving the past twelve hours. "I went to the park around noontime to obtain material for a design project I'm working on for a client. I drove and walked to several viewpoints and took notes and photos, until I reached Rainbow Point. I walked the Bristlecone Pine Loop Trail continuing to take notes and pictures when I saw them...."

Cantrell interrupted. "Saw who? I thought you were alone. When that part of the park was searched, the rangers didn't report seeing anyone."

"That's not surprising. Anyway, I came upon three men on the trail, quickly backed down and hoped they hadn't seen me. I stayed well behind them and noticed they were deep in conversation, ignoring the scenery and not behaving at all like tourists. I thought, why come here and trek this trail just to talk? Makes no sense, unless it's top secret stuff...you know, espionage activity or something like that.

"They stopped and appeared to be arguing with one other. God, my leg hurts. Hand me the morphine drip, Scott. Well, anyway, my curiosity

got the better of me. I left the trail and climbed a rocky precipice where they couldn't see me and I could overhear them—the place you found me, Joe. Don't ask me why—guess I have to attribute it to a hangover from last year.” She looked at Cantrell and shook her head. “Well, to make a short story shorter, they were arguing about whether to launch some kind of activity here in the U.S. or in Canada. Before I could learn more, a sudden blast of wind and snow bore down on us. They immediately took off, and I tried to scramble off the rocks, slipped and fell. Then, I heard something I hope never to hear again. I tried to get down off the rocks with my one good leg, but it was hopeless. I thought I was done for when Joe found me.” She reached over and squeezed Ryan's hand.

Cantrell flushed. “What in heaven's name were you thinking...playing the counterintelligence agent? Haven't you learned enough from your adventures of the past two years? My God, Pat, you relocated from Philadelphia to Utah to get away from that stuff. Now, you risk exposing yourself again. I don't understand you at all.”

She avoided Cantrell's glare, knowing he was right. It was a stupid thing to do.

Ryan's reaction was all business. “What did you overhear, Pat?”

“I picked up snatches of their argument. Two of them were trying to persuade the third guy to do something here in the U.S. The third guy was arguing to do it in Canada. I have no idea what they were talking about, but they clearly had something specific in mind and had no need to describe what it was.”

“But you assume it's some kind of espionage or terrorist activity, right?” said Ryan. “Okay, describe the three men, exactly what they said, and anything else you can remember.”

“Can't that wait until tomorrow, Joe? I'm exhausted and in pain...I'll think more clearly in the morning.”

The caring Cantrell showed up. “Of course. We can't do anything about it tonight. Right, Joe?”

Ryan nodded. “Okay, Pat. Get a good night's sleep. See you after breakfast.”

Her shoulders sagged, Cantrell kissed her forehead and the guys left.

On their way out of the hospital, Ryan pulled Cantrell aside. “Why would Pat assume three men in the park having a conversation were spies or terrorists? Does she have a vivid imagination or what?”

“She’s been sensitized to threats here in the good old USA, Joe. Been involved in some hot action for the past two years. She had a successful business in Philadelphia when she was drawn into covert government operations and wound up having to deal with foreign agents and terrorists. It all started when she hired a private eye, a guy named Harry Hamilton, to help her find her missing brother, Jimmy. That innocent search led to their involvement in an undercover operation with the State Department and FBI in the Grand Canyon. That’s where I met her.

“Well, the next thing I knew, she was recruited by State for a new operation. I guess it was because of her effectiveness in the canyon caper. She and Hamilton were given the job of keeping an eye on foreign guests in Zion, here for a government sponsored program. Well, that assignment turned out to be more than she bargained for. It escalated into a challenging terrorist hostage situation. She and Hamilton played key roles in resolving that crisis. I almost wound up in a box defending the hostages.”

“No shit. I never knew the specifics of those encounters, only that you and she had some operations with State. Is that why she relocated to Utah?”

“Yeah. By then, much to her regret, Pat had become known to embedded foreign agents. Her fear of continued threats from them prompted her to make the move. She hoped to sever all connections with the government and with all the problems that went with their counterintelligence activities.”

Ryan smiled. “What about that guy, Hamilton? He’s still hanging around, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, like a recurring virus. For some reason, she considers him a friend.”

“Hmm...competition, hey, Scott?”

Cantrell ignored the remark.

Ryan pictured Pat in full flower: five-eight, auburn hair, hazel-green eyes, full sensuous lips, Grecian nose. He hated pug noses. He swallowed hard and shook his head.

That night, in the hospital bed, Pat wondered if she'd made a disastrous mistake. Am I inviting trouble that I came here to avoid? Oh, Jimmy, where are you when I need you to keep me out of trouble? You returned from the grave once and warned me to stay clear of intrigues I'm not trained to handle? She relaxed. I'll tell Joe what he wants to know in the morning and then wash my hands of the whole affair. I need to refocus on my design business and stay out of trouble.

After a night of deep sedated sleep, interrupted by nursing imperatives, Pat awoke restless and in pain at six. She groomed herself, checked her eyes for bloodshot imperfections, and propped her head and shoulders on bed pillows. The early-morning TV news was on and she started to drift off when startled by a familiar voice.

"Well, you certainly don't look the worse for wear, Patricia. You're as pretty as ever." It was Harry Hamilton. "You made the late-night news. I had to come and offer support, but you sure don't look as if you need any.

She smiled. "Thanks, Harry, that's sweet of you. I thought you were on your way back to Philadelphia. Did you change plans?"

He shook his head. "No, the airline did that for me. My flight was canceled because of weather. In a way, I'm glad. Gives me time to be of service to you."

She cocked her head and smiled. "Oh, really. Just what kind of service did you have in mind?"

He laughed. "Now, behave yourself. When will you be released?"

She shrugged. "Sometime today. Joe Ryan and Scott Cantrell will be here later this morning to finish interrogating me."

"They're interrogating you? What's that all about? I thought you only fell and broke a leg."

"Don't I wish. No, I stuck my big Grecian nose where I shouldn't." She told him about her experience of the prior day.

He stared at her with a bemused expression. "You put yourself in jeopardy *again*. You moved here to avoid getting involved with that stuff. What were you thinking?"

She looked away, chagrined. "Don't beat up on me, Harry. I know it was stupid of me. I thought I might learn something I could pass on to

Joe Ryan. Well, on second thought, maybe I didn't really *think*." Pat stretched and pulled herself upright. "I just reacted. Attribute it to a residual sense of citizenship—something left over from the past two years. I know it's crazy, but somehow I still have this idea I need to fulfill Jimmy's commitment to serve our country. I'm torn between that sense of duty and the fact I've already served...twice."

He patted her hand. "I know. Sorry for coming on so strong. Can I help?"

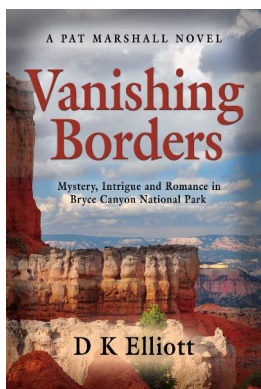
"Not at the moment. I plan to cooperate with Joe and Scott and tell them what they want to know. Then I expect to forget all about the incident and get back to my business."

"Well, I hope it turns out that way. I'll hang around for a few days just in case I can be of help." He bent down and kissed her firmly.

She returned the gesture. "Thanks, Harry. Thanks, also, for taking the time from your business to visit me here in the wild west. I enjoyed hearing about your recent cases and revisiting our favorite breakfast dish." She winked.

He stroked her hair. "Too bad I have to travel two thousand miles to serve you breakfast in bed. It was a lot easier back in Philly." He smiled, waved and left.

Pat laid her head back on the pillow and reflected on her friendship with Harry Hamilton. What a great guy. I'm lucky to have him as good friend...and lover. She smiled. Too bad it took ten years to get back into the game after that college disaster. Harry has the patience, wit and sensitivity to make the game a joy. I really love that guy. Being six-foot, dark-haired and good-looking doesn't hurt, either.



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