

the one Serena was taking.

“When I explained that we’d had a little brush with the law, everyone agreed it made sense to hit the road early,” she said.

Leaving the stream of headlights behind them, she drove another mile down the highway before cutting off onto a brush-lined dirt road. They bumped along it for a hundred yards, to where the track widened slightly. Serena turned the pickup around so that it was pointing back toward the main road and then killed the engine, leaving the headlights blazing and the radio volume turned up. It was still tuned to the country station, now featuring an up-tempo female vocal about a romance gone bad.

“I’ll never understand how people listen to this stuff,” Blake said.

“That’s Patsy Cline,” shot back Serena. “One of the all-time greats. For your information, a lot of your beloved British rock has the same roots as this ‘stuff’ you like to knock so much. Did you ever hear of skiffle?”

After Blake helped Serena wrestle the sheriff’s body back behind the steering wheel, she took the beer from the cup holder and emptied its contents over the front of his poncho. Slamming the front door shut, she stood facing Blake. “He can have fun explaining *that* to the FBI.” Reaching for his hand, she drew it inside her jacket and pressed his palm against one of her nipples. It was rock-hard.

“Are you excited by me, or by what just went down?” asked Blake.

“Both,” she said.

Together they trudged back toward the highway, their shadows stretching before them in the truck’s high beams.

“You made a good point back there,” said Blake. “About skiffle, I mean.” Serena grunted and kept walking, as the distant strains of “Heartaches” played on beneath the dark Wyoming sky.



They’d been standing on the shoulder a few minutes when a pair of headlights appeared down the road. Serena stuck out her thumb and a large Winnebago slowed to a stop.

“You kids need a lift?” asked a man, peering down from the

window on the driver's side.

"We'd be much obliged," said Serena.

"Don't keep them waiting, Henry. It's chilly out there!" scolded the woman sitting beside him.

"You heard Nell—hop in," the man said.

Blake followed Serena into the roomy interior of the RV as the man steered back onto the road. He and his companion were both attired formally, the man in jacket and tie, the woman in a knee-length dress with matching hat and fur stole. After they'd settled into the cushioned bench seats, the woman turned and beamed at them.

"Serena, I'm always running into you in the most *unusual* places," she said. "Although this is certainly quieter than Beirut."

"Or Nairobi," said Serena. "Or Kiev."

"Stop it, you two," growled Henry. "You're making me jealous."

"You know each other," Blake said, stating the obvious.

"It's true. I was with the State Department for many years," said Nell, "and Serena was our department's security liaison. Whenever trouble popped up, so did Serena."

"We've been fully briefed," Henry said, clearing his throat. "I think the best thing is for us to get into character, in case we encounter any friendly inquiries in the near future."

"Of course, dear," replied Nell. She shot a knowing look at Serena and Blake. "Tradecraft, tradecraft—he's something of a broken record, if you ask me. Anyway...if you could hand me your latest collection of driver's licenses and credit cards, please?" Pulling a small box from the glove compartment, Nell plugged it into the car's cigarette lighter, then fed the cards into an opening in the side and pressed a button. A low whirring sound could be heard for several seconds. When it stopped, Nell unplugged the box, opened her car window and held it outside, releasing a cloud of dust particles into the rushing air.

"Quite a handy gadget," she said with satisfaction. "Now, here are your new Illinois driver's licenses, along with two credit cards each, as well as library cards—a nice touch, don't you think? And of course your Urban Zone IDs, to be used at the appropriate time."

She handed the cards over with a canary-eating grin. "Here's your back story, children: You are Felicia and Donald Hill, a young married

couple, both born and raised in Highland Park—wholesome, church-going folk. We are your equally spritual former neighbors, Nell and Henry Jamison. We've never gotten over the fact that you gave up the North Shore suburbs for the madness of the Chicago Urban Zone—but thankfully we were able to persuade you to join us for a glorious two-week road tour of religious sites in the Western states.”

“From which we are now returning, praise the heavens!” interrupted Henry.

“In actuality, Henry is an atheist,” sighed Nell. “To continue: Once we reach Chicago, the two of you will be boarding a train to New York, where you hope to bring our brand of religious music to the heathens at that dreadful-sounding cultural festival. That reminds me—I have some new clothes for you.” She rummaged around her feet, then handed back two packages.

“Once you're fresh and clean,” she said, “*and* you've gotten a little sleep, you can change into these.” Pawing through his bundle, Blake saw it contained an outfit similar to Henry's: Pressed dark trousers, white dress shirt and conservative necktie, a gray blazer, a fedora, and a pair of polished black dress shoes.

“If you'll hand me your current outfits,” said Nell, “I'll happily dispose of them at the next rest stop. Although part of me hates to see them go—they're so *wonderfully* butch.”

“You want us to get undressed...here?” asked Blake.

“Don't be shy on my part,” said Nell, winking broadly. “I've always enjoyed a little beefcake on the side.” Glancing at Henry, she added in a stage whisper: “He pretends to be upset—but secretly it excites him!”

Ignoring her, Henry focused on the road as Serena unzipped her jacket and removed it. “Bareback under our leathers, are we?” squealed Nell. “That's my sexy girl!”

She turned to Blake. “Come, young man,” she said briskly, “this is no time to be bashful.” Reluctantly, Blake stripped off his clothing under the woman's watchful eye. “My, but you two youngsters are so *attractive*,” she gushed, studying Blake's bare torso. “An athlete, I see. Maybe we can train together sometime.”

“Nell, you haven't changed a bit,” laughed Serena.

Removing her hat and stole, Nell slipped on a pair of black stiletto