



65 and Going

Ed Jackel

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by

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“When one grows old, the biggest tears are for those actions that were never taken.”

Anonymous

Chapter I

At last, David Sanders was on his way. It seemed as if he were flying, though he was firmly ensconced behind the wheel of his three year-old Volvo. He had made it. He had surmounted all the obstacles in his way. It was the autumn of 1982 and David was off to see his wizard.

Come to think of it, only a wizard could duplicate the feeling of freedom that filled his entire being. Never in his 65 years of life had David felt like this. The world stood before him. Actually he didn't want the world; he just wanted what he had right now and a little more. And what he had at present had been tough to get. It had been an uphill battle, but the struggle finally enabled him to cut loose. Throughout the process, David was never fully certain he was doing the right thing. After all, he was the head of a family, whose members lived in Atlanta and the surrounding area. They were a tightly knit family - more so since his wife Molly had died almost two years ago. During that period his family had been very supportive.

When he announced his decision to break away and travel the country by himself, they were flabbergasted. They said, “You are 65. Why don't you sign up with a travel agency

for some tours? Maybe you can get one of your friends to accompany you.”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I want to do this by myself. I don’t want to be burdened by anyone. I want to go by myself, and where and when I want to. Remember, I often traveled big distances alone when I was officiating college basketball. I won’t have any destination. It will be fun traveling without a definite goal or schedule. If it is convenient for them and for me, I might look up some old friends.

“Even though all of you have been supportive, life has been different for me since your mother died. I’ve missed her greatly. I know I’m the head of the family and that in some ways I’m needed, but you can get along without me. Also, I’ll keep in touch by telephone.

“My finances are in good shape. My Social Security and retirement pension checks will be deposited to my checking account. I will have sufficient funds. I’m closing up my apartment and will put the furnishings and extra clothing in storage. I don’t want to burden anyone with it. My rental lease is about to expire, and I’ve informed them that I’m moving out and will not renew.”

Even now, as his reflexes automatically guided the car onto the interstate ramp, he wondered if he were making a mistake.

David looked at the distant skyscrapers fading from his rearview mirror. Would he ever return to this energetic Southern city where he had lived happily most of his adult life? The city and its people had been good to him and his family. He had matured and grown with the city while he earned a modest but comfortable income.

“No one gave me anything,” he often said. “I earned every penny I ever made. It wasn’t a great deal, but more than enough for the four of us. Our kids never went hungry. Sure, at times I didn’t have a dollar in my pocket before payday. Also there were the tough years when we went into debt to put our

children through college. But we paid everyone back. After that, we managed to save a few bucks.”

Overall, David had been a happy man. His life had been successful and productive. At least, he thought, raising two youngsters to adulthood was one indication of success.

David was a healthy, vigorous man with brown hair beginning to turn gray at the sideburns. His blue eyes highlighted a clear ruddy skin and a small dimple accented a firm chin. He was not tall; the quickly passing years had decreased his original 5 feet 10 inches by about two inches. He was flat-bellied and looked younger than his age.

David was born and raised in the Lower East Side of New York City. He was the middle child of five children, four boys and a daughter, the eldest. He graduated high school and held mediocre jobs while taking NY University classes until he was drafted into the Army.

It seemed as if he had known Molly forever, growing up. Her older brother and David were often in the same class at school. He often saw her playing with her friends. “She’s nice,” he said to himself. “When she grows up, I’m going to take her out.”

The years went by. She became a slim, lovely teenager. But David and she never talked except to say hello when they passed in the street.

Every Sunday night was a big night for David and his friends. They always wore a nice suit, white shirt and a good tie in order to be admitted to the dance at a local community center. An eight-man band supplied the dance music. David never danced with Molly because she looked much younger than their 2½ years age difference – he didn’t want his friends to think he was robbing the cradle.

The Army’s draft call came, and David was sent to serve with General Patton’s Third Army infantry in Europe. He had seen fierce combat, and was fortunate in surviving World War II

despite receiving several wounds. He loved to tell his children about some of the more bizarre experiences, but would not give the details of his most harrowing escapades.

When his enlistment was over, David returned to his Lower East Side neighborhood. One of the first things he did was to revisit the Sunday night dances at the community center.

One Sunday night, David saw Molly sitting alone near the far wall and asked her to dance. She smiled as she accepted. She was a good dancer.

Too soon the band was playing "Goodnight, Sweetheart." David did not see Molly as he said goodnight to his friends, but he hurried down the steps to the exit. The open doors showed rain coming down; he was wearing his best suit and his brother's tie.

After a few minutes, Molly came downstairs, carrying a big black umbrella. She lived in the next building to his. "Could I walk home with you?" he asked. She smiled and said, "Yes."

When they were near where they lived, an elderly woman stopped them. She had no umbrella and was thoroughly drenched. She gave David a wet sheet of paper with a barely legible address and asked, "Can you tell me how to get to this place?"

David started to give directions, but Molly urged the woman to get under the umbrella with them. "David, she'll never find it," Molly said. "Why don't we take her there? If we go slowly, we can all fit under the umbrella."

They walked slowly to the address several streets away. When they neared the building, the woman recognized the area and a smile lit up her face. "Thank you, thank you!" she told them, and hurried into the building.

As Molly and David walked home, the rain stopped and they began to talk together - a real conversation - for the first time. David noticed her quick smile and liked her kindness to a total stranger. He wanted to see more of her, and he did.

They dated. He courted her. Their families approved. He was 24; she was 21, when they married.

During these reflections, his Volvo coursed down the interstate. He was lucky to be on his way. Through the months since Molly's death, he had slowly dealt with grief, with loss, with loneliness, with sometimes waiting to hear her voice in the other room. He began to feel his feet under him more firmly and a desire to shape his life again. He would never forget, and would always miss, the days and years he and Molly had shared. But now that he was launched on his new adventure, he was enthusiastically looking forward to each bend in the road, each new day.

Isn't it wonderful, he thought, here I am in the car, starting out on the greatest adventure of my life and I just noticed that I'm heading south. Funny, I never thought of where I would go first. I'm just going.

It wasn't completely true that he did not know where he was going. Though he wasn't headed for the Taj Mahal or any of the Seven Wonders of the World, he did know the places he wanted to get to eventually, but those were in his long-range plans. He had waited a long time to begin his odyssey and the details could wait a little longer. The immediate need was to be on his way and on his own.

He did not want to awaken to a clock. He didn't want to answer the phone or make phone calls. He would finally be free of his monthly calendar and appointment book. For the first time in years, he would not be accountable to anyone but himself.

Those were his thoughts, as he turned the radio on for the hourly news broadcast.

Chapter 2

It should not be construed that all was perfect as David Sanders rode the highway in his Volvo. There were times of loneliness, when he had misgivings and doubted whether it was all worthwhile. In between the good meals, the scenery, the new environments and new acquaintances, there were thoughts of home and family. It was difficult to completely divorce himself from all that had previously been important. However, he was learning to accept these recurring doubts and to understand this was part of the price he was compelled to pay for his freedom.

David still admired a beautiful sunset or a landscape that came before him as he drove the back roads. "Of course," he conceded out loud to himself, "it would be more enjoyable if I could share it with someone."

Sometimes he had to settle for second-rate hotels or motels. Nor was every bed he slept on firm and comfortable.

David enjoyed good food, and now and then was rewarded with outstanding meals in small, ordinary-looking restaurants. Decent dining was seldom a problem in a fair-sized city, but in

smaller towns he learned it was wiser to choose nationally-known places. Sometimes he went to a supermarket and purchased fruit and vegetables, and enjoyed them in his room. He kept a small ice chest in his car trunk for the safe storage of food and leftovers.

David sought no deep enlightenment from his travels. He had a need to explore, to touch and smell the various sections of his native land and to meet and speak with some of its inhabitants. Most sights and sites were described in travel books or Chamber of Commerce pamphlets. He preferred the less-frequented historic landmarks found on state maps or revealed in conversations with local people.

Each day was different from any before. He followed no routine and no itinerary. He went where he pleased and stayed as long as he wished.

At times, he wondered about this irresponsibility. He thought, why should I be so free? There were no money problems. Paul was reliable about taking care of David's financial affairs.

One afternoon in Valdosta, Georgia, some weeks after his breakaway, David stopped for a coffee break at a doughnut shop. As he was opening the door of the Volvo, he was momentarily startled by a young Southern voice, "Ya got a cigarette for somebody hard up for a smoke?"

"Don't smoke, miss. Sorry."

"How about the price of a cup of coffee and a doughnut? I haven't eaten in more'n a day."

David reached in his pocket for a dollar bill and then looked at the diminutive young woman staring at him with bright blue eyes. His hand came out empty.

"What's the matter? Can't you afford it?" she sarcastically whined.

"You almost talked yourself out of a good meal instead of coffee and doughnuts," David said gruffly. "There's a Waffle House down the road. See the sign, there on the

left. Get in the car and I'll buy you something substantial to eat."

"No foolin', mister. You're not up to somethin', are you?"

"Get in the car or walk there yourself, and I will meet you. Either way, you'll get something to eat. There are no strings to this offer. Which will it be?"

She got into the passenger seat but stayed as close to the door as possible during the short distance to the eatery.

They sat in a small booth. David slowly sipped a cup of coffee and watched the hungry girl devour eggs, bacon, hash browns, grits, milk and a double order of whole wheat toast.

She sighed with contentment as she wiped the residue of egg yolk from her plate with her final piece of toast. "Some coffee and a couple of cigarettes would make this a perfect meal."

David ordered the coffee and then went to the machine and brought back a pack of Marlboros. She cupped a match in her hand and lighted a cigarette. Despite the cigarette in her hand, her small thin face made her look young and vulnerable.

She had discarded her wary look, and now extreme fatigue was evident in the slight lines of her face. The unwashed blonde hair and unkempt clothing concealed a basic attractiveness that had been obscured by tension and hunger. A small snub nose added to her youthful appearance. In David's judgment, her age could have been anywhere between 16 and 21.

She wore an old pair of dirty blue jeans, gray sweatshirt, and a thin pair of sandals. A large denim shoulder bag was on the bench beside her. A thin silver chain adorned her neck. Before the coffee and cigarette were finished, she slumped in her seat, almost asleep. She gave a shiver and awakened. It was clear she was fighting sleep. It was four in the afternoon, and David was eager to be on his way.

"I've got to go. Good luck," David said reluctantly, as he placed a tip on the table and headed toward the cash register.

He was out the door and almost to his car when he heard,

“Wait a minute, will you? I’ve never even thanked you. You’re a nice guy, mister. I don’t even know your name. I guzzled down my food and never said one word of thanks to you. I just couldn’t keep awake. Really, I appreciate what you did.” Her words came out rapidly, tumbling over each other, and her manner was contrite.

David looked closely at her. She stood about 5 feet 2 inches tall, weighed about 95 pounds, and had a small waist. The food had temporarily perked her up, but she still looked the part of a woebegone waif. But David had helped her as much as he could and was anxious to be on his way. He wanted to be a hundred miles further down the road before he checked into a motel for the night.

“That’s okay,” he replied in a kindly manner. “Take care.”

He was in his car with the key in the ignition when he heard a slight tapping on his window. It was the girl. He rolled the window down.

“Are you going south?” she asked. “Could you give me a lift? I’m headed for Fort Lauderdale. Any distance in that direction will help. Please give me a ride or at least drop me off at the interstate. I’ll be able to get a ride more easily from there.”

David hesitated. He was firmly against picking up hitchhikers, though he was certain this young woman posed no threat to him. Well, he would take her to the interstate, where she could get a lift. Reluctantly, he waved her toward the other door and reached over to release the lock. He gratefully noted she threw her cigarette away before getting in. During the brief ride, she again thanked him for the meal and his kindness. When they reached the entrance ramp, David pulled over and let her out.

Halfway up the ramp, through his rearview mirror, David saw her trudging toward the highway. Subconsciously, his right foot hit the brake pedal. She saw the brake lights signal red and knew what it meant. She came running and he opened the door.

"Get in. I'm going about 100 miles and there's no reason why you can't ride with me."

"Thank you, thank you. I sure can use the lift. You're an angel."

Within ten minutes she was snoring gently with her head resting against the side of the door. He had planned on spending the night in Ocala, but when the Gainesville exit on I-75 appeared, he realized he needed to check into a motel before darkness might make it difficult to get a room. She awakened when he stopped in front of a small motel. For a minute, she looked around dazedly as if she didn't know where she was, or with whom.

"Where are we?"

"Gainesville, Florida. You slept all the way from Valdosta. Guess you needed the rest. This is where we part company. The university is only two streets away; maybe you can find a bed there for the night." David extracted a five dollar bill from his money clip and handed it to her. "This will help a little. Good luck."

Sleepily, she accepted the money and removed her bag from the rear seat. With a small tight-lipped smile, she said, "Thanks again, mister. You're a good guy." She went on her way.

David checked into the motel, had dinner at a nearby diner, and returned to his room. He unpacked his suitcase and set out his clothes for the next day. He wrote a brief letter to his son, Paul, and began to read his book. The small print and the slow pace of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* soon made him sleepy.

A soft tapping on the door awakened him. The luminous dial of his travel clock revealed it was almost 1:00 a.m. He went to the window, pulled the blind aside, and looked out.

In the dim light from the parking lot, he could barely see her face. With chain in place, David opened the door. She came near the opening. He asked, "What is it?"

"I couldn't find a place to sleep at the campus. The

Gainesville police threatened to lock me up as a vagrant if they saw me on the streets again. Could you let me sleep on the floor? I won't bother you. I'm a quiet sleeper. I'm freezing. I don't want to go to jail. Please."

Softhearted David could not refuse a damsel in distress and, since his sleepy mind produced no alternative, he motioned for her to come in. He slept in his shorts and, embarrassed at his semi-nudity, promptly put on his raincoat. Were he a younger man, he would have given her the bed and slept on the floor or a chair. But he knew what a night's sleep under those conditions would do to his aging body. He also gave her his top sheet, the extra blanket, the bedspread and the other pillow. He tumbled drowsily into bed and immediately fell asleep, scarcely aware of the bundle in the far corner of the room.

David awoke with a start. He had been having a strange dream, a sexual fantasy similar to those he had as a teenager. In his dream, he was cupping a small firm breast. Now awake, he was doing just that. Snuggled up to him was the petite hitchhiker. Her buttocks, covered by a thin bikini panty, were pressed to his loins and that explained his erection. He quickly removed his hand from her breast and lowered her sweatshirt over her back.

As he spread the blanket gently over her, she again moved toward David, seeking his heat, pressure, or presence. But he moved further away. He had not heard or felt her coming into the bed. The clock indicated 6:00 a.m. Should he wake her and send her back to the floor?

First he had a pressing need to urinate and quietly went to the bathroom. He had forgotten the difficulty in passing water with an erection.

She was in a deep sleep when he came back to bed. Once again, a small breast was evident in the dim light. David gently pushed her to the far side and climbed in. Soon he too was asleep.

He awoke alone. The bed seemed huge and empty without her. The bathroom door was open and she was not in it. Her clothes and bag were gone. What else had she taken with her? He checked his possessions but nothing seemed to be missing. But what about his money clip? Each night, he placed it in the bottom of his toiletry kit. Was it still there? He hurried to the bathroom and poured the kit's contents out onto the counter adjoining the basin. There it was. A fast count, and he breathed more easily.

David was not certain the girl was trustworthy. He knew nothing about her except that she was a penniless, hungry and dirty hitchhiker. He didn't know her name or where she came from. Anyway, she was gone and he would probably never see her again.

He began his morning ablutions. While finishing up a satisfying shave, he heard a light kicking sound near the door. He slid back the drape, peered through the window, and there she was. In her arms was a large brown paper bag with steam emanating from its opening.

"Open up, I don't want the coffee and food to get cold."

David put on a pair of slacks and opened the door. "This is very kind of you," he said with a large grin. He liked good surprises and appreciated thoughtfulness. "I'll finish dressing in the bathroom - be only a minute."

When he returned, the table had been set with two cups of coffee, two egg sandwiches and two pieces of Danish pastry. She had remembered his preference for sugar-free sweetener. Several packets were next to his cup. Two small plastic cups of orange juice were ready for drinking.

They sat next to each other at the table near the room's large window. Neither spoke until they were eating the sandwiches. Her face and hands were scrubbed, and her blonde hair was neatly combed.

"You look rested and refreshed," David said admiringly. "I didn't hear you use the shower."

"I washed up good at the sink. I didn't shower because I didn't want to wake you."

She is a thoughtful individual, David said to himself. First, she threw away her cigarette and did not smoke in the car. Then she bought the breakfast, and finally her concern about interrupting his sleep.

"My name is David Sanders. Don't you think it's time we exchanged names? And where are you from?"

She placed her sandwich carefully on an opened paper napkin and extended her hand. "I'm Betty Jean. I was born in Starke, Florida, but haven't lived there for years. You're a Yankee, aren't you?"

They shook hands. Her fingers were strong and warm. "I've lived in the South more than 30 years," David laughed, "and I can't get the North out of my speech. My children are true Southerners, although the older was born in upstate New York."

She smiled and it brought a dimple to the side of her mouth. She was attractive. "Where do you live?" she asked.

"Until recently, I lived in Atlanta," David replied. "Right now, I'm getting some traveling out of my system. I've been on the road for some weeks. Are you on vacation?"

"No, I'm looking for work. I'm on my own, and once again, I'm dead broke." She motioned toward the food on the table.

"I'll pay for that," David said.

"You already did. I used the money you gave me yesterday."

"What I mean is, I'll replace that money. I meant for you to spend it on yourself, and you splurged it on me. No wonder you're broke. Why are you headed for Fort Lauderdale, Betty Jean?"

She finished chewing the last bite of her sandwich, wiped her mouth with her paper napkin, and took a sip of her coffee before replying.

"I expect to stay with a friend who lives there and who should be able to help me find work. Are you heading anywhere near there? Listen, Mr. Sanders, I owe you a lot already. If you'll

give me your address, I'll pay back every penny and also pay my share of the gas. I'm no freeloader, though right now it may look that way."

David liked the company of young people, but knew very little of the current generation. His children were in their thirties and he often thought how fortunate he was not to be bringing up children in this era of drugs, free sex, and other problems. Raising children any time was difficult. Now it was tougher.

Now that she was rested, Betty Jean spoke animatedly. She told David she had finished high school and had no desire for further education. She had been a cheerleader and thoroughly enjoyed the trips she made as a member of the squad. Betty Jean loved her distinctive cheerleading ensemble featuring the school colors, red and gold.

"In our small school, it was an important position, since cheerleaders were involved in many school events. Dates and other school activities filled up my days, and the years rolled happily by."

She paused, removed a cigarette from the pack, and struck a match to light it.

"Did you graduate?" David asked.

"Yes. But after graduation, my life changed. My parents told me to go to college or go to work. I wanted to wait on tables in the best restaurant in town. It had fine atmosphere, great food, and the waitresses had the nicest uniforms. But my parents wouldn't let me work there. They said I should work in the local department store.

"I didn't have any money of my own, and so I had to live at home. My job at the department store was dull and didn't pay much. Waitresses in that restaurant made more in a day than I earned in a week, and they worked less hours and met all sorts of interesting people. I couldn't understand why my parents wouldn't let me be a waitress."

"When did you leave home?"

"One day about a year after graduation, I took a bus to Atlanta. The next day I phoned and told them I was okay and working at Rich's department store. It was a lie. I was waiting tables at a Denny's restaurant, near several downtown hotels. Most of the customers were business people and travelers. The wages and tips weren't much, but I made enough to take care of myself. I lived in a nearby furnished room and ate most of my meals at Denny's.

"All went well for almost three months. I dated a couple of boys from Emory University, and every now and then went out with salesmen. Everybody was real polite, but the restaurant manager kept after me for a date. I didn't like him. He was fat, married, and grabbed at me every chance he could."

She paused, looked at David and said, "You must be bored by all this. It all happened a long time ago."

David was pleased she had confided in him. It was not an unusual story. But what brought her to her present situation? Did her parents know where she was? Where was her clothing and other possessions? Those and other questions remained unasked. Instead, with an encouraging smile, he asked, "What were you doing in Valdosta?"

She averted her head and he could no longer see her face. When she spoke, her eyes looked out the window. "It seems like I worked in Denny's in Atlanta a long time ago, and yet it was only about 18 months. After I left Denny's, things didn't go too well. I'm not going to talk about that, and you can't make me."

As she spoke, her face hardened. She still did not look at David. Her tone became bitter, the words came faster, and the set of her chin indicated belligerence.

David leaned forward and touched the hand tightly clutching the paper coffee cup. "I'm sorry. The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt or offend you."

She began to cry. Sobs accompanied the tears which

poured down her tanned cheeks. David was surprised by the effect his words had on Betty Jean.

Suddenly her head was on his shoulder and her damp cheek was pressed close to his. He could feel her chest heave with each sob. He gently patted her back. He did not know what to say. Her hand came up and stroked the back of his neck. Despite his sense of guilt for being the cause of her tears, David enjoyed her closeness. He now held her in his arms and said, "Don't cry, Betty Jean. I'm sorry. I guess I'm a prying old man."

He gently kissed her forehead. She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him with teary eyes. She lifted her lips toward his and kissed him. He tasted the salt of her tears as their lips briefly met. She kissed him again. The softness of her lips was a delight.

Her fingers moved from his neck to his earlobes and her lips became more insistent. It was no longer a sympathetic kiss. Her lips parted and her tongue insinuated itself between his lips. David fought for control. He wanted her kisses and caresses, but his common sense asserted itself and pointed out: she's younger than your daughter! Reluctantly and with difficulty, he broke away and got up from the chair.

She seemed nonplussed. "Don't you like me?" she asked petulantly. "You look as if we did something wrong. We were only kissing." She remained in the chair, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

"Sure I like you, but we shouldn't be kissing that way. You hardly know me, and I'm old enough to be your father." David almost said 'grandfather,' but was reluctant to admit his age of 65.

She smiled as she used a tissue to wipe a stray tear. "You're not an old man. Besides, I like mature men. They have experience and are kind. Most men I meet want to go to bed with me right away. You've been good to me and never even

hinted at such a thing. I owe you a lot. Wouldn't you like to? As a matter of fact, I think you'd be real good. Why don't we pull the blinds down and have a quickie?"

David was not naïve. He had traveled extensively and considered himself a man of the world. Nonetheless, he was shocked by her proposal. He could not believe he had been propositioned by this youngster.

At times he had fantasized about young women. He knew of public figures who had married girls young enough to be their daughters or granddaughters. Now faced with a real situation, he did not want to indulge. He knew he would feel tainted if he let this progress further. She was provocative and appealing, but a long time ago he had foresworn affairs that could lead to remorse or trouble.

David had instinctively moved toward the opposite end of the room. Now there was distance between him and temptation. She looked at him wonderingly.

"Is there something wrong with me? Or you? Don't you like girls? I thought you liked me. You kissed me real good."

Now she was up from her chair and the tone of her voice indicated she was greatly perturbed and becoming angry with this man who had rejected her. In a querulous voice she asked, "Do you think I'm dirty or diseased? Is that it?"

She was visibly upset by his negative response. What she wanted, she eventually got; her brief biography revealed that.

David had cooled down. He was grateful his erection had subsided. He saw her chin drop to her chest and recognized she would soon be crying again. This he wished to prevent. He moved toward her but remained more than an arm's length away. It would be unwise to get too close again.

To comfort her, he said, "Really, I like you. You're a desirable young woman, but liking you and wanting you are two different things. I thought we were becoming friends. Can't we just be friends? We have too many years separating us.

Though that may not mean anything to you, it does to me. Can you understand that?"

Her lips quivered as she absorbed what he was saying. Her manner was hesitant. She seemed to be considering his response and did not look at him. Her fingers were clenched into tight fists.

David continued to reassure her. "You wouldn't want to hurt me and you know I'm concerned about you. Let's forget the whole thing. Why don't you let me pack and we can get on our way. If you want, I'll take you all the way to Orlando. Would you like that?"

Just then, they heard a heavy knock on the door. "Is everything all right in there?" an authoritative male voice asked.

David opened the door. "What is it?" he asked the short heavysset man standing there.

"I'm the manager," the man said. "Someone reported a woman crying in here." He stepped briskly through the doorway and looked around the room.

He addressed Betty Jean. "Miss, is everything okay? Can I help you?"

The manager had consulted his registration file and knew the room was rented to a single male. Long ago, he learned the value of discretion. A quick glance at the table covered with the remains of breakfast, the rumpled bed and discarded towels, informed him that two people had shared the room for which a single rental had been paid.

"Mr. Sanders, our check-out time is noon. Don't come back again. We don't need your business." Giving the surprised couple an insolent stare, he turned abruptly on his heel and strode toward his office.

Chapter III

On the road to Orlando, David perceived he was accompanied by a different woman. The female with him seemed a youngster no longer. She sat up straighter, wore more makeup, and brazenly lighted a cigarette and puffed away. Involved in his own thoughts, David didn't smell the smoke or see the cigarette until she opened the ashtray and began dropping ash into it. The discarded match was visible on the floor of the car. What was happening?

Glancing at her face when he was able to take his eyes off the road, he was able to see that she seemed pleased with herself. She was no longer the diffident teenager. At various times, he caught a small smile on her face. Her chin seemed firmer and her total mien appeared more assertive. She hummed a tune he did not recognize. What had caused this turnabout?

David soon found out. "Let's stop for lunch," she ordered. "I'm tired of being cooped up in this old car and I'm hungry. There's a Holiday Inn at the next exit. Get off and we'll eat."

"We have to keep going, if we're to get to Orlando before nightfall," David said.

"Forget about that. I'm starving and I've got to pee. Use your brakes or we'll go by the exit. Damnit! Hit the brakes!" she shouted angrily.

When the car was parked near the motel, David turned to Betty Jean, who was combing her hair prior to getting out. "I suppose there's an explanation for your behavior?" David asked.

She looked at him defiantly and said, "Old man, you've got your nuts in a vise. And if you don't do as I say, I'm the girl who can squeeze them until you yell for mercy. You and I shared a room last night. The manager of the motel will be more than glad to testify to that. I'm under 18, and in this state, you could get your ass into trouble for that. And remember, you took me over the state line in your car. There's some law I read about which says you can't carry girls across state lines for sexual purposes. They could get you for that, too."

David was appalled. She was right. The appearance of his room could have given the wrong impression. He had provided his name and license number at registration. The obnoxious manager would probably attest to Betty Jean's sharing his room. It would be her word against his.

She would shed copious tears and he would be in trouble. If she called the police, it might take days to get it straightened out. For the present, it would be better to go along and find out what she expected to gain from the situation.

With the addition of makeup and an authoritative air, Betty Jean looked older. She ordered beer for David and a glass of red wine for herself. After the waitress left, she said, "I don't like to drink alone."

She subsequently ordered a steak and told the waitress in a crisp voice, "Make sure it's rare, or you'll take it back."

David watched Betty Jean dig into her steak as his fork tines stabbed into a slice of tomato from the salad he had chosen for his main course. He had no appetite but felt compelled to eat

something. His companion ate as if there were no tomorrow. In addition to the steak, she ate a potato, a tossed salad and most of a small loaf of bread.

They did not speak during the meal. Now and then, a slight smile played across her face. She looked like a winner enjoying a victory banquet.

After the dinner, she insisted on seeing the movie, featuring a famous rock and roll star, at the local cinema. The sound almost deafened David while Betty Jean avidly watched and nibbled a huge box of popcorn and sipped a giant Coke.

Afterward, they returned to the motel. She designated the bed next to the bathroom for David and commandeered the one next to the door. While David watched in stunned silence, she took the car keys he had tossed onto the nightstand and placed them in her handbag.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked.

"Just to make sure you don't try anything. You can't go anywhere without the car. I don't want you skipping out on me. Meanwhile, you and I are spending another night together and that, too, is on the record."

And it was. She had insisted they register as David Sanders and daughter. She was sinking the hook deeper into the fish she had snagged. Before going to dinner, they had stopped at the small local department store while she added to her meager wardrobe, paid for with David's credit card.

He understood she was increasing his involvement but could not come up with a suitable plan for breaking out of her expanding web.

There was no conversation as they prepared for bed. She flipped off the lights without a goodnight. The wine and food soon put Betty Jean to sleep, but David was wide awake as his mind searched for a way out of his dilemma. Her cupidity and his stupidity had placed him in this awkward situation.

She seemed in a deep sleep. Perhaps he could quietly

unlock the room door, loosen the chain lock, get to his car and escape with the hideaway key hidden in the bumper next to his left front wheel. But in addition to his keys, she had his wallet, credit cards, and driver's license. He would first have to recover them.

He carefully got out of bed. Fortunately, the bed did not creak. Barefooted, he went to the clothes rack and secured his jacket, pants and shirt. He put his shoes carefully under his other arm. Near the door, he placed his clothes on a chair and his shoes on the rug.

In the soft light that came from the parking lot, he saw she was still asleep, undisturbed by his movements. Her handbag was on the bed, next to the pillow. He could hear her soft, steady breathing.

At last his hand extended toward the bag. Gently, he removed it from the bed and brought it carefully toward him. His first thought was to open it and remove his possessions. But he was afraid to do this because the items needed had been placed in the center zipper compartment. The sliding of the zipper, the slight jangle of a key might awaken her. He would have to take the bag with him.

He put on his pants and shoes. He tucked the bag under his arm, along with his shirt and jacket, and gently loosened the bolt near the doorknob. The safety chain was his next objective. It came loose easily, his hand slowly turned the knob, and the door opened noiselessly. He eased his body through the door and was halfway out when he heard her triumphantly say, "You were pretty good. You can go out that door, but I know two reasons why you won't. Want to hear them?"

David was startled. Straddling the doorway, he took the bag in both hands and pulled the zipper. The compartment was empty. He searched the rest of her bag while she laughed loudly. "The car keys and wallet are hidden where you can't find them. I'm not dumb. I took them out while you were in

the bathroom. They're in a safe place. Why don't you give me the bag and go back to bed?"

She laughed delightedly at his look of chagrin.

A beaten old man slept fitfully through the night. Though he racked his brain, he could not come up with a plan for breaking away from his female captor. In the morning over breakfast, she taunted him about his ineptness and stupidity. Their next objective, she insisted, would be Orlando. "I've never been to Disney World, and we're going there together, old man."

For their stay in Orlando, Betty Jean again selected a small motel. She had a good time in Disney World with David as an unwilling escort. On the rides, she was a vivacious youngster without a care in the world. She ate and drank everything the vendors sold without any after-effects. He was amazed at her capacity and her ability to retain the junk food despite the jerking and whirling movements of the various rides.

David protested about fatigue, but she ignored his complaints. She had the upper hand and maintained it. By the day's end, they were loaded down with the many souvenirs she had purchased or won. Several hours after dark, they left the make-believe world.

By that time, David was completely burned out and, for the first time in years, looked and felt older than his age. He was too tired to think clearly. His mind was in turmoil. He felt as if he had been tortured. All he could think of was a shower and bed.

To his surprise, they did not return for a second day at Disney World, but left Orlando and headed for the west coast of Florida. David could not have taken another day of hectic activity. The back seat was loaded with her acquisitions. For the first time, Betty Jean went to the driver's seat and David was the passenger. He was grateful he did not have to drive. Despite a long night's sleep, he was weary, tense, nervous and unable to concentrate.

The situation was clearly getting him down. Only a lifetime habit of self-control prevented him from acting irrationally. Several times, he was tempted to attack her physically, but he was fearful such action might boomerang and further stack the cards against him.

David did not respect the abilities of rural police, and did not feel an appeal to them would be in his best interest. In addition, he was ashamed of his plight and wanted to extricate himself without involvement of family, friends or police. He now knew Betty Jean was tough and shrewd. She never relaxed her guard and always kept her visual and verbal halter tight around her victim.

They drove to Tampa and spent the night at another motel. Their routine varied little from the first day. From there, they journeyed to St. Petersburg, Bradenton and Sarasota. David would have appreciated the sights and the cities, but each day was prolonged agony. He did not like his role. He felt emasculated. They stopped one night in Fort Myers. The next day they drove down a long avenue of palm trees and toured the residence and laboratory of Thomas A. Edison. It would have been enjoyable and interesting, except for the behavior of his companion. He kept hoping for an opportunity to break away, but none developed.

When David's opportunity arrived, he almost did not recognize it. As they were driving back to the motel with Betty Jean at the wheel, she went through a traffic light as it turned red. A police patrolman in the vicinity observed this. The flashing blue light signaled for her to pull to the curb. A tall patrolman stepped to the car.

"Ma'am, you went through a red traffic light. May I see your driver's license?"

"But officer, I made it through on the yellow. Didn't I, David?" she asked as she turned to her respectable-looking passenger.

David didn't seem to hear, he was mulling over how this incident might be utilized to his advantage. He pondered whether Betty Jean had a valid driver's license. And whether this might bring the entire escapade to a head, revealing his illegal involvement with a minor. Deep in thought, his thinking processes dulled by fatigue, he made no response.

"It doesn't make any difference what he thinks. Give me your driver's license," the officer said more firmly.

Betty Jean knew better than to refuse the second request, if she had any hope of avoiding a ticket. She reached into her purse, extracted a plastic card and handed it to the officer.

"What are you doing in Fort Myers?" he asked.

"We're vacationing. Just came from the Edison place. It was so interesting."

"Who owns this car?"

"He does."

"May I have the registration papers, sir?"

Betty Jean said, "Just a minute, I have his wallet in my bag. We're afraid of pickpockets. In crowded places, I keep it for safekeeping." She gave the wallet to David, who removed the paper and handed it to Betty Jean to give to the patrolman.

The police officer studied the registration carefully and asked, "Sir, may I see your driver's license?"

He carefully looked at the photo and then at David. "I see you both are from Georgia. What is your relationship to this young woman?"

David was still involved in checking his wallet to see whether his credit cards and other papers were still there. He did not reply. Instead, Betty Jean said, "He's my uncle."

The officer came around to the passenger side and spoke to David. "Sir, here are your papers. I'm not going to give your niece a citation. Don't want to spoil your vacation. Will you make certain Miss Layton drives more carefully during your stay in our city?" He tipped his hat and strode to the patrol car.

David replaced his papers and then thrust the wallet into his pocket. He looked at Betty Jean's license. It bore the typical license photo of Betty Jean, and her last name was Layton. He saw her date of birth, and it shocked him. He looked at it again. She was almost 23. He realized he had been conned. What a fool he had been. But he was buoyed by his chance discovery. He was rejuvenated. He felt like a new man. The hook was out of the fish. He could now swim to safety.

David grabbed the keys from the steering column and handed her the license. "I'll drive from now on, Miss Layton. Don't want you to commit another violation. It might get you arrested, that is if I don't first put you in jail for what you've pulled on me. What a sucker I've been. Come on, get out of that seat. Don't worry, I won't drive off and leave you."

Betty Jean looked subdued. She realized her age had been revealed. She stepped out of the car and went to the passenger seat. Not a word passed between them as they drove toward the motel. David opened the door and said angrily, "Miss Layton, get your things together. I want you out of this room in five minutes."

After Betty Jean put all her newly-acquired clothing in her two suitcases, several stuffed animals and pillows remained. From the closet, David took a large paper bag for laundry collection and hurriedly thrust them into it.

"Here, take this and your bags and get out," he said in a voice which fought for control. "Get out. Go on, before I do something I may be sorry for. You're a despicable person. You took advantage of someone who tried to be nice to you."

He lifted the suitcases from the floor and set them outside the door. He held the door open until she went out with the large paper bag in her hands. He locked the door.

Three days later, David noticed the following item in a Florida newspaper:

STARKE WOMAN ARRESTED

A woman identified as Betty Jean Layton was arrested by the Fort Lauderdale police. The complaint was made by an elderly visitor who stated that Layton propositioned him for sex and then tried to blackmail him.

Chapter IV

David had planned to spend some time in Florida, but discretion dictated that he head directly out of the state. He feared he might become involved in court proceedings if the Fort Myers patrolman saw the arrest notice and then recalled his name.

David was on cruise control and heading north on I-95 toward Savannah, Georgia. He thought of the phone conversation the day before with his daughter-in-law, Nancy. He had called to check in with Paul, and to tell him to pay the unusual credit charges made during his harrowing journey with Betty Jean Layton. Paul was out, and David and Nancy chatted for a few minutes. Suddenly she broke in with, "Dad, I need your help."

"What is it? Certainly, I'll help you."

"Dad, I hate to bother you, but I have been getting more concerned about this."

"Nancy, what's the problem?"

"It's Paul; he's gained a great deal of weight again."

"There was a tendency to obesity in Molly's family. Paul