

"Gimme A Chance"
6-16-92
Donna Hutt-Stapfer

She'd taken off, again. But this time, he knew where to find her.

She took long, leisurely drives in Sam's Bronco, late at night when she thought nobody noticed. Hell, she deserved to -- she kept the damn thing in mint condition, clean as a whistle, waxed it once a month...probably drove it to keep it from falling apart where he'd parked it. She even changed the air freshener when it aged.

She'd only neglected it for a few weeks. Moping, Beeks had said. Well, let her mope a little. He'd known better.

It got dusty, sitting there in the parking lot. Passing it in the morning, again in the evening, he watched it get browner and browner as parts of New Mexico settled upon it like cinnamon sugar. Finally, he could take no more.

He inscribed "Top Secret, Dirt Test -- Do Not Wash" on the back window late one night as he was leaving. Just as he was finishing the final t, he saw a glint of light reflect off the window and then the bucket of ice cold water hit him. It reached everyplace -- down to the shorts and into the socks. He knew the culprit, so he turned even more slowly to face her, reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket for a cigar. They were as wet as the rest of him.

"You know, in some places, this could be considered an act of war." He tried to shake off the water, but it was a no go. Donna only stood there, empty bucket in her hands. Her face seemed almost frozen, unsmiling, except for the merest glint of mischief in her eyes. "You missed the car." he said softly, "Care to give it another go?"

"I suppose the next thing you'll try to tell me, is that it missed me." She tossed the bucket down with a little sigh and walked up to him, fishing car keys out the pocket of her jeans. She met his eyes for a moment, noticing he only stood there, sodden cigar in one hand, blinking as water dripped into his eyes. "I wish you would get angry." she said, popping the hatch. She reached into the back and fished out the towel she used to dry the thing with and offered it to Al. "It would make more sense."

"Nah. Why should I? Tho' I wish now Gooshie had been the one with the balls to try this. He could be the one with squishy shoes and mushy smokes now, 'stead of me." Shedding the jacket and tie, Al sponged most of the water off. "Talk to me."

"Want to go for a drive?"

She drove them onto a dirt track that winded its way into the desert, far and away from the project so that it receded into a faint white shadow in the distance. Then the road began to climb.

It topped out onto a mesa that overlooked a valley of modest beauty, but the sky opened out over them like the softest black velvet, the stars gemlike with their cold fire. The air was warm and comforting, a gentle breeze blew through the chapparal. Other than that, the silence was absolute.

Stepping out of the car, Donna looked into the sky, hugging herself. Walking around to the passenger side, she watched Al walk to the edge of the mesa, jacket draped over one arm. She only smiled and walked over to the boulders skirting the area, finding a well-used place and sat down, leaning back. "Not much to look at, eh?"

"If you like nothing, it's great."

"Yeah, nothing." she said, "Lot of that out here. It's where I go to find some sanity when I need it."

"Out here, all alone?" He walked over to where she sat, squishing all the way. "Y'know, Verbena said --"

"Verbena talks too much." she said in a curt voice. "Talk, talk, talk. I could go deaf with it."

"So, you come out here." Al replied, "Where nobody can hear you." Dusting off the rock next to her, he sat down. "Where you can talk to Sam as long as you like."

The light wasn't all that good, but he saw her flush and tip her head down so that her face was hidden beneath her hair. "Yeah, I talk to Sam. Sure. I talk to Sam's goddamn car!" Picking up a rock, she tossed it in the direction of the Bronco, missing it by a mile. "You know, he left his jacket in the back seat? The one I gave him the last Christmas before..."

"I know."

"The hell you do. Dammit Al, it smelled like him for two years! And I don't know if that's the worst part."

She heard Al heave a deep sigh. "Not easy, being left behind. Not knowing."

Donna let out a strangled laugh, closer to a sob. "Not knowing. That's a riot. Al, don't you know? Sam never did anything, went anywhere without telling me. Surely you figured it out by now."

He turned to look at her as she faced him. The moonlight lit upon her face, eyes filled with tears as she grinned at him, a grotesque mask. "Donna, what did you do?" The voice was low, quiet and deadly. "And you'd better level with me, 'cos I'll know if you lie."

"Leaping early was both our idea. I knew he was going to do it. He had my permission to leave."

"And?"

"And I fixed it so he wouldn't remember me or our agreement. Engineered it that way."

"And that wasn't part of the deal. Am I right?"

She nodded, the tears falling off her face into the sand. "We didn't know how old he'd be...I wanted him to be free to do whatever he had to. Completely. What I didn't know was for how long it would be."

"And it's not over yet, kiddo. Not by a long shot." A lighter flared as he tried to light a cigar but only rose a trickle of steam from the soaked tobacco leaves. "Ziggy says we may not even be halfway through yet."

"I know. I know, Al. Believe me. I never though I'd be having second thoughts about this."

"Well, your timing sucked little green rocks, girl." He tossed the fireproof wad into the bushes. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? What, at this point? What choice do I have? It's done." She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "I don't know how much longer I can keep appearances up, Al. How many holidays do I spend with Sam's family alone? And don't forget, the last few years have included Tom and he knows everything about me, and I don't know dip about him..." Donna stood and began to pace. "I send letters home to his mother, I sign his name to the Power of Attorney I've had to renew more times than I care to name...I make excuses to old school friends...keep buying him Christmas presents that haven't even been wrapped yet...."

Al didn't say anything. Beth's memory was getting too close, and this time, he wasn't remembering it from his point of view. I didn't mean to be away so long, he insisted to himself. I didn't mean to! But this was too close...almost. "Don't stop caring, Donna. Don't give it up." He heard himself say it, but it seemed like a million miles away.

"Give up? Al, I gave him up when he leaped the first time.

I let him go and burned the bridge behind him. He never missed me. Never needed me. Doesn't need me now, matter of fact."

"He'll come back."

She nodded. "But what will he come back to? Dammit Al, I'm so mad at him -- "

"You hate him." Statement of fact. "How do you think I feel about the whole thing? That ever cross that mind of yours?"

"I wish you'd get angry. I could understand that."

"What for? The kid got what he wanted, didn't he? He's getting the ride of his life." He scuffed a shoe against the sand. "Aw hell, I dunno. Maybe the first thing I'll do is hug him. Or probably deck him. I don't know which."

Snuffling, she came to rest beside him, leaning against him. "You'll have to get in line. The whole project wants a piece of him for one reason or another."

"I can just see it now -- welcome home, Sam. Wham!"

"Yeah, bif, boom, zowie!" She began to giggle. Al joined her.

"He won't know what hit him."

"Oh yes, he will! I'll make sure--" Twin sighs fell into the night air. "Why do we stick with him, Al? I can't figure it out. He's gone most of the time, and we don't know if he's ever coming back."

"He stuck with us when it was bad." he reminded her gently, "Maybe we've just had our turn and it's payback time."

"Maybe. Maybe we just got dumped once too many times and we're desperate."

Al screwed his head around to look up at her. "Huh? Come again?"

She used her hands to illustrate in the darkness. "Look at us, a couple of sentimental suckers --"

"Watch who you're calling sucker, lady."

She only looked at him. Looked hard, as he looked back at her and smiled. "You know." she said into the quiet. "You know all about it."

"Don't I just." Donna could barely see the grin, but the eyes were sparkling. "If they don't know I know, they're stupid

enough to deserve each other."

"That's insane. How could you --"

"Tina's fun, all the same, don't get me wrong. But that's it. Eye Tee. You don't think I'd ask her to marry me, do you?"

"That is your record." she replied in a dry tone. "You've done that a time or two. Or three. Or --"

"Skip it. I'm not that stupid." She only cut eyes with him. "Okay, maybe I am. But that's past now. I've learned. And I think I've done my bit for the institution of marriage."

"Certainly have given it enough tries."

"Bitch." he said good-naturedly. He fished out another cigar.

"What about a family? Don't you want that?"

"Can you imagine the kids Tina and I would have? Ugh." This time, the cigar looked cooperative. "Besides, with you and Sam around, who needs kids?" He sat back and puffed away, content.

"Thanks a lot."

"'S true."

"Brat."

A few perfect smoke rings floated across the night sky. "I look at it this way." Al said, leaning back, scratching his back against the rock. "He's got his job to do, and we've got ours. It's not much different from when he was here, is it? Just think of it as a long business trip."

"I miss him, Al. That's what I think."

"I know. That wasn't much help, was it?" he said. "But I don't think you want me to feel sorry for you and tell you what a terrible thing all this is for you and all that crapola. For that, you got Beeks. So..."

"Maybe I just wanted someone to hear me this time."

"Maybe so." A pocket pager began complaining with its piercing wail into the night air, left by itself in the Bronco. "Uh oh. Time to go back to work."

Standing, Donna turned and gave Al a hand up. "What do you think he'll be this time?"

They brushed themselves off and got into the car, slamming the doors and shushing the pager. "Search me. I quit guessing a long time ago."

"I could wish --"

"Don't."

"Fine! I'll settle for a cub scout with poison oak. Real bad. Good enough?"

Al chuckled as he finished the cigar, blowing the smoke into the inside of Sam's Bronco with careless abandon. "Perfect."

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