



Donna was that kind of gal.

Only killing would cure her

The gun pointed at Carson, and only then did he realize who held it

HIDE-AWAY

By H. A. DeROSSO

THE FARM lay at the end of a dirt road. There was no other way in or out of the place, only this thin, brown ribbon of road winding through cut-over land that now was green again with second-growth poplar and maple and oak. Will Carson took the bumps in the road in second gear, noting that the lane looked as if it were regularly used even though there was a forlorn, abandoned air in the way the fields about the house lay fallow with orange hawkweed and yellow buttercups dominating the land.

Carson stopped his coupe in the yard in

front of the house and stepped out. He cupped his hands to shield the flame of his match while he lit a cigarette, at the same time giving a swift appraisal of the place with eyes uplifted beneath the brim of his gray hat.

Yellow paint was peeling off the side of the house, but there were clean curtains in the windows and the front steps were swept and scrubbed. Nevertheless, these still held the glare of newness as if they were recent additions that did little to alleviate the squalor of the old dwelling. Off to one side

stood an unpainted shed that listed slightly to the side. The wide door was closed but Carson could see the car tracks leading into the barn and this answered his question as to why he did not see any car about.

The whole thing was as he had been told in town it would be. Nobody showed at either the door or windows yet Carson felt that he was being secretly observed by someone in the house. Finally, in irritation, he put an arm inside the open window of his coupe and honked the horn.

Carson was working on the second long, loud blast when the man showed. Carson took his hand away and straightened, eyes narrowing slightly while he watched the fellow descend the front steps almost sheepishly and walk slowly toward him.

"Hello, Art," said Carson quietly. "When I sent you out on this job I didn't expect you to take off for six months. You bashful or something? Why didn't you keep in touch with me?"

ART HUNT spread his hands in wordless resignation. He was a young fellow of twenty-three. He had tawny hair and a pleasant face that had been burned red by the sun. He had gone to work for Will Carson about a year back. Carson's detective agency had prospered to the point where he had decided to take on an assistant. Hunt had applied for the job and Carson had taken an instant liking to the young fellow. Hunt had shown promise although he had displayed signs of a soft heart and this had troubled Will Carson for he felt that in this business heart had no place at all.

When Hunt made no effort to say anything, Carson went on, "What's the matter, Art? If you wanted to quit, why didn't you tell me? Why run off and hide in the woods like this?"

Hunt tried meeting Carson's cold stare but could not do it. "I just got tired, Will," he said in a low tone. "I got tired of looking for

missing persons and spying for divorce cases. I liked this north woods country and so I settled down here." His voice took on a measure of defiance. "Is anything wrong with that?"

"No," said Carson, "but you could have told me you were quitting." His eyes narrowed. "Before you decided to settle down, did you find any trace of Donna Southworth?"

Hunt's mouth tightened. "I told you I got tired and quit. I don't know anything about Donna Southworth."

Carson dropped his cigarette to the ground and stamped it out with his foot. Seemingly engrossed in doing this, he asked quietly, "I was told in town that you're married. Aren't you going to introduce me to the wife, Art?"

Hunt said nothing. Carson lifted cold, piercing eyes. "Aren't you?" he repeated.

"Yes, aren't you, Art? Or should I introduce myself?"

She had approached quietly, unobtrusively, coming around from behind the house. Carson had been entirely unaware of her until she spoke. He heard Hunt utter a gasp of surprise or of anger and then Carson swung around and was seeing her.

She was tall for a woman, about five-eight, Carson would say. She had a slim, high-breasted body that looked very lissom beneath the light print dress. She wore no make-up and Carson noticed the soft blueness of her eyes. Her mouth was rather wide, but to Carson she still was a very attractive woman. The kind a man would like to come home to, he thought somewhat poignantly.

He remembered the pictures he had seen and though it wasn't entirely unexpected he still could not help a small start inside.

"You're Donna Southworth," he said.

"I am. Only now I'm Mrs. Arthur Hunt."

An angry flush had come over Hunt's features. "Why didn't you stay inside like I

told you?" he said to the girl.

"He'd know about me," she said, looking at Carson. "Once he found you he'd find me, too, wouldn't he? I think he should know everything, Art."

"You get in the house," Hunt said in a low, savage tone.

She was staring calmly, appraisingly at Carson. He could not help but get the feeling of a keen intelligence behind those eyes and he supposed it came from much reading and studying and many visits to the public library. She looked just like the type.

"What should I know?" he asked her.

"Donna?" Hunt said in a warning tone. "Did you hear what I said, Donna?"

Her mouth tightened stubbornly. "It's best this way, Art. Carson looks like the kind of man who'd understand."

"Understand what?" asked Carson.

"Donna!" Hunt said it almost despairingly as if he knew she would never heed him. Then he spread his hands and shrugged resignedly.

THE GIRL kept her eyes locked with Carson's. "Does my father still want me back, Carson?"

"He does. He's worried about you a lot. When Art went after you and never reported back, your father gave me no rest until I dropped everything and took that job. It's costing him a lot of money he can't afford, Donna."

She lowered her eyes now as if considering something. She was silent a while and then she said in her quiet way, "I'd like to go back home but you see, Carson, I've killed a man!"

The words sounded almost ludicrous to Carson. He stared at the girl narrowly. She was no more than nineteen. She had a sweet, wholesome face and nice blue eyes. There was no harshness, no sophisticated callousness about her. She didn't look as if she had the heart to kill a fly, Carson

thought.

"This man you killed," he said slowly. "Who was he?"

"The man I ran away with. Eddie Ketchum."

She spoke readily, almost eagerly. Carson could feel it touch his heart a little and this angered him for he never wanted his heart to enter into his business.

He glanced at Hunt who stood with hanging head and a tight, bitter look on his face. "Did you know this, Art?" asked Carson.

Hunt nodded.

"Do you know how it happened?" Carson went on.

"She told me all about it. I had no trouble finding her, Will. She was just a scared, simple kid and she spilled everything to me not ten minutes after I'd been talking to her. I didn't have the heart to bring her back, Will."

"How did she say it happened?"

Hunt glanced at the girl, then turned defiant eyes on Carson. "You can believe it or not, Will. I believe it and that's enough for me. I won't ever let anything change my mind."

"Let's have the story, Art," said Carson patiently.

"Donna never got out much. You know that, Will. Her father told you about that when he hired you. She met Eddie Ketchum and he swept her off her feet and talked her into eloping with him. Then she found out that Ketchum was a no-good hood and burglar and he threatened to kill her if she ever squealed on him. She started to run away but he caught her. They had a fight and she killed Ketchum in self-defense. That's it, Will."

Carson looked at the girl. The strain was apparent on her face, her mouth twisted in a crooked line, a haunted look in her eyes as if she were living the awful, terrifying moments all over again.

“Well, that’s not too serious,” Carson said gently. “Why not go back and make a clean breast of it, Donna? The law is lenient when a person merits it.”

Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. “It isn’t as simple as that, Carson,” she said through pale lips. “I—I lost my head. It happened out in the country. We were in Eddie’s car. He had picked me up and was driving me back to where we were staying. He stopped the car by a ravine and threatened to kill me and dump me in it. He pulled a gun. I don’t know. Maybe he intended only to frighten me. We struggled for the gun and it went off and then I lost my head when I saw Eddie was dead. I took all identifications away from him and then I rolled him over the edge of the road and into the ravine and drove off. It doesn’t look good for me, does it, Carson? But I lost my head.”

She told it all in a plaintive, heart-rending way. Carson could not help a silent curse at the fate that had assigned this job to him.

“You’ll keep making it worse by running away,” he said quietly. “The best thing is to own up to it of your own free will. If you’re ever arrested for it, then it will really be bad for you. I’d go home and confess everything if I were you, Donna.”

There was a cool, thoughtful look in her eyes. “Do you intend to take me back, Carson?”

“I do.”

Hunt moved over close to her and put an arm around her. Determination lay in the glitter in Hunt’s eyes and in the tight line of his jaw. “You aren’t taking anyone back, Will,” he said evenly. “Look. Ketchum was no good. If you don’t believe it, why don’t you check up? I’m sure he had a record. Eddie Ketchum was a no-good hood and a bum. Donna did the world a favor by killing him.

“We aren’t harming anyone, Will. We’re

married and settled down here. I’m working in the iron mines. She made a mistake but aren’t we all entitled to one or two in our lives? Go on home and tell Peter Southworth you don’t know what happened to Donna or me. Would you do that, Will?”

CARSON drove back to Irontown and made several long distance calls to the midwestern city where he operated. In these conversations he learned a few things and he lay on his bed in his hotel room for a couple hours, running the facts over in his mind and trying to reach a decision.

No matter which conclusion he arrived at, the result left a bitter taste in his mouth. He realized that the longer he put it off, the harder the job would be. So he sighed and went down and outside and got his car.

He turned off the paved highway onto the gravel road that lifted and dropped over a series of rolling hills as it stabbed straight and deep into farming country. In his rear view mirror Carson noticed the car behind him, hanging rather far back and making no attempt to pass him even though he was not going very fast. But Carson supposed this was due to the dust he was raising. It was when he turned off the gravel road onto the dirt road that led to Hunt’s farm and saw the car still following him that the first apprehension struck him.

This road followed the lay of the land. It was just laid down on the contours of the ground, going up and down as the land lifted and fell, going straight where the earth permitted and when some obstruction like this immense, jutting rock ahead arose, the road took the way of least resistance and went around the obstacle. The road made a sharp curve around this rock and on the other side, Carson stopped his coupe and quickly got out.

A blackbird began to scold raucously in a poplar above his head. The muted purr of the approaching automobile fell gently on his

ears. Carson reached under his coat and loosened the .38 in its shoulder holster.

The car popped into view abruptly and came to a halt with a screech of the brakes as the driver noticed Carson's coupe standing still and Carson alongside it, waiting. A chill sense of premonition, the reason for which he could not understand, descended on Carson as he recognized the driver.

It was Art Hunt.

He got out of his car and stared at Carson awhile without saying anything. There was a pale strain on Hunt's face and hostility in his narrowed eyes.

"So you didn't leave Irontown," Hunt said finally. "What are you coming back for? Donna?"

"That's right."

Hunt's lips pinched tightly. "Why don't you leave us alone?" he cried. "We're not hurting anybody. She's just a poor, scared kid who made a mistake. What she did wasn't too bad. No one'll miss Eddie Ketchum. Or didn't you check up on him?"

"I did," said Carson quietly. "That's why I've come back." He stared thoughtfully at Hunt. The thing was quite clear to him but he doubted that Art Hunt would see it the same way. Hunt was too much in love to see anything straight, Carson realized sadly.

"I checked on Ketchum," Carson went on. "What you said about him was true. He had a police record. His specialty was burglary—fur coats and expensive dresses and the like." Carson wished he knew just exactly how to put it, the thing was that delicate. "The police claim that Ketchum didn't work alone. They say he had an accomplice."

Carson left it like that for Hunt to reach his own conclusion. It was not long in coming. Hunt's face slowly flushed and he took a menacing step forward, fists clenching.

"Are you trying to insinuate that Donna was the accomplice?" he said through his

teeth.

"I'm not insinuating anything," Carson answered evenly. "I'm only telling you what the police said."

"You've got a dirty, filthy mind," said Hunt, voice trembling with rage. "Maybe Ketchum had an accomplice but it wasn't Donna. She didn't know anything about Ketchum until after she eloped with him. She's a sweet kid who never had very many dates. That's why Ketchum fooled her." His eyes glared at Carson. "You're leaving her alone, Will."

Carson's voice hardened. "You know me better than that. Art. You worked for me long enough to know that when I take on a job I finish it."

"This is one job you won't finish," said Hunt, reaching for his hip pocket.

A COLD feeling clutched at Carson's throat. It wasn't fear, he had been in too many dangerous situations to know fear at an instant like this. It was something more like regret and distaste for he had no heart for a thing like this.

As Hunt reached back under his coat, Carson stepped quickly ahead. Hunt saw the blow coming at his stomach and he tried to hurry up but he was too late with his gun. Carson's left fist rammed against Hunt's belt buckle and the breath whooshed out of him. The pain of it doubled him up but with a straining singularity of purpose he brought his gun up and started to level it.

Carson slammed his right fist against Hunt's face. The man went sprawling back, bringing up against the front fender of his car. He cried out with hurt but doggedly hung on to his pistol and started to aim it again.

"You'll never hurt Donna," he said thickly.

Reluctance clogged Carson's throat. He had never done anything he disliked more than what he was doing now. He closed in

and with his left hand smashed the gun aside while with his right he struck Hunt hard on the jaw. Hunt's mouth slackened, the whites of his eyes showed, and then he was suddenly limp and sliding to the ground.

Carson retrieved the pistol out of Hunt's lax fingers. "I'm sorry, Art," he whispered.

The house looked just as lonely and forlorn as Carson drove up but this time he did not have long to wait. As he was getting out of his car, the door of the house opened and the girl stepped out. She walked directly, unhesitatingly up to him. As he watched her come, Carson could not help thinking that she looked like the dream he had always had. There was nothing like having a good, sweet girl to come home to, he thought. What made it affect him so was that thus far he had not found such a girl and, in his bitterness, he had begun to give up hope that he would ever meet one.

She stared at him with that calm, appraising manner of hers. Carson found himself wondering if she ever smiled, she always looked so sober and thoughtful.

"You've come back, Carson," she said quietly. "Why?"

"I'm taking you home, Donna."

Slowly, resolutely, she shook her head. "No, Carson. You aren't."

Carson watched her closely, trying hard to make up his mind about her but unable to arrive at a definite judgment. "You don't have to be afraid of what you did to Eddie Ketchum. He was a no-good hoodlum. What have you got to be scared of?"

Again she shook her head. "You're going back alone, Carson."

Carson's voice thinned. "What are you afraid of, Donna? Eddie Ketchum had an accomplice. Is that what you're afraid of?"

The color drained slowly from her face, leaving her lips white. A strange, calculating hardness came into her eyes but no fear. "Are you trying to say that I was the accomplice, Carson?" she asked quietly.

"Look at me. Do I look like someone who'd help a burglar break into warehouses and steal furs and dresses? You know my family, Carson. Do you really think I'm a common thief?"

"Then you've nothing to be afraid of. Come home with me to your father, Donna."

She clasped her hands tightly until the knuckles showed white. Her eyes lost their coolness, they wavered, her glance dropped to the ground. "All right, Carson," she said, and her voice quivered. "I'm scared. Do you want to know what I'm really scared of?"

She lifted an appealing face to him. "I'm listening," he said.

"It's Art. That's who I'm scared of."

"Art?"

She moved in close to Carson. She was near enough for him to reach out and embrace. Suddenly he realized that she was no longer only the sweet, good girl he had thought her to be. Now she was a vital, desirable woman, too. An aching stiffness filled Carson's throat.

"He made me do it," she said, grasping Carson's arms with urgent fingers. "He made me lie to you, Carson. I didn't kill Eddie. Art killed him, Carson!"

HE LOOKED at her narrowly. Her face was very earnest. Her blue eyes seemed full of a swirling terror. "Why would Art want to kill Ketchum?" Carson asked.

"Because he was jealous and wanted me." She pressed close to Carson, putting her face against his chest, her whole body trembling, her voice muffled with emotion and fear. "You don't know the hell that I've gone through, Carson. I had to pretend to you that I killed Eddie to make Art believe I really cared for him and would never betray him. I had to do that because I was afraid he'd kill me.

"Oh, Carson—Will, take me away. Not home. I'll never go home. I'm too ashamed to ever go home. Take me away with you,

anywhere, just so I'll be away from Art." She lifted a tear-streaked, begging face to him. "Please. Will? Please?"

Carson could feel his heart being twisted by cold, throttling fingers. His mind would not grasp it at first. He was too confused. His brain told him one thing, his heart another. Gone was the old chill detachment with which he had always regarded matters in this business.

He lifted his head and looked up at the house, gazing at the building and beyond it without the image registering on his brain, as he tried to get his mind straightened out. He saw the man come out on the steps and lift the gun. He saw the gun point at him and only then did he realize that it was Art Hunt.

Hunt had recovered sooner than Carson had expected. Hunt must have hurried back and cut through the fields to the house to obtain another gun and now he was here again, lining up the big automatic with Carson's head. All this flashed through Carson's mind in the instant that he flung Donna from him and reached under his coat for his .38.

The automatic roared as Carson went down on his knees. The slug made a vicious, snarling whine as it passed over Carson's head. He had his .38 out and leveled. His throat clogged.

"Art!" he shouted, and knew sickeningly that it was no use. The automatic dropped slightly to come in line with him again. Carson wanted to cry out once more, to explain, to plead, to threaten, but he realized that even if he had the time it would do no good.

Hunt's face was twisted in a grimace of unreasoning rage and hate. His eyes glared insanely above the sights of the automatic.

Knowing he had no choice, Carson fired. The automatic blasted again but the barrel was tipping toward the sky and Hunt's knees were sagging. He took a stumbling step forward, the automatic weaving crazily in his

hand, his mouth working soundlessly, and then he abruptly collapsed.

Carson rose shakily to his feet. He started toward Hunt's sprawled body but when he was five feet from it he could force himself no further. He halted and holstered his .38.

Donna shrieked Hunt's name. Carson heard her come running but he could not face her. He could only stare off past the house over the fields and trees, seeing nothing, not even the blue of the sky. Sobbing brokenly, the girl dropped on her knees, her back to Carson while she huddled over Hunt's dead body.

The shock was just passing from Carson's brain when the girl suddenly rose to her feet and turned to face him. Her tears were gone and there was no anguish on her face, only a cold, venomous purpose. In her hand she held Hunt's automatic. The barrel pointed at Carson's stomach.

"All right, Carson," she said in a low, determined tone. "It's your turn now."

He stared at her and at last saw her for what she was. The clear blue eyes, the lack of make-up, the serious, unsmiling mien had deceived him up to now. At this moment, however, he witnessed the transformation and hers was no different from any of the rottenness he had found in so many of her kind since he had been in the detective business.

"Art doesn't mean a thing to you, does he, Donna?" Carson asked quietly, bitterly. "He died for you but that doesn't mean anything, does it?"

"That's right, Carson," she said, lips moving stiffly, eyes gelid and uncompromising, the automatic rock-steady in her fist.

"You really killed Eddie Ketchum, didn't you?" Carson went on. "You were in with Eddie all the way, weren't you? Those times your father said you went out at night to the public library and to visit girl friends, you

were with Ketchum while he worked his dirty, sneaking trade. When Art found you, you spotted his softness and so you passed yourself off as the innocent, sweet young thing and fooled him completely. Isn't that right, Donna?"

A VAIN smile touched her mouth. "That's right, Carson. I fooled everybody like that. My family, Art, and you, too. You were ready to go along with me, weren't you, Carson, until Art made his damn fool play. Well, you know me for what I am but it won't do you any good. I won't let you stand in my way. I won't let anyone stand in my way."

Carson stood and listened dully, watching the feral viciousness flicker across her face while inside him the ideal he had built and worshipped slowly crumbled to sharp-edged shards that knifed his heart.

"I killed Eddie because he was just a small-time burglar and would never amount to anything more. He was too dumb to climb any higher and I wasn't going to tie myself to him for the rest of my life. He wouldn't let me go and so I killed him. Just like I'm killing you, Carson."

He saw her breast swell with the immense breath she was taking and he knew it was on its way. He swiftly measured his chances, all the while eyeing the automatic, and found only one slight hope. He did not know if it would work and if it didn't he wouldn't be alive to rue its failure so he felt there was nothing to lose.

He kept his voice calm and casual. "You can't shoot an automatic with the safety on, Donna," he said.

Her eyes dropped instantly to the weapon in her hand. Then as the truth dawned on her, she spat a curse and pressed the trigger but Carson had stepped in swiftly, striking out with his hand. He knocked the gun aside as it blasted and the bullet shrieked off over the fields. The girl fired again but by now Carson had grasped her wrist and yanked it high and the slug snarled up at the sky.

Control broke in him. He felt the rage start deep down inside him and rush upward, fanning through his head and brain, diffusing him with a singular, overwhelming ferocity. With a violent twist that tore a scream out of the girl, he sent the gun flying from her fingers. She screamed again and began clawing at his face with her free hand and kicking at his shins.

He released her long enough to strike her hard across the mouth. Then, as she turned to flee, he grabbed her again, fingers closing about her throat. "Carson," she gasped, clawing at his straining hands. "You'll kill me, Carson, you'll kill me."

"You bet I'll kill you," he snarled, his mind holding only the pain and disillusionment he had suffered. "Art was a fine boy and you caused his death. Why shouldn't I kill you?"

"Carson," she gasped, her struggles growing weaker. "Carson, Car—"

The enormity of what he was doing dawned on him as his rage ebbed a little. His fingers slackened and the girl slid to the ground. She huddled there on her knees, rubbing her neck and making harsh, gasping sounds. Carson stared at her awhile and then he said, "Well, Donna, shall we get started? It's a long way home. . . ."