GUMSHOE

Also by Rob Leininger

January Cold Kill

Killing Suki Flood

Maxwell's Demon

Olongapo Liberty

Richter Ten

Sunspot

The Tenderfoot

GUMSHOE

A Mortimer Angel Novel

ROB LEININGER



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FIRST EDITION

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ISBN: 978-1-60809-163-8

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing Longboat Key, Florida www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA





GUMSHOE



CHAPTER ONE

FOUR HOURS INTO my new career as a private eye—a gumshoe—I found Reno's missing mayor. Me, Harold Angel's son, as unlikely as that was to all those who know me. Mayor Jonnie Sjorgen had been missing for ten days. By the time he'd been gone a week, he was national news, so my locating him was a major coup that got me well-deserved but unwanted media attention. More about that later. First, there were the two gorgeous women who came into my life.

* * *

I was sitting at the bar when the first girl wandered into the Green Room at 10:56 p.m. and looked around. Other than two middle-aged ladies drinking mai tais at the farthest table from the entrance, and, of course,me, the place was empty.

An old *Star Trek* rerun was winding up on the TV over the bar, the real deal from before my time with Kirk and Spock, old funky bad-ass Klingons in bad costumes.

Tucked into a corner of Reno's Golden Goose Casino, the Green Room was a dim, unlikely watering hole overlooked by many of the locals. It was also too tucked or too dim to attract the attention of folks from out of town, which made it a good place to get a quiet buzz on or get loaded to the gills.

Pretty damn fine evening, it was, too. I had sole possession of the bar's remote, and I was about to start a whole new career in the morning as a PI, Reno's very own Sam Spade, when this finely tuned *Penthouse* creature appeared at the entrance and looked around with nothing promising on the horizon except me.

Which shows how much looks can be deceiving.

After giving the place a quick scan, she sauntered over and eased onto the stool next to mine at the otherwise empty bar. This was, of course, a sizeable mistake on her part, but how was she to know? And what were her options? I gave her a quick scan of my own. By some clever, possibly industrial, process, she had been poured into a slinky black dress that had responded by filling out more than adequately in all the customary places. Or maybe she'd been dipped in liquid silk and inflated.

But enough about her. In my personal experience, and in the court of public opinion, IRS agents rank somewhere below that of politicians or prostitutes. As a result, my place in society for the past sixteen years had been fixed somewhere beneath the rock you'd look under to find a Sunset Boulevard hooker or the politician atop her.

Sixteen interminable years. It was time for a change. First week in July I finally made it. Told the IRS to shove it and took three weeks off—a well-deserved mini-vacation before embarking on my new career. I figured this change in my life, as radical and irresponsible as it was, was going to be a snap, exactly what I needed as I approached the midlife-crisis years. As it turned out, I was wrong about the snap, but that was anything but new.

It's said that a change of careers is stressful, but I didn't see it that way. Why would I? I was going from one of the world's worst jobs to one of the best. My equanimity was also due in part to the large number of Pete's Wicked Ales I'd downed that evening,

elbows planted on the bar's oddly colored green leatherwork, awash in dim green lighting as Scotty fixed the Enterprise's busted warp drive for the umpteenth time. Warp drives in the future, I decided, were like the Xerox machines of today—a promising and useful technology, but buggy.

I took a sidelong look at my newly acquired drinking partner. It wouldn't be long before she hit on me. That she would was pretty much guaranteed, practically a requirement of my upcoming position as a private investigator, which would begin—I glanced at my watch, not a Rolex or even a knockoff—in about ten hours. The girl showing up at this pivotal moment in my life was predictable, written in the stars as they say, my way of getting a jump on what I knew was destined to become routine.

She was a looker, all right. Slender, frizzy blond hair, long legs, perfect curves, sleek as an otter. I took another hit of Pete's from a longneck as I awaited the inevitable. I'd read the books. I knew the drill. No doubt there's an entire chapter on gorgeous gals in the PI's manual. I gave the guy in the mirror behind the bar a fatuous wink, and he winked back at me, right on cue. Turns out both of us were drinking Wicked Ale. I liked that.

During my years as a field agent for the IRS, I could count true friends on the fingers of one hand, with a few fingers left over. Reno's phone book was a roster of potential enemies. After finally dumping the whole mess—all those years, including a percentage of what had metastasized into an almost attractive pension that I couldn't touch for another twenty years—I told people I'd quit because of the grim silences that resulted at parties when I was asked what I did for a living and, due to a well-exercised lack of judgment, I let on that I was a field agent for the IRS. I might as well have announced that I had a virulent form of airborne rabies. On the surface, therefore, my reasons for leaving the IRS sounded

more or less plausible. Who the hell invites Internal Revenue goons to parties in the first place? Social climbers with a death wish? What kind of a life was I leading as a wallet wringer for Uncle Sam? The pay wasn't bad, but did I want to endure another two decades of forced smiles and paranoid glances?

My ex, Dallas, shook her head when I ran that sorry pile of excuses past her. Her explanation charted a very different course: according to her, I was forty-one going on eighteen. I might argue that second number with her, but I couldn't fault her logic.

My name is Mort. Mort Angel. Not Mortimer—although that mistake made its way onto my birth certificate all those years ago. My mother's idea of a joke, no doubt. It would be just like her, but she says the name comes from a long-dead favorite uncle on her father's side, and a bona fide war hero to boot—Guadalcanal—"so you oughta be proud of the name, kiddo." Knowing mom, and not trusting her as far as I could spit a lug nut, I checked. There is no such uncle on her father's side, which means there's no Guadalcanal war hero, which in turn suggests the name Mortimer is, in fact, her idea of a joke. Someday I'll have to get her drunk and ask her about it again. Sober, she would laugh and give me the finger, or pay someone else to give me the finger. She's that rich.

So there I was, Sunday evening, not entirely sober at 10:58 p.m., TV remote in hand, a girl right out of wetxxxdreams.com all set to proposition me, and me as eager as a teenager to start my new adult life at my nephew's firm, Carson & Rudd Investigative Services.

I was going to be a PI, the next Mike Hammer or Magnum, but not Hercule Poirot, which I've always thought sounded like a guy who might wear lace undies, which I don't. I was transitioning from a man universally reviled to a man about to become steeped in dark mysteries—although I might've played the part better

wearing a trench coat at a rundown, rathole bar over on Fourth, east of Virginia Street. A dark and dangerous place like Waley's Tavern. I thought noir suited me. But I liked the electric air of the casino, too, the tension, the incessant money jangle and kinetic activity, the half-assed James Bond atmosphere—what would've been closer to a 007 atmosphere if not for the moronic siren song of the slots that have taken over—a slap-happy, nerve-shredding noise right out of Sesame Street.

The girl set a sparkly black purse the size of a gerbil on the bar in front of her, made herself more comfortable on the green leather stool with a dexterous wiggle, removed a Cricket lighter from her purse and casually placed it in the neutral zone between us, just within my reach. She tapped a cigarette out of a pack of Camel 99's and held it absently between her fingers, unlit, not looking at me, sitting there as if momentarily distracted, waiting for me to pick up the lighter and act every inch the gentleman so she could act surprised, smile, and get on with the business at hand.

All of which shows how little she knew. I took another pull on my Wicked Ale, then hit a button on the remote to change channels, thinking I'd catch the news on Reno's NBC affiliate, see if anything new had popped up about Jonnie and Dave, respectively our missing mayor and district attorney. Missing, to be clear, as in gone without a trace.

The girl sighed at my density, lit up, inhaled a lungful of carcinogens, God only knows how in that dress, then blew a smoke ring—a conversation piece. No comment from me even though it was a nice green-hued ring in the track lighting. She gave it another ten seconds, then turned and hit me with a smile so spontaneous and dazzling it had to have been rehearsed in a mirror on a daily basis.

"Buy a girl a drink?"

I knew she'd do that. Or something like it. I'd seen her around. A high-end hooker, she'd been working the Goose for a month or two. But, "Buy a girl a drink?" C'mon. She should've been able to do better than that even if she thought it wasn't strictly necessary. A few hookers have class, but most don't. Sleek or not, this one probably lived in a single-wide trailer out in the redneck wasteland of Sun Valley north of Reno, not because she didn't have enough money but because she wouldn't know any better.

Hookers can be fun if you don't take them seriously, which I don't. And I'd downed enough beer in the past three hours to fully appreciate the lighter side of life.

"Nope," I said, just warming up.

She gave me a pout, something done entirely with her lips, but a calculating look never left her eyes as she continued to assess her chances. She crossed her legs slowly, revealing an interesting length of expensively tanned, aerobicized thigh. I figured her for twenty-one, twenty-two tops, still fairly new at the game, especially at the casino level, and cheating like a sonofabitch on her federal income taxes. Her tip income for services rendered was probably over a hundred fifty grand a year, maybe two hundred. If I'd still had my IRS badge, I could've stopped her heart.

So call it a hundred eighty thousand. Roughly three times what I'd been making as an enforcer for our nation's Gestapo. Which begs the question, which of us was the smarter? Who was more successful? Then again, I didn't have a twenty-four-inch waist and I wasn't straining a C-cup, so it could be argued that she had a natural advantage, very likely enhanced by a few unnatural procedures, not that I was complaining.

She blew another perfect ring.

"Knew a girl once who could blow square rings," I said.

"Yeah?" Her eyes got wider.

"Uh-huh. Down in El Paso. Cute little Mexican gal. Something she did with her tongue."

"Her tongue? Sounds fun," the girl cooed, turning a little more in my direction. "You got a name?"

"Damn right. And yours is...?"

"Uh, Holiday," she said, timing thrown off by my non-response. "Holiday Breeze."

"You're kidding."

"No, really. Breeze really is my last name."

"What about Holiday?"

"My very own." She looked around, lowered her voice. "We could be friends, hon."

"Yes, we could, Holiday. You could buy me another beer." I swirled my bottle. "This one's pretty much done."

She pursed her lips again. "Tough guy, huh?"

Hell, yes. Come the dawn I would be a full-fledged PI, or close enough. Beautiful girls were going to flock to me like pigeons to a statue. I could take my pick. My previously humdrum life was about to do a great big one-eighty.

Little did I know.

She smiled. "You here on...holiday, or what?"

Oh, man, this kid.

O'Roarke sidled over, eyes glittering in amusement at the two of us. Patrick O'Roarke was six-five, a lean whipcord of a guy an inch taller than me, balding, with a bushy red mustache. Great bartender. At two-twenty-eight, I outweighed him by the better part of fifty pounds. We're about the same age. I'd hate to try to outrun him, and he'd hate to have to wrestle me. No one's the best at everything.

The girl ordered a Tequila Sunrise, then went back to work on me. "So, good-lookin', what's up with you, huh, you won't buy me a drink?"

"Good-lookin" almost sprayed a mouthful of beer past those sturdy round globes into the depths of that slinky black dress. Last person who'd said I was good looking was my mother, back when I was still in middle school, and she was lying through her teeth, as mothers are prone to do—mine in particular. When I was ten years old I'd run a skateboard into the side of a car that was doing thirty miles an hour, broken my nose, acquired two dangerous-looking facial scars which had eventually helped during field audits with the IRS, and it'd been all downhill ever since.

But I shouldn't have been surprised. Holiday was a hooker. Hookers say dumb things. They lie. They'll tell you things like their name is Holiday. They tell you what they think you want to hear. To her, every schmoo with a wallet was "Good lookin'," even guys with a face like Wilford Brimley or Edgar G. I decided it was time to spin her around a time or two.

"I've got this side mirror on my car, Holiday," I said, running a finger around a damp ring on the bar's faux walnut surface.

"Yeah?" A wary note crept into her voice, so maybe she wasn't so dumb after all. No way was the side mirror of my car going to lead to anything she wanted to hear, conversation-wise.

"Yeah. The freakin' thing howls, up around sixty miles an hour."

"Lucky you." Her jaw worked, trying to decide if I was for real. She ground her cigarette out in an ashtray and stashed her smoking paraphernalia into her purse, preparing to bail in case this business with the mirror took a turn for the worse. Which it did.

"You oughta hear it," I said with oblivious, cheerful abandon. "Sonofabitchin' thing howls like a banshee."

"Fascinating." Her eyes darted toward the exit, then one final thought crept in. "What kinda car?"

"Toyota Tercel. Nineteen ninety-four. Still got its original paint, too. Yellow."

She snatched her purse off the bar. "Serves you the fuck right, bozo," she snarled, then stormed away.

Bozo. Good one, Holiday. I grinned, watching her go.

O'Roarke came over with her drink and the two of us stared with unbridled piggish male admiration at the sight of her marching away, ramrod straight, taut hips swiveling angrily. She disappeared into the video-game jangle of slot machines and the metallic din of dollar tokens tumbling into stainless steel bins.

"I've lost her," I said.

"Howling mirrors. Every girl's secret dream, good-lookin".

I stared at him. "Christ, you must have ears like a radio telescope."

"Comes with the job, laddie. And I wish you wouldn't chase 'em off before they've paid for their drinks."

"Maybe next time." The eleven o'clock news started up on TV. I hit the remote, jacking up the volume for the latest on Jonnie and Dave.

For two days they'd been national news. Another day or two and the story might get international exposure. Jonnie Sjorgen and Dave Milliken, Reno's mayor and district attorney, had been missing for nine days, since Friday before last. Two of Reno's most visible public figures, gone without a trace. Twenty-four hours would have been a long time. Nine days was an eternity.

In truth, the story was in danger of growing stale locally. People lose interest when the news is no longer new, or when its interest quotient dips below the public's attention span. It wouldn't take much to stoke that fire again, but for the moment the story was like an old comet disappearing into the cosmos, leaving behind a glowing trail of dust. National attention had given it a much-needed boost. It was as if the pair had been sucked into a black hole. Of course, the lack of anything new in the case was itself news, but that only works for a while.

I wouldn't have followed the story quite so closely, except that my one-and-only ex, Dallas, had been living on and off with Jonnie Sjorgen for the past two years. Mostly on, which had made the gossip columns of the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, which was hinting that the two of them were hinting at marriage.

Tonight, however, Channel 4 delivered the same old tired rehash which meant it was time for me to hit the road. I had to go to work in the morning. Looking forward to it, too, for the first time in a decade.

"See ya," I said to O'Roarke, dropping a few extra dollars on the bar, relinquishing my grip on the remote.

O'Roarke jerked a thumb at the TV, at clips of Jonnie and Dave and a voice-over by Ginger Haley droning on, speculating furiously, trying desperately to keep it all fresh and alive. "Find those two," he said. "Make a big name for yourself."

"Hah."

He sucked his teeth, grinning mischievously. "Then do it for Dallas, Great Gumshoe."

"Double hah."

I drained the last of the beer and headed for the door.

Great Gumshoe, hell. I was starting to wish I hadn't told him about the change of jobs. I'd made the mistake earlier of telling him about my upcoming career change and of course he'd laughed at what was nothing less than my one-and-only future, the jerk, which didn't surprise me in the least—O'Roarke and I go way back. I would've done the same for him if he'd told me he was going to raise llamas or start designing women's dresses.

I went out the Virginia Street exit into a muggy July night. This is desert, but half a dozen times a year Reno confuses itself with

New Orleans or Miami. At 11:06 p.m. the sky was overcast, clouds tinged muddy orange by the city's lights, temperature in the eighties. Heat lightning flickering in the mountains to the east. Despite the humidity, the night had a pleasant muzzy whirl to it—about six beers' worth. Or eight. I'd lost count. Didn't matter.

I was about to walk up north toward my home in the hills, not far from the university, when something caught my eye, or a lack of something—darkness, a hole, an emptiness punched like someone's fist through the garish casino glare. Maybe it was the Sjorgen thing, the constant media pressure, but I found myself staring at the three-story Victorian mansion across Virginia Street known locally as Sjorgen House—or Woolley House, depending on how one viewed its ownership, legally or historically.

The place had been one of Reno's finest in 1898, about the time of the Spanish-American war. It had become an island in the midst of Reno's unbridled growth, an anachronism overrun by neon, protected by the local historical society, squatting darkly amid shaggy elms beneath the Golden Goose's eerie green bulk. But for a lone yellow light in an attic window, the house was dark. Edna Woolley had lived in the place for forty years, but the house still belonged to Jonnie.

I turned away. Sjorgen's name came up a lot in Reno. It was something you got used to. Mayor Jonnie owned all or part of half a dozen businesses and three or four rental properties in the city.

Having left the wailing Tercel at home in the garage, I began the half-mile trek home, not entirely steady on my feet. Jonnie was still floating around in my mind—just what I didn't want or need, but there it was. Jonnie Hayes Sjorgen, fifty-seven years old, was a shoo-in for reelection next time around. Or would be if he turned up again. He'd vanished minutes after delivering a speech at a fundraiser for battered women. Reno's D.A., Milliken, was

last seen leaving his office two hours before that. By the following afternoon, the media got wind of it, and the circus had been in full swing ever since. By now everyone knew the two of them had gone to high school together right here in Reno. They'd graduated the same year. Jonnie had been class president his senior year and six foot six Milliken had been an all star on the Reno High basketball team. They had been friends, still were, and both were gone. The story, with its connections to the past, was a sex boutique for journalists.

In spite of a tendency to use the word "proactive" in speeches, Jonnie had been a popular mayor for six-plus years. He'd been voted Reno's most eligible bachelor five years running. Women's groups adored him, swooned in his presence—that year-round tan, curly silver-black hair, boyish grin, capped teeth, dark green Jaguar. He was rich. He was a guy I loved to hate, especially after he'd made a move on Dallas.

Adding another layer of melodrama to an already unlikely story, Jonnie's father, Wendell Sjorgen, had been murdered outside a saloon on Wells Avenue twenty years earlier, a tidbit whose effect on Nielsen ratings was not lost on the networks.

So far, not a single ray of light had been shed on what might have happened to Jonnie and Dave. The dominant theory, rumor had it, was that they were somewhere in the vicinity of Great Abaco or Nassau, laughing their heads off on a pristine beach with topless giggling nut-brown girls in attendance providing rum drinks with little umbrellas in them, and that a big chunk of city money would turn up missing any day now, if only the accountants could find it. It didn't hurt that theory one bit that Jonnie's Jaguar and Milliken's Jeep Cherokee had been found the day after they'd vanished, parked side by side at the Airport Plaza Hotel on Terminal Way, directly across from Reno-Tahoe International

Airport, even though it had been determined that the pair hadn't flown anywhere, at least not using their own names. Nor had security tapes shown them to be in the airport on or around the first critical twenty-four hours of their disappearance.

Dallas had kept my name, which figured. She would die before calling herself Dallas Frick again. There were times when I thought the only reason she'd married me was for the name—Dallas Angel has an undeniable ring to it—but I knew that wasn't fair and wasn't true. We'd simply been too young. Nineteen. I knew now that my primary reason for saying "I do" back then had been simple lust and a kid's unshakable belief that lust was all it took, that love and lust were in fact the same thing, and a perfectly reasonable basis for a lifetime of forever. But at nineteen, what else is there? Testosterone is one hell of a drug, and Dallas had been an absolute knockout. She still is. Truth was, I still loved her more than ever, but sometimes you have to let go, and I'd learned that, too.

Dallas and I were on good terms, and not for the sake of the kid either. The "kid," Nicole, was no longer a kid, a fact to which I was having trouble adjusting. Twenty years old, over two thousand miles away, taking dance and theater classes at Ithaca College in New York. She wasn't the reason Dallas and I weren't at each other's throats. Hatred and grudge-holding, I've found, aren't inevitable by-products of divorce. Dallas and I have always been friends. She had no reason to hate me, before, during, or after the divorce. It wasn't my fault that the football career hadn't panned out, years ago. It hadn't been much of a career—it hadn't been any sort of a career, in fact—just a will-o'-the-wisp dream of a kid too wet behind the ears to have a clue. What's great in high school is second-string in college is nothing at all to the NFL. So Dallas and I were still friends. And, as I kidded her a month after the

divorce was final, she might not have wanted any trouble with the IRS. The comment earned me a punch on the arm that still bothers me on rainy days.

I paused under a streetlamp to check my watch. In nine hours forty minutes I was going to report to Carson & Rudd Investigative Services, to my nephew, Gregory Rudd, my sister Ellen's oldest, age twenty-eight, and as dull and as staid as they come, as if he'd been born in the wrong century, but a good kid nonetheless, especially if vanilla's your flavor. I'd once changed his diapers, back when I was fourteen. Emergency situation. I told him about it two months ago. Now he was about to become my employer—an unsettling reversal of roles, fortune, or some combination thereof, but one I'd brought upon myself. I could've toughed it out with the IRS. Maybe I should have. But...no way. Some things in life are unspeakable. I have a soul. Sometimes I can even feel it down there plugging away.

I trudged through pools of light spilling from streetlamps, not quite as drunk as I thought I'd be when I'd hiked down to the Goose earlier that evening, but the world had a nice glow all the same. Its edges had softened. Drinking wasn't my strong suit—damned if I knew what was—and I didn't want to show up at Greg's smelling like a brewery, even if Gregory was likely, due to the diaper incident, to forgive his old uncle an occasional weakness.

Sleuthing, I figured, would require a clear head and razor-sharp reflexes.