

GUMSHOE
FOR TWO

Also by Rob Leininger

Gumshoe (A Mortimer Angel Mystery)

Richter Ten

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January Cold Kill (A Gabrielle Johns Mystery)

Olongapo Liberty

GUMSHOE FOR TWO

A Mortimer Angel Novel

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*For everyone who read GUMSHOE.
This one's for you.*

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GUMSHOE
FOR TWO

CHAPTER ONE

“SHAKE THE HAND of an honest politician.”

Harold J. Reinhart, senior U.S. senator from the great state of Nevada, had found himself a battle cry that apparently resonated with voters. Enough of them, anyway, that his polling numbers were up 5 percent in the past month. If you thought political polls had the slightest bearing on reality—never a good idea—this proved you could fool some of the people all of the time. But when you head out to conquer the world with an unbeatable oxymoron like that, it’s like playing chicken with the devil.

“Omigod,” Jeri said, grimacing at the television above the bar. “Can’t we turn him off?”

“You kidding?” I said. “Brilliant orator like that?”

“Uncle Harry,” sixty-two years old, was making a bid for the presidency. With numbers in his own party trolling below 15 percent, it wasn’t as if the guy was on fire. But he was in the news, front page above the fold in the *Gazette-Journal*, second story on television behind a hotel fire in Vegas. He’d missed a noon rally at Wingfield Park on Saturday where he was scheduled to shake hands with an estimated two thousand supporters—good luck rounding up fifty warm bodies, I thought—and hadn’t been seen in three days.

Tuesday night, 11:06 p.m., Jeri and I were sitting at the bar in the Green Room of the Golden Goose Casino watching a

week-old clip of our very own lying senator on Channel 8 as he delivered his now-famous campaign slogan, when—

“Omigawd, lads, we have found paradise!”

Six drunken Shriners tumbled into the room like moonshine sloshing out of a Mason jar, turning what had been a reasonably pleasant atmosphere into a 90-proof circus. I heard them coming ten seconds before I saw them.

A Shriner convention was loose in Reno. This piece had broken free of the larger mass and discovered the Green Room. I'd always thought of the place, tucked into an odd corner of the Golden Goose Casino, as the city's “best kept secret,” but maybe it was the track lighting that turns skin and teeth an unsettling shade of green that kept the hordes away. If a guy was hoping to get lucky, this was the last place to bring a date. Green is an easy skin tone to overdo.

Jeri DiFrazzia was my boss, business partner, friend, lover, and fiancée. This was only the third time she'd been in the place. For me it was something of a second home, especially nearing the end of baseball season. This evening the Cubs had whipped the Pirates six to five in extra innings, just in time for News at Eleven.

Mid-September, Jeri and I were using free-drink coupons the bartender, Patrick O'Roarke, had given me five weeks ago when I was in the hospital recovering from fencing wounds. A gorgeous but unfortunately psychotic twenty-year-old girl half my size had run a foil through my chest and out my back, missing my subclavian artery by a quarter inch. Up till then I didn't even know I had a subclavian artery. She'd also stabbed my foot and slashed my face. For the rest of my life, I would have a scar across the bridge of my nose and my left cheek, an inch below my eye. If I'd still been working for the IRS, the enhanced intimidation factor would have been worth a nice raise. The various holes and slashes were

the first fencing wounds reported in the state of Nevada since it was admitted to the Union in 1864, but the national celebrity I'd received was for locating Reno's missing mayor and district attorney, not the puncture wounds. That near-death experience had taken place the first week of August. Since then I'd been in recovery mode, taking it easy. Jogging still put twinges in my chest.

My name is Mort Angel. Not Mortimer—although that mistake was made forty-one years ago on my birth certificate and was never corrected, causing me no end of embarrassment and trouble. Mom is still on my shit list for that.

Jeri DiFrazzia and I investigate—privately. Well, she does. It says so on the door to her house-office. I'm a PI-in-training, having quit a thankless IRS job the first week of July in order to prowl dark alleyways and dodge bullets. I hadn't counted on sword fights. In Nevada it takes ten thousand hours to become a licensed PI. Ten thousand freakin' hours—a requirement that weeds out the wannabes by the truckload. Five *years* of training. Currently I was 6 percent of the way through that thicket of bullshit. Bet Spade and Hammer didn't have to slog through any of that. I figured it took them about as long as it took to pound a nail and hang a shingle. I know McGee—Travis—hadn't gone that route.

Jeri was working on an End Wrench with a twist of lime and a cherry. I had abandoned my usual—Pete's Wicked Ale—and had a longneck of Moose Drool brown ale in front of me. An End Wrench, I'd learned, was orange juice and tonic water, something I wouldn't put down my throat to win a bet under a hundred bucks. But Jeri was in training. She had a national competition coming up in three days in Atlantic City. She had a flight out on Southwest at 8:35 in the morning. My job, starting at 8:36, would be to hold down the fort and keep out of trouble while she was away, which was going to be a while since she was meeting her

brother Ron and his wife the following Monday. Ron was competing in the Pan American Judo Championships the following week in Manhattan. The whole family was type-A like that. I'm more B-minus, but I compensate with luck. Jeri would be gone for twelve days, the longest we'd been apart since she'd taken me on as an investigator-in-training midsummer at the urging of my ex, Dallas, who'd probably wanted a good laugh.

Back to our lying senator. His absence had become bigger news than his poll numbers, so ditching that rally at Wingfield might've been a way to get even more attention, though that might just be my churlish take on politics in general. Reinhart's absence was made more ominous when his chief of staff, Jayson Wexel, was killed in a house fire two days ago. The fire started in a fireplace, no surprise, except the daytime high temperature was eighty-five—and when the place had cooled, investigators found Jayson, age forty-nine, burned to a crisp. It looked like an accident, but . . . maybe not. Police were looking into it and “no comments” were being flung at reporters by lawmen as they entered buildings and climbed into cars, so it made for dry viewing and languid ratings, even with Senator Reinhart's disappearance.

Jeri nodded at Reinhart on TV. “You oughta find that guy while I'm gone.”

“I'll get right on that.”

“Last August I wouldn't have put it past you. You and Kayla.”

A neat little dig there. Kayla, the missing mayor's beautiful daughter, and I had gone off to Austin in the middle of Nevada, ignoring Jeri's suggestion—okay, order—not to “horse around” with the investigation until she got back.

“My forte is decapitations,” I said. “Not missing dimwits.”

She smiled and sipped her drink. “Senator Dimwit would put you back in the spotlight again. That's something.”

“No need, I’m still hot on Google. And our missing politician is probably in disguise in Puerto Vallarta boffing senioritas, trying to boost his numbers by getting himself in the news.”

“*Boffing?*”

“It’s in the dictionary. Look it up.”

“With that guy Wexel dead, Reinhart might not be laughing it up in Puerto Vallarta.”

“Right. He might be in Cancún.”

“Mort—”

That was when the Shriners rolled in. To a pile of drunks in red bucket hats, too-white shirts and red vests loaded down with merit badges, pins, and whatnot, half-blind as they were, it’s surprising Jeri ended up on the big Shriner’s radar, but she did. Fast, too, so the old guy had an eye. But maybe not so surprising. As usual, Jeri was looking good, dressed in tight-fitting plum pants and a long-sleeve ivory shirt. She had a face that drew stares, she’s that beautiful. She’s not much into jewelry—rings interfere with judo, karate, and aikido—but that night she was wearing gold hoop earrings that gave her a subtle gypsy look, especially with her dark hair cut in a feathery layered style. The reddish highlights, of course, were invisible in the green lighting, but the big guy didn’t know that.

In his funky fez, he looked about seven feet tall. In fact, he ran six foot six, an inch taller than the bartender, O’Roarke, two inches taller than me. Bunch of big guys in that bar, except that the rest of the Shriners were shrimps, all of them six feet or less.

Man Mountain passed by Jeri then hung a sloppy U-turn and sidled up to her on the side opposite me. He stuck an elbow on the bar, leaned in close, and stared at her. “Man oh man, you are some kinda hellacious pretty, sugar.”

Jeri leaned away from his breath. A lit match might have blown Bigfoot’s head off. “Yeah, thanks,” she said.

The two hints—Jeri’s body language and the arm’s-length voice—didn’t take, and things proceeded from there.

“You an’ me, little lady, we oughta dance.”

“I’m pretty sure we oughtn’t.”

“Y’all don’t dance with strangers? Well, allow me to fix that apace. The name’s Earl. Earl Eberhard.”

“You sure?”

Earl didn’t know what to say to that. He blinked a few times, squinted at her, then said, “Hah?”

Jeri stared at her drink. “Is it just me, or did it get a whole lot stupider in here in the last thirty seconds?”

I put a hand on her arm. “Whoa, there, little lady.”

She gave me a look that could have etched glass, an industrial process involving hydrofluoric acid, then she caught my meaning and nodded. Some of the tension went out of her. This gaggle of fools wasn’t mean, just drunk. Happy drunk, actually. The big guy was away from the ol’ ball and chain, whooping it up a bit, and he’d stumbled across something that got his man-circuitry galloping, couldn’t turn it off.

“Earl,” I said. “How ’bout I buy you a drink?”

“Maybe later,” Earl said, not looking at me. “Right now I got me a date with this purdy lil’ gal. We gonna dance.”

“How about tomorrow?” I said.

Finally, he squinted at me. “Who’re you, an’ wuzzit to ya?”

“The name’s Mort, and this purdy lil’ gal and I are engaged, that’s wuzzit to me.”

“Well, then, you’re some kinda lucky, stud. But that mean she can’t dance?”

“How about you leave that up to her?”

Earl sized me up with bleary eyes. He had me by fifty pounds, but they weren’t good pounds. Mine were better even though I

was still convalescing, not yet at a hundred percent. He didn't get that, however, because he pushed back into Jeri's space. "Man, y'all're some kinda gorgeous, gorgeous."

"And you're some kinda—"

"*Maybe*," I said before Jeri could say whatever incendiary thing she was about to say, "you two oughta arm wrestle for it."

Well, it just popped out. That's my excuse. My mouth has a mind of its own, an entire inner life independent of mine. Thing is, something like that can take on a life independent of the mouth. This one did.

Jeri turned and stared at me.

Earl, however, roared with laughter. I think that's what really did it. His belly shook. In a beard, a red suit, and a button nose he'd make a jolly old elf. Trouble was, his nose looked like a pickled cucumber and it was only September.

"Arm rassle?" he howled. "Har, har, har." His laugh was one of those. It dug into your brain and loosened neurons.

"C'mon, Earl," said one of his buddies, five-ten and as bald as an egg.

Baldie wasn't nearly as drunk as Earl. Or the rest of them, for that matter. I figured him for the designated Shriner With A Brain. His job might have been to keep Earl out of jail. The other four were staggering in place, trying to keep up with all this, but they looked like harmless souls, just wanting to down a few more shots or shooters, turn their brainpans into happy comatose oatmeal, then head off to a room and crash. The Designated Brain's name turned out to be Barry Flynn.

Earl looked at Barry with tears in his eyes. Real tears. He had to wipe them away with the back of his hand. "Arm rassle, Barry. 'Magine me rasslin' Missy 'Merica here? Har, har, har." He sucked in another breath. "Har, har, har, har."

Jeri popped off the barstool, all five feet three and a half inches of her. At the sight, Earl doubled over with laughter. The top of her head didn't reach his shoulders.

Barry gave us an apologetic shrug.

Jeri, however, gave Earl a look that could freeze a yak. She was facing away from me, but I caught her look in the mirror behind the bar. Type-A, like I said. That "Missy" thing had fired her rocket. Earl's "har, har, har" was just the cherry on top.

Jeri poked him in the belly, hard. "Bring it on, wiseass."

For a moment, time stopped. Stopped so dead it seemed the earth had quit rotating—which would've thrown off all the clocks and pissed off untold billions of people.

I stared at Jeri.

Earl quit haring and stared at her.

The rest of the Shriner pack stared at her, including Barry, as the world held its collective breath—

* * *

—which makes this a perfect time to mention that in late August, when I was finally up to it, Jeri decided she wanted to meet my mom, Dori Angel, a lady so rich she sometimes finds hundred-dollar bills in her hair. She also shacks up with guys half her age as long as they're "pretty," which means tan, over six feet tall, well-muscled, and dumb—dumb evidently being an attractive feature in a sex object. She goes through three or four a year. My father has been out of the picture for quite a while, having died in a golfing accident of his own making.

The trip was a huge success. I got a tan, and Dori and Jeri bonded, possibly because their names both end in the letter "i." At least that was my theory. No other way to explain it.

* * *

Okay, back to the wrestling match.

“Let’s do ’er,” Earl said.

Jeri rolled her shoulders and shook out her arms, which might have told Earl something, but he was too busy chuckling as he finished off a Kamikaze: Smirnoff Red Label vodka, triple sec, and lime juice. The drink had been ordered for him by one of the other guys, Gill, which indicated that this was not a Mensa convention.

I stood next to Barry.

“This probably isn’t a good idea,” he said.

“It just popped out,” I offered by way of explanation.

“Uh-huh.”

“My mouth says things when my back is turned.”

He looked at me. “That right? I got a cousin used to do that. He’s in prison now.” He turned his attention back to Earl and his Kamikaze. “Earl ain’t a bad guy. Just kind of a sloppy drunk, you know what I mean.”

“Yup. Been there.”

We watched Jeri and Earl a moment longer, then my mouth had its second bright idea of the evening.

“Side bets, anyone?” I said, loud enough to cut through the chatter.

All eyes turned to me. Jeri gave me a look. “Might’s well pick up a little extra traveling money,” I told her.

That got another round of baritone “hars” out of Earl. Not knowing how dangerous it was, he patted the top of Jeri’s head. “Whatdda you weigh, sweetheart? One-ten?”

In his defense, he hadn’t seen her in gym shorts and a halter top. First ten seconds I’d seen her, in a loose cotton shirt and

sultan pants, I had her pegged at one-fifteen and I wasn't drunk off my ass at the time.

Jeri gave him a smile with a lot of teeth in it.

About that time, Shriner Jim-Bob was waving a twenty-dollar bill at me. "Twenty on Earl."

"Slow down," I said. "Lookit the size of that guy. We're gonna need some decent odds here."

"Five to one," Jim-Bob said.

I laughed. "How 'bout ten to one?"

"You're on."

And we were. Jim-Bob, Barry, and Al were in for a hundred each. Pretty sporting, considering they'd only get ten bucks out of it if Earl won. Gill was in for two hundred. At that point Jeri and I were only in for fifty. Then Earl said, "Hundred to one, girlie. My ten grand against your hundred."

Whoa. The world slammed to another halt, then started to spin again, slowly. The air in the room changed.

Barry said, "Earl, no."

I said, "No."

Jeri said, "No."

Earl stared at Jeri, eyes bright. "Or," he said, "maybe we could mud rassle, honey bun. Win or lose, that'd be worth ten grand."

Honey bun? Mud wrestle? I took a step closer to save Earl a month in traction, but Jeri reined herself in and said, "Arm wrestle, buster. Our hundred bucks against your ten Gs."

Buster. I liked that. Made me proud of her. Even working for the IRS I'd never called anyone "buster."

"You're on, sweet cheeks," Earl said.

I drew Barry aside. "Any way to stop this stagecoach before it sails off a cliff?"

“Double shot of fast-acting Valium for both of ’em?”

“Got any on you?”

“Nope.”

“Not sure why you brought it up, then.” I put my hands in my pockets. “Guy’s a bulldog-terrier mix, huh?”

“Been that way long’s I’ve known him.”

“So’s she.”

“Yep, got that, too.” He looked at Jeri and pursed his lips. “I ever seen her before?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I sell insurance. I’m usually pretty good with faces.”

“Uh-huh. So—is Earl good for that kind of money or is this just talk?”

“Why? Think he’ll need it?”

“One never knows.”

“He’s good for it. Owns a company in East Texas that makes specialty valves.”

“Valves?”

“Gate valves, ball valves, valves for acids, sodium hydroxide, you name it, high-temperature and cryogenic stuff.”

“Rich dude.”

“You got it. More money than sense, ’specially stewed, out on the town like this.”

“You probably still oughta rein this guy in.”

“Trust me, that’s not happenin’. You shoulda seen what he did in Chicago two years ago. There’s a big-chain hotel there that won’t take Shriners anymore.”

Jeri touched her toes. Earl watched her for a moment, then “harred” and drained another Kamikaze, courtesy of Gill, their resident genius.

“Let’s have the barkeep hold the money,” Jim-Bob suggested.

Wallets emptied—five hundred bucks landed on the bar. Earl quit chuckling long enough to write a check for ten grand, signed it, left the pay-to line blank. O’Roarke put all of it out of sight and out of reach behind the bar.

Earl sat at a table. Jeri took a chair opposite him. Earl had a smile on his face the size of . . . well, Texas, but his eyes looked like ball bearings since his manhood was on the line. He plopped an elbow down on the table, arm up, waiting. Jeri put her arm up. Too short by five inches. She took his wrist, not his palm.

“Bad leverage for the lady,” Barry observed. “Might want to do something about that. Put a telephone book or something under her arm.”

“Yeah, well, Earl’s drunk. Let’s call it even,” I said. Fact is, I didn’t want Earl’s ten Gs or the five hundred. I figured we could afford a hundred fifty bucks if it came to that.

Barry shrugged.

O’Roarke put his hand on Earl’s. “Sudden slam don’t count,” he said. “Start slow or forfeit.” He looked over at me with a question in his eyes.

I gave him a head tilt, then said to Jeri, “Go get ’im, honey bun.” She shot me a look and I knew I’d catch hell later that night.

Earl grinned at Jeri. “Maybe you oughta roll up your sleeves, little lady.”

“Why? There’s only one of you.”

“Har, har, har.”

O’Roarke gave me another look, then took his hand away and said, “Okay, then. Go get ’em.”

Earl put on a little pressure and Jeri held him. Earl bore down a little harder. Jeri yawned. Earl’s eyes widened. Jeri smiled. Sweat glistened on Earl’s forehead. Jeri yawned again, audibly. Earl put

his weight into it, then Jeri slammed his arm down so hard that Earl tumbled out of his chair and landed on the floor.

Hard.

A moment of silence ensued for the dearly departed.

Money, that is.

Then the groans started, and someone said, "What the hell, Earl, you shithead."

Earl lay on the floor for a moment, then slowly got to his feet. Jeri went back to her barstool. "Another End Wrench, Patrick," she said as O'Roarke went behind the bar.

"Third place," Barry said to me. "Or was it fourth?"

"Huh?"

"Just remembered where I saw her. National power lifting championships last year in Miami, New York, someplace. She took third, right?"

"Fourth," I said. "In her weight class. But she's stronger now and Nationals are this weekend in Atlantic City. I'm thinking she'll take it all."

"Hell." He looked at me. "You two're engaged?"

"Uh-huh. Three weeks ago."

"Well . . . good luck, man. Don't ever piss her off."

Earl didn't have much to say once he was on his feet. He was too busy being called a shithead and a pussy and other terms of endearment by his fellow Shriners. I got the folding money from O'Roarke. Our fifty, their five hundred, gave O'Roarke a hundred, then Jeri grabbed Earl's check and tore it up.

"Hey, hey, hey," Earl said, sounding like Fat Albert. "You won that money fair an' square, sugar plum."

Okay, some guys are naturally slow learners, like me most of the time. To her credit, Jeri didn't pick him up and body slam him. In fact, she said, "How 'bout that dance, Earl?"

For a moment his eyes got bright and happy, then they shut down. “Guess not. So, little lady, what’s your name?”

She smiled. “Jeri.”

“Jerry? Man, they’re doin’ wonders with that sex change stuff nowadays, ain’t they?”

I shut my eyes. Earl’s life passed before my eyes, which was eerie, but Jeri just patted his cheek, maybe a little hard, and said, “Let’s dance. I’ll let you lead.”

Earl shook his head. “Not till you take my money. You stay right there and hang fire for a few.”

He went out the door, came back five minutes later with ten casino chips worth a thousand each, put them in Jeri’s hand, and folded her fingers over them. “Don’t tear ’em up, sugar plum. Now, if y’all’re still willin’, I guess I wouldn’t mind that dance.”

* * *

Jeri and I were at Reno-Tahoe International Airport at seven forty the next morning. At under five-four, a hundred thirty pounds, white and female, Jeri profiled out as a likely terrorist so they gave her the full treatment, checking her shoes—sandals—for C-4, going through her purse to find bottles of exploding lotion. They look for the most unlikely things, then miss automatic weapons when FBI agents test airport security by sneaking Glocks and Uzis through. Granny can’t get through unmolested, but profiling Middle Eastern males with “Allahu Akbar” beards isn’t PC so they’re waved on through.

Before entering the security obstacle course, Jeri kissed me, long and hard. We drew envious stares.

“Go get ’em, tiger,” I said once we came up for air.

“Will do.”

“Got everything you need? Toothbrush, toothpaste, spare bottle of hydraulic fluid?”

“I usually stock up on fluid after I get there.”

“Good idea. Have fun in security. They’re waitin’ for you.”

“Yup. Love those strip searches.”

She gave me another quick kiss, then she was gone, into the red-hot security vortex that keeps our nation’s air travel safe. Like the IRS, of which I was no longer a part, it was a government-run operation.

Food for thought.