



RAPID READS



THAT DOG WON'T HUNT

LOU ALLIN

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Allin, Lou, 1945-
That dog won't hunt / written by Lou Allin.
(Rapid reads)

Issued also in an electronic format.

ISBN 978-1-55469-339-9

I. Title. II. Series: Rapid reads
PS8551.L5564T43 2010 C813'.6 C2010-903657-3

First published in the United States, 2010
Library of Congress Control Number: 2010929176

Summary: A drifter takes a job at a hunting lodge in Northern Ontario, with the expectation of a big payday for the summer's work. But when the eccentric owner decides to renege on her promises, she ends up dead. (RL 2.8)



Mixed Sources

Cert no. SW-COC-001271
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Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Design by Teresa Bubela
Cover photography by Getty Images

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 5626, Stn. B
Victoria, BC Canada
V8R 6S4

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 468
Custer, WA USA
98240-0468

www.orcabook.com
Printed and bound in Canada.

CHAPTER ONE

This mirage was made to order. A cherry-red Mustang Mach 1 sat by the side of the road in the Mojave Desert. Its hood was up. Waves of heat rolled off the asphalt like X-rays.

My eyes were sore from squinting. One side of my throat was tickling the other. I took the last swig from a plastic gallon of water I'd bought at Twentynine Palms. Scored a three-pointer against a saguaro. The jug rolled like a tumbleweed. I had been hitching on I-10 east from LA. They might be looking for me on

the Interstate, so I took this back road through the Sheephole Mountains toward Vegas. Hadn't seen one damn car in an hour.

Cowboy boots hate asphalt and sand. Fact is, they're not big on walking, period. I hoisted my duffel over my shoulder and headed for the car. The sun beat down like honey. Too dry in the desert for sweat to even bead. Thank god it was April, not July.

"Damn it to hell!" a rough voice yelled. The rear plate read *Ontario*. My mirage was near perfect. Canucks are helpful, and they'll swallow hard-luck stories. Then the hood slammed down.

A wiry woman, barely five feet, with a wide straw hat and sunglasses, puffed on a cigarillo. Female. Three for three. Leading with my "trust me" grin, I approached.

"Where did you come from, cowboy?" she asked, tapping the ash and smiling with a plump red mouth. My boyish look makes women want to mother me.

"A lady in distress?" I took a mock bow, sweeping off my hat. It was battered and stained from a beating I'd rather forget.

Why was she out here alone? Where was she heading? Surely as far as Utah. Canada was way past that.

"You look like a man who knows horses. How about Mustangs?"

Smiling, I trailed a finger over the dust on the door. Hand-buffed and detailed. Someone loved it.

"Let's take a look." Raising the matte black hood with that sexy scoop, I fixed the safety rod.

She took off the hat and fanned herself. The cat's-eye sunglasses made her look like Cher. Throaty laughter said hard years of liquor and tobacco.

"It's fate. Looks like we both took the wrong road. Nothing's come along but a couple of vultures ready to pick my bones." She pointed to a circling bird.

“Shame to waste such pretty bones. Anyways, it’s a red hawk. You can tell by the whistle.” I reached in and turned the key to watch the gauges. “Not outta gas. Oil’s good. Not overheating. What happened to her?”

She shrugged and flipped the plastic tip of the cigarillo toward the sagebrush. “Got herky-jerky at first. Nearly slowed to a stop.” She wore a white linen skirt and a floral blouse. Silk scarf around her neck. Like she’d come from a business meeting. Not many women could keep their cool alone in the desert.

I tossed an appreciative glance just to let her know I noticed.

“One thing’s sure, we gotta get out of here. Start her up.” I moved to the front.

The engine caught right off. But instead of a purr, she sounded like she had the hiccups. Not in the starter then. No back-firing or pinging either. Dirty fuel line?

I signaled to turn off the ignition. Spark-plug connections were good, carburetor flap moved easy. When I removed the distributor cap, I knew what was wrong.

“More gas. But nice and easy. She’s talking.”

Give Daddy a paper clip, a screw-driver, duct tape and a hose and he’d get anything with wheels moving. From my jeans pocket, I pulled a penknife with a bone handle. Then I exposed the points and scraped.

“Try her now.” Listening, I held up a hand, and she read me loud and clear. The engine stopped. I scraped again. “She’s hurting but back in business.”

The Mustang had enough life to get us to a town. The woman revved the motor.

“You’re one damn miracle worker. I’d like to shake your hand, kind sir.”

I took out my last handkerchief and cleaned my fingers. “Glad to help.”

“I’m Gladys Ryan.” She had a firm grip, like she knew what she was doing. It’s a western thing. I’m all for being equal. Some women I’ve seen could ride and rope circles around me. Credit where credit’s due, and all that. She wore a real strange ring on her third finger, left hand. Like a cigar band, only colored metal.

“Rick Cooper.”

“Gary Cooper. Tall, dark and handsome.”

“No relation, ma’am.” Mama used to like that dude. Another good sign.

“Looks like we both caught a break. Hop in. You drive,” she said.

I tossed my duffel into the trunk beside her set of fancy luggage marked YSL. Maybe it was secondhand. Then I eased into the seat and took the leather-wrapped wheel. Daddy always said to keep your hands at ten and two. Looking at the gearshift, I did a double take.

“What the hell’s that?”

She gave a little pound to the dash as she laughed. "That's the future, if you get old enough. A steel hip joint."

"I've seen custom, but this beats all." I found first and juiced the gas. I went through all five gears, double-clutching at the top to show off.

Some fierce stink filled the car. "Oh, Christ. Bucky's awake."

"Huh?" I hadn't seen a kid. She was a bit old for that.

"It's my golden retriever in the backseat. You'd never know he was there unless he wakes up for a meal. Then he farts up a storm."

Turns out Bucky was fifteen, old for the breed and on the deaf side. She and her husband had him from a pup. Retrievers weren't my thing. Didn't see the point of them. German shepherds, maybe. Good guard dogs earned their keep.

Her tiny hand reached out to adjust the air conditioner. Blue veins. Not so young then.

Maybe a rough fifty or a prime sixty. That could work in my favor.

“The gearshift was my late husband George’s. He had a hip replacement and a wicked sense of humor.”

“Uh-huh.” That explained the weird ring. Must’ve been a cheap bastard.

“I do admire the car. She’s choice.” Fifty thousand miles on the odometer. Babied big-time for twenty years. “No rust neither. Saw your license. Don’t you have salt on the road up there?”

“Kept it covered up inside all winter. Too light in the rear for traction. We used it only for special trips. George had a sister in San Diego. We went down once a year.” Her voice took on a sad tone. “I’m... coming back from her funeral.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

She shrugged and pooched out her lower lip. “She was eighty. When you gotta go...”

"It's not bad to go in California."

"You got that right. How'd you know that trick with the engine?" She reached into the backseat.

"My daddy purely loved Mustangs. The '65 classic, and then the '70 like this one: 351 Cleveland V-8 engine. Same color too. Christmas cars, he called 'em. Red, green, gold stripes." I heard her rummaging around. A metallic clinking. My lips were chapped and I licked them. "Sure would be funny if it was the same one," I said.

"In the movies maybe. George bought this new. Five thousand bucks." She popped the cap off a can of Colt 45 and passed it over.

"That'll hit the spot. Lots of snow up north?" I finished the brew in a couple of gulps.

"We don't all live in igloos like Yanks think. But we plow and shovel plenty of

the white stuff.” Next came a paper cup and a bottle of Smirnoff. She poured herself a generous slug and toasted me.