

OF DOGS AND DECEIT

JOHN SHEPPHARD

“**J**ack O’Shea, Deception Specialist,” she said, reading my card aloud. “What can I do for you?” I asked.

She insisted we speak in person as it was a “personal matter.” We met in a park in Santa Monica. I agreed because it was a short drive from my office in Culver City.

Dede Dobson was a frazzled mother in her thirties. Her mop of curly auburn hair was tied back and she wore a faded Oregon Shakespeare Festival sweatshirt. We sat on a park bench as her two young children, a boy and girl, climbed the playground equipment nearby. Assorted mothers and nannies were seated around the other benches, with kiddie snacks and bottled water.

“So, you wrote this book?” She pulled a worn trade paperback from her faux-leather purse.

“A couple of years ago.” The publication was my tell-all confession—a stab at redemption that hovered near the *New York Times* Bestseller List for about fifteen seconds.

“So you’re a con man? Really?”

“Back in the day, but I’ve changed my ways. Now I root out deception as a licensed private investigator. How can I help you?”

“We lost our dog.”

A *dog*? “Lady, I don’t do that sorta thing,” I said, getting up. I sensed on the phone she was quirky. I didn’t expect her to be crazy. Another waste of my time.

“It’s not what you think.”

“You need a pet detective,” I said. “I suggest you stay away from the ones who claim to be psychic.”

“You wrote in your book about the scams you’ve pulled,” she said. “One was pretending you found a lost dog. You claimed you were a trucker and came across the stray at a truck stop. You told the owners that you scanned their pet’s imbedded microchip for their contact info. Then you convinced the owners to wire you money to ship the dog back home.”

“I’m not proud of it, but I’ve done that.” It’s a standard scheme that depends on the gullibility of the pet owner and only good for a few hundred bucks but worth the phone call. Reach out to enough desperate folks

who've lost something they love and you're bound to find a sucker. People will shell out a fortune when it comes to pets. Veterinarians have that angle covered, that's for sure.

"That's exactly what happened to me," she said. "I wired six hundred dollars to a guy. I need you to find him."

"Understand he doesn't have your dog."

"I know. We'll probably never see Rufus again," she said, looking out to her kids. "My children miss him most of all. The day at the airport, when the crate never arrived, it really broke their hearts." She pulled out a photo to show me. "He's a purebred golden retriever, champion pedigree, and such a good dog."

"Did you go to the police?"

"They were no help."

"You wire the money through Western Union or MoneyGram?" I asked.

"Western Union. The funds weren't picked up in St. George, Utah, where he said he was. It was collected in Costa Mesa. How could I have been so stupid? It's because I'm an optimist. My flaw is that I don't see the bad in people. Cookie?" She offered a Tupperware of homemade treats.

I thanked her, accepted one, and sat down. Costa Mesa is in Orange County, less than an hour south. I'd never been there. "Where'd you post notice of your lost dog?" I asked, biting into the cookie. It was incredible, maybe the best chocolate chip cookie I've ever had; chewy but crisp around the edges.

"We posted signs around the neighborhood and went to the pound but they didn't have him."

"Classifieds? Craigslist?"

"No."

"Realize you're never going to get the money back. And the chances are . . ."

"I know," she said. "But I need to confront the man who did this. It's all about looking him in the eye to let him know how much he hurt my children. We loved our Rufus so very much," she said, getting emotional but clearly trying to hide it. "This bastard took advantage of us in our hour of weakness. He kicked us when we were down."

"It's probably best to get another pet and move on."

"It's not about Rufus. It's about settling a score," she said. "Will you help me?"

"I'm not the police. I can't have the Western Union pull surveillance video. And honestly, I'm not sure where I'd start."

"I have his name."

"I doubt this guy used his real name. Probably a stolen identity."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's what I did." She gave me a quizzical look so I continued. "I faked a postal uniform and pretended to be delivering mail. In reality I was stealing personal information, credit card statements, that sort of thing."

"I don't remember reading about that," she said, lifting the book.

"I couldn't include everything in there. Mail theft is a federal crime and the Feds don't take that stuff lightly. Last thing I need is a postal inspector looking into my business. Does your mailbox lock?"

"Yes. We live in an apartment. I have a tiny key."

"Good. Most mailboxes don't lock. All should."

She bit her lip. "Then I bet there's other activity under the alias. Maybe that's the way we track him. I would do it myself, but I don't know where to start. The cops won't help, and my ex is of no use."

Only then did I notice she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"I know it's a long shot," she continued. "If you can't help me then I'll have to find someone else who can."

"I'll need a retainer of a thousand dollars, cash," I said. I figured asking for a grand would scare her off. In my new line of work the retainer is always negotiable, and sometimes the only money I'll ever see from the client.

"Not a problem. My residual check should be coming any day now."

"Residual?"

"From the Screen Actors Guild."

"You an actress?"

"I used to be on a series before I had kids. Thank God it's still in syndication. When my check comes I can pay you."

Maybe it was the cookie she gave me. Maybe I was bored. Why I agreed to take the case I have no idea. Work had been scarce and I figured this might be another step toward my salvation. I couldn't arrest the guy, but I could give his name to the police. I could do something honorable, maybe even worthwhile.

To release cash, Western Union requires a driver's license or passport, so I returned to my office to do an online search of the name she gave me, Raymond Kling. I found a handful of Raymond Klings but none residing in Costa Mesa or Orange County. There was a doctor in Denver, a student in Seattle, and an engineer in Houston. I ran arrest records and background checks but came up with nothing.

For the scam to work you've got to convince the owner that their dog is in a distant location, the farther away the better, as long as it's believable. They're supposedly sending you the cost of a crate and a one-way plane ticket. When I ran this scam I dug up leads from newspaper classifieds and city animal control postings on the Web. The first thing I'd ask the pet owner was if they'd imbedded an identification microchip in their dog. If they said yes, I proceeded with impersonating the good Samaritan, saying I found their dog. I claimed I already spent my own money for a veterinarian to scan the chip for their contact information so right off the bat they felt they owed me something.

Dede said she'd advertised with flyers and went to the pound. My next step was the Santa Monica Animal Shelter to see if they have a lost-and-found forum.

After twenty minutes in the waiting room a tattooed administrator was available to talk to me. She was an attractive, dark-haired woman in her twenties who introduced herself as Vera even though Florence was etched on her bowling shirt. She had tattoos on each arm, but the real shame was the thorny black tattoo etched up her neck. It was off-putting and distracted from her natural beauty. I was both attracted and disappointed—but mostly disappointed.

I explained I was a private investigator looking into fraud and asked if there had been any false lost-and-found claims. She hadn't heard of any and offered to show me the animals in the shelter in the event Rufus might be there.

"Do you post the strays you find on a Web site?" I asked as we made our way to the back.

"We're not really set up for that. We give Police and Fire our inventory daily in case people contact them. Sometimes they do."

A cacophony of barks greeted us as we entered the kennel. Crates were stacked three high, one area for dogs, another for cats. Dozens of eyes followed us as we strolled through the aisles.

After more small talk there was a lull in the conversation. She asked, "Do you have love in your life?"

That caught me off guard. I hadn't known love since the fatal car crash years ago that killed my girlfriend and tweaked the bone structure in my face. That was the incident that changed me forever. I don't sleep well at night. As ridiculous as it sounds I've been diagnosed with Restless Legs Syndrome, among other things. The nightmares continue to this day. I've been seeking redemption ever since.

"Well," I stammered, "I'm not in a relationship."

"No, I'm talking about companionship. Dogs and cats offer unconditional love. Unfortunately many people are not equipped to handle an animal's needs so they end up here." We slowed at a slender dog sniffing us through the cage. "We get all kinds, huge Great Danes, tiny Chihuahuas. It seems once a TV commercial makes a breed popular we see a wave about six months later." She consulted a clipboard. "This one was found on the beach. She's a racing greyhound. Her name's Buttermilk Suzie."

The dog's ears perked up. She could tell we were talking about her.

"Suzie chased mechanical rabbits at dog tracks in Arizona," she added.

"If she's a stray then how do you know her name?" I asked.

"We do our share of detective work too." She opened the cage, reached in, and turned up Suzie's ear. Under the flap in the pink skin there was a number etched in black.

"That a tattoo?" I asked.

"When greyhounds are licensed the Racing Board etches their ID number under the ear. This is how the stewards confirm the dog set to race is the same as in the racing program. Race horses have a similar mark but it's on the inside of their lip."

"Do you think getting that tattoo hurts the dog?" I said, then immediately regretted it, having forgotten about hers.

"Dogs, like humans, have very few nerve endings in the ear. When I got my work done here," she said pointing out the tangle of black thorns up her jugular vein, "it hurt like a bitch."

I nodded, didn't know what to say, averted my gaze.

"We traced Buttermilk Suzie from the number," she said. "They e-mailed her history."

"Couldn't the Racing Board tell you who her owner is?"

"Unfortunately, no. After Buttermilk Suzie retired, the owner sold her. That's where the trail ran cold."

I reached in the cage and gave Buttermilk Suzie a light stroke on her head. She was grateful and licked my hand. "What's going to happen to these dogs?" I asked, even though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

"If not claimed or adopted, after ninety days they'll be humanely euthanized."

"Even her?"

"We've informed the Adopt a Greyhound program, but they can't harbor any more at this time. We'll try again at the end of the week."

"End of the week?"

"When her time is up."

"It's gotta be hard, I mean . . . you must get attached to some of these guys."

"We're told not to, but I can't help it," she said, emotion softening her hard exterior. "Every day more cats and dogs cross our threshold. Unfortunately, we're not able to place them all, but we do what we can."

I nodded and gave Suzie another pat on her head. She sniffed at me.

"I've got a wild idea," Vera said. "Why don't you give Buttermilk Suzie a good home?"

That's when I realized why she gave me the tour in the first place. "I can't. I'm allergic. Plus I travel way too much to have a pet," I lied.

She closed the cage. "If a golden retriever comes in, I'll let you know."

I thanked her then got the hell out of there.

My next stop was to hit the Western Union in Costa Mesa. It wasn't a full-fledged Western Union office like I expected but rather a payday loan store adjacent to a tanning salon nestled in a strip mall. The establishment offered the usual assortment of items for customers with questionable credit: pay-as-you-go cell phones, calling cards, and high interest short-term loans. Produce a pay stub and walk out with cash in your pocket. I'm certain most don't realize the money is tainted by a three hundred percent interest rate.

I waited in line behind a young Hispanic man filling out a form at the window. He wore workboots and was covered in paint. He spoke Spanish to the female clerk, a thirtysomething Latina, processing his order. Handing over cash, he was given a receipt and thanked her with "Gracias." It appeared he was sending a portion of his wages to loved ones south of the

border. I wondered who was the recipient; his wife? Parents? He clearly had love in his life. Good for him.

The clerk searched the entire database for “Raymond Kling” and came up empty.

I returned to my car and gave Dede a call.

“I’ve got nothing,” I told her, explaining the steps I’d taken. “I can continue to search, but I don’t have anything more to go on. Honestly, the chances are slim we’ll ever find him.”

“Please don’t give up,” she pleaded, “I realize I’m old-fashioned in my belief that bad people are ultimately punished for the evil they do,” she said. “If I can just call him out, let him know what he’s done and how much he’s hurt us, it’s worth every penny. Then at least I can put it to rest.”

I explained I’d keep the case open but could make no promises. She told me she was fine with that, and said, “I don’t expect we’ll ever find him, but I have to try.”

I hung up and before starting my car an idea struck me. Back in the day, when I ran schemes like this, after I’d collected I’d often celebrate with a drink or two—more often a lot more than two. Looking back it was probably so I could deaden the feelings of guilt. So I put myself in Raymond’s shoes. If I considered this storefront the scene of the crime, the actual spot where the money changed hands, then what would I do next? If I were Raymond, cash in my pocket, where would I wet the whistle?

It was obvious. The sports bar across the street was named Tailgates. I figured I’d give it a shot.

There was a good-sized afternoon crowd watching a college football game. Some sat at tables having lunch. I bellied up to the bar and nodded to the bartender, an attractive woman in her thirties wearing a football referee minidress outfit. She tossed a cardboard coaster in front of me and I ordered a Coors Light while checking my watch and pretending to be looking for someone. I drank and feigned interest in the game. I toyed with my iPhone and when the bartender returned I asked, “Was Raymond here?”

“Who?”

“Raymond Kling. He texted he’d be here. I called but got his voice mail.”

“You mean Ray King?”

King not Kling. Could it be the same guy? Brilliant. A simple typo in the spelling of your name and the bank still cashes your check. What are the chances?

“Yeah, Ray,” I said.

“Haven’t seen Ray or Gretchen today.”

I checked my watch. “I got here late.”

“He should be here for the Notre Dame game. Never misses one.”

“That makes sense,” I faked with a laugh. “I bet I mixed up the time.”

She went about her business and I used my iPhone to check the TV schedule. The Notre Dame game was about an hour away. I nursed my beer and kept an eye on the door.

Another beer and a plate of greasy hot wings later the Alabama vs.

Auburn game wrapped up and the big TV switched to Notre Dame. By then the crowd had grown considerably. The bartender cleared my plate and pointed to a tan guy in his thirties sitting at a table. There was a buxom, peroxide-haired blonde on his arm.

"There's your friend," she said.

"Right. Thanks. I didn't see him come in."

I got up and approached their table. "Ray, it's been a long time," I said. "You probably don't remember me. I'm John Brown. We went to school together." I could see he was at a loss, but he faked that he recognized me.

"John, right."

I motioned to the scar on my face. "You probably don't recognize me. I was in a car accident."

"No, I remember. Good to see ya, bro."

His lady companion held out her hand. "I'm Gretchen," she said. "Nice to meet you."

I shook and caught the scent of musky perfume. She was clearly older than him, probably eight to ten years. "Nice to meet you," I said. "Ray was a wild man back in the day," I said and turned back to him. "What have you been up to?"

"This and that."

"Cool." There was a pregnant pause—the perfect opportunity to make an exit. "I'm late for a barbecue but had to see the end of the game. Got to run. See ya around."

With that I cut out. The bartender caught my eye and I checked my watch feigning urgency for her benefit.

Next came surveillance, the worst part of being a P.I. I moved my car to allow a view of the entrance. I figured it would be a few hours, so I grabbed a taco at a nearby take-out Mexican grill and washed it down with a Sprite.

It was dusk by the time they emerged, arm in arm, body language that suggested their romantic relationship was new. They climbed into his sleek Lexus. I followed them for a couple of miles until they pulled into the driveway of a suburban home. With its manicured lawns, basketball hoops, and occasional RV it didn't make sense to me. Suburbanites aren't necessarily con men. It had to be the wrong guy.

My fascination with the alias Kling for King prompted me to check the mailbox. All mail was addressed to Gretchen Unger, nothing for him. My wheels began to turn. If he was "the guy," could he have glommed on to this divorcée, working an angle? Could Ray be her arm candy?

I called Dede. "I may have found him, but I'm not sure."

I explained the conversation I had with the bartender and how I waited for him to show up for the Notre Dame game. "It's a long shot, and probably not the guy, but you should engage him in conversation. Do you think you can recognize the voice?"

"Definitely."

"And we'll size up his reaction at that moment. That's how we'll know for sure."

She explained to make the time she'd have to juggle work and arrange a babysitter. We made plans for the following Saturday—the next Notre Dame game—at Tailgates.

I got there first. Her jalopy Chevy arrived, smoking under the hood. She climbed out, and I could see she was wearing a skirt and heels, in definite contrast to the first time we met. Her hair was down.

"You're really dressed up," I said.

"Dressed to kill," she replied.

It didn't make sense, but I figured she's an actress and it was her costume of choice. I reminded her of our plan. We'd engage Ray to see if she could recognize his voice.

"Have you been in? How do you know he's here?" she asked.

"His car," I said, pointing out the Lexus.

She laughed out of nervousness. "Of course."

Ray was seated next to Gretchen at the bar. She was sipping a margarita. He had a beer.

"That's him," I said, pointing.

She nodded and silently marched toward him. His back was turned when she stepped up.

"Ray?"

He turned, "Dede? What are you . . . ?"

He called her by name! That's when she punched him in the face. He stumbled back and knocked over his bar stool.

"Bastard! What kind of man are you?" She swiped at him more, connecting again as he tried to duck away.

"How can you neglect your own children?" she said, near tears.

I realized then that I'd been had. This guy was no stranger. He was the elusive ex-husband.

"You're a monster! A lowlife." She pointed at him and called out to the entire bar, "This man has abandoned his children. He's a psychopath, a deadbeat liar."

"Dede . . . I've been trying to . . ." he started in.

"No more lies! You're a pathetic, selfish loser, Ray. Face it. You've broken your children's hearts," she said. "How's that feel? Good?" She then turned to Gretchen. "Give it time, sister. You'll see what an asshole he is."

With that, she spun on her heels, brushed past me, and marched out the door. As I chased her out I heard a raspy, drunken voice call out, "Take care of your kids, Ray."

I caught up with Dede in the parking lot. "You lied to me."

"I'm sorry I wasn't honest, but you wouldn't have helped me if you knew he was my ex."

She had me there. I wouldn't have. "What about the dog?"

"There was never a dog. The money I wired him was a residual payment from the Screen Actors Guild."

"He's an actor too?"

"I met him doing 'the Scottish play'," she said.

"What's that?"

"*Macbeth*. Our relationship was cursed from the beginning. I should have seen the signs." She looked at me with a wry smile, a twinkle in her eye, and said, "You know I've fantasized about slapping his face for almost a year now. He avoided the warrant for wage garnishment by working under the table and dealing weed. But you found him. Thank you."

"Everything you said about Rufus being part of your family."

"I'm an actress. What can I say? Send me a bill. You'll have to get in line with everyone else though, and the list is long. Someday I'll be able to pay. Excuse me, I've got to get back to my kids."

"Wait a minute. If he owed you money in the first place why'd you send the residual?"

"You don't understand, we're actors, and it's his. He earned it. At the time I guess I thought he'd do the right thing. I was wrong."

"You really had me," I said shaking my head. "I'll give you that."

Dede pulled an electronic car key from her pocket. Ray's Lexus beeped to life and the doors unlocked. She handed me a key to her Chevy. "See that he gets that, will you?"

"This car is yours?"

"What do you think?"

The last thing I wanted to do was go back in there, but I agreed to give it to him.

"Thanks for your help, Jack," she said. "I liked your book."

She was off and left me standing there—the deception-specialist deceived.

On the drive home I made the decision. It was something Vera at the pound said about having love in my life. Why not?

At the animal shelter I paid the standard rescue fee. Vera gave me a complimentary collar and leash.

"The journey is rewarding," she said. "Show her love, and you'll see."

I found myself no longer as put off by Vera's tattoo. She thanked me and returned to her duties.

Well . . . it's a start.

Buttermilk Suzie is the newest addition to O'Shea Investigations. She sleeps a lot, under my desk mostly. I often see her dreaming in her slumber and flinching her hind legs, restless like me, chasing mechanic rabbits, no doubt. 🐾