

# BELL RINGER

An Adam Perdue Mystery

S.J. Spain

Copyright © 2024 Stephen Spain

All rights reserved

The city, characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN-979-8-9913354-3-0

Cover design by: Ivan, Bookcoversart.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024917681

Printed in the United States of America; Published in Wilmington, NC

*This book is dedicated to all who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness and those who provide them aid and comfort.*

*Special thanks to my beta readers and editors extraordinaire: Beth Cameron and John Hill.*

*Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in*

LEONARD COHEN

## *HANDS OFF*

I don't recommend sleeping on the street in Orman. The summers are scorching, the winters are frigid, and it's humid all year round. The metal bench I was curled up on was as hard and cold as a mortuary slab. A blanket, long underwear, and wool gloves made it almost bearable.

I was looking for a woman no one really wanted found. Michelle Rathborn was one of three surviving children of Charles Rathborn, founder of the Quickie Buy chain of convenience stores. Quickie Buy stores are located in the more marginal neighborhoods of Orman and a couple of other nearby towns.

The stores' losses from shoplifting and hold-ups are more than made up for by the huge mark-ups on their merchandise – and the lack of any competition in the areas where they did business. Most of their customers refer to the local franchise as the “Stab & Grab.”

Michelle was the sole beneficiary of her father's majority stake in the operation. Her brothers weren't happy that they were required to try and find her if they wanted to challenge the will expeditiously. They had cheered up a little when the deceased's brother and executor, whom they called “Uncle Unctuous,” had made it clear that proof of death would be even better than finding her.

With the information her loving siblings provided, it hadn't taken me long to follow the tracks of the prodigal daughter's downward spiral from two tours as a decorated medic in Afghanistan to just one more entry on Orman's annual count of the homeless. I had traced her to the night shelter at the Veterans Assistance Center over by the bus station, but she had been tossed out of there a week before for drinking.

One of the other residents had told me that Michelle liked to sleep in a dead-end alley in Village South. The Village is a sixteen-square-block area that morphed from squalor to gentrification and back again several times over the last few decades. It finally settled in as an upscale artists' enclave, with a subculture of illicit drugs and sex that its residents protected as fiercely as they did the art deco facades on some of the brownstones. For the third night in a row, I pretended to sleep while watching the mouth of the alley.

An owl appeared in a patch of sky between two buildings, wings outstretched and rigid, diving in an arc that brought it over a dumpster. It dropped and then rose with its wings beating, a squirming rat clutched in its talons. Who needs television? I had the Raptor Channel streaming live right in front of me.

Someone must have been messing with the remote, because a car turned the corner, high beams bouncing and tires squealing. The startled owl dropped its prey and disappeared into the night. The car, a black limousine, pulled up along the sidewalk and stopped.

The back door opened, and a passenger emerged and walked toward the alley. The driver stayed inside, hidden behind the tinted glass. I couldn't get a good look at the passenger, either, who was wearing a long raincoat with a raised collar. It could have been Rathborn. Of course, it could have been almost anyone. It didn't figure that a homeless addict would arrive by limo to sleep in her favorite alley, but it was an excuse to get up and move around.

In case it was just a smallish guy who needed to take a leak, I paused for a minute before walking toward the alley entrance, blanket wrapped tightly around me. Anyone who's ever been homeless knows the trick to using a blanket as a coat is to hold one corner from the long side tightly in each hand and then cross your arms over your chest. When you uncross them, you look a bit like Dracula opening his cape. That's not the worst look to have when you're living on the street.

I shuffled along in the controlled stagger of someone who is used to being drunk, ignoring the limo. Enough of the streetlights in the alley were still working for me to see that it was empty. It was lined with trash cans set outside sturdy metal doors. Whoever was in the car must have gone into one of the townhouses. Not Michelle. Not my business. I turned to go, and a movement on the ground caught my eye.

It was the rat, squirming on its back like a flipped over turtle trying to regain its feet. As I watched, the rat stopped struggling and lay still, chest rising and falling rapidly. One eye was gone, and the other was staring at

me. Not glancing in my general direction, or looking at something beyond me, but staring me straight in the eye. Blood pulsed from a hole in its neck, beading up into a blob and dissipating into its fur.

I steeled myself to walk past. After all, it was just a rat. If not for the limo's sudden arrival, it would already be owl chow. As I moved away, the rat's one eye followed me like one of those creepy paintings in an old horror movie. I suddenly had a vision of myself wrapping the rat in my blanket and walking into Mercy Hospital with it. That would be a hoot. Much hilarity would ensue as hospital security tried to figure out a way to make me leave without actually touching me or my rodent patient.

The demand for emergency mental health beds in Orman so outstrips the supply that I wouldn't even be in the running for one. A derelict seeking medical attention for a wounded rat fell into the psychiatric category of "catch and release." The mental health issues involved are too small to put him in the live well. He has to be unhooked and returned to the stream so his mania can mature and spawn before finally making its way to the therapeutic dinner table.

Maybe the rat would just die. It was bleeding a lot. How long could it last? Maybe it was dead already? I squatted down. It wasn't dead, and its eye was still fixed on me. It was wheezing as it breathed: "Ehee, ehee, ehee." I reached out and put one hand over the rat's chest, firmly pinning its body to the ground, and with the other I twisted its head sharply. The squeaking stopped.



I carried the rat to the dumpster and placed it inside. It wasn't a very dignified send-off, but a full dumpster has got to be about as close as it gets to heaven for a rat. I considered tossing the bloody gloves in, too, but it was cold and I still had several hours to go on the stakeout.

I walked to the end of the alley and back before stretching out on the bottom step of the brownstone nearest the dumpster. I could see the entire alley and was sheltered from the wind. It was more comfortable than the bench, and I dozed off for a while.

A door slammed shut in the alley behind me. I got to my feet, leaned against the dumpster, and muttered to myself. I heard footsteps coming closer, the hard slap of real leather soles against cobble stones. Not Michelle. Probably the limo passenger.

Professional curiosity required that I try and get a look to be certain. I pushed myself away from the dumpster and turned. It was a man, slightly built, and as he passed me, his lips twitched in what could have been a smile. He looked familiar somehow, like someone I knew who had changed his hair style, or shaved off a beard, or usually wore glasses. I couldn't place him, but I knew the guy from somewhere.

He was out of the alley before I could call out to him or catch up and get another glimpse of his face. An engine roared. The limo came flying forward, jumped the curb, and crushed the man against a building. I stepped back behind the dumpster faster than my brain could articulate the thought, "What the fuck?"

The limo backed off, and the man crumpled to the ground. The driver got out, a pistol in his left hand and a hatchet in his right. He stared down the alley, and I willed myself to become one with the dumpster. It must have worked, because he didn't come and shoot me or hack me to death. There was a pop followed by two thumps.

I wasn't exactly frozen with fear, though I was definitely cold and plenty afraid. It was more that I was stuck in fight-or-flight mode, with neither option holding any appeal. My gun was in a car that was parked two blocks away. The only way out of the alley was about twenty feet from the guy who was currently giving new meaning to the phrase "full-service limo driver."

Dropping into a crouch, I poked my head out from behind the dumpster. The driver was bent over the body. I could hear the purr of the limo engine and something else. Whistling. The sick son-of-a-bitch was whistling.

He wiped the hatchet blade on the dead man's coat and wrapped something in a towel. He stood up, looked at the body for a moment, and nodded. He popped the trunk and deposited the towel before getting back in the driver's seat. The limo backed off the curb and roared away. I stared at the back bumper through a cloud of exhaust. The license plate was covered with mud.

I pulled out my phone, hit 911, ignored the operator's questions, gave her the location, and said only "Hit and run. Gunshot." I closed the call and walked over to the body. I really wanted another look at his face, to see if I could place him. Half of his head and face was a bloody

mess. I stared at the other half, squinted, tilted my head one way and then the other, trying to isolate whatever was familiar, but I couldn't quite get it. I knew this guy. Not well, maybe. But I knew him. I moved closer and bent down. Still nothing.

The sound of sirens drawing closer caused me to straighten up and take stock of my situation. I was standing in a pool of blood. My foot was right next to one of the coat cuffs – where a hand should have been. I stepped back and looked at the man's other arm. That hand was missing, too. The pop had been a gunshot to the face, from inside his mouth by the looks of it, and the thumps had been the hatchet hacking off his hands.

The first officers arrived on the scene before I'd gotten more than a few feet from the body. Reasonably enough, they pulled their guns and shouted for me to raise my hands and get down on the ground. They looked scared.

Being a patrol cop is 95% boredom and 5% terror. Bored cops can be open to conversation and sometimes even argument. Not frightened cops, though. It's best to do exactly as you're told and keep your mouth shut until absolutely certain that they aren't afraid anymore. I raised my hands in the air and knelt on the ground.

They cuffed me, bagged my hands and feet, and put me in the back of a squad car. The bags would preserve the evidence on my bloody gloves and shoes until I got to the station. More importantly to the no-longer scared and therefore now-bored cops, they prevented a mess in

the back of the car that would have to be dealt with at the end of their shift.

## *PIE HAS CHARMS*

From the outside, the Orman Police Headquarters is a stately building that fits in perfectly with the courthouse and City Hall across the street. It features marble steps leading up to a columned archway, and the sign over the entrance is polished copper. Inside, it looks pretty much like every other police station I've ever seen, with scuffed metal furniture, scratched tile floors, and sagging walls coated in peeling layers of once-white paint.

A not so polished copper sat across from me in the interrogation room. Detective Woodward "Woody" Wales was familiar to anyone working either side of the law in Orman. Crooks hated his guts, and other cops hated him just a little less. Folks like me tried to stay clear of him.

Word is that his mother's the only one in the world who ever has a kind word for him, and even then, it's usually followed by a muttered, "Asshole!" and a slap to the back of his head.

I was still cuffed, but the bags had been removed, along with my gloves and shoes. The linoleum under my stockinged feet was warm. There must have been a heating pipe running underneath the floor. It felt nice.

"So, we've had a busy night, have we, Perdue?" He lowered himself into a chair on the other side of the table. The chair had no arms, which was good, because Woody is a very large man.

"Just the usual."

He gave me a look that I imagine he usually reserves for a smear of dog poop found on the sole of one of his favorite shoes. Woody's chair wasn't bolted to the floor, and it had a lot of suspicious scuffs and scratches on it. I found myself hoping that someone was on the other side of the wall-length mirror, hopefully Lieutenant Squire. She and I are friends. I think.

"It's rat's blood, you know, on the gloves." I got only a stare in reply. At first glance, I may have seemed like a pretty good suspect, standing over the body in a pool of the victim's blood. It was readily apparent on second glance, third at the most, though, that I didn't do it – at least, not alone.

The man had been nearly cut in two by a vehicle, shot, and partially dismembered. My undamaged car was parked two blocks away. I didn't have a gun or anything with which to perform amputations, and when told to put my hands up, I had only the regular complement of two with which to comply.

"Let's cut to the chase, Perdue. You were found on the scene, your hands covered in blood, with your bloody shoeprints all around the body. I have a lot of questions, and you better have a lot of answers. Got it, Shit-for-brains?"

I nodded.

"OK, then. Where are the victim's hands?"

"I don't know."

Woody brought a grapefruit-sized fist down on the table. "*I don't know* is not an acceptable answer! Try again."

I shrugged. "The guy who killed him must have taken them, I suppose. He wrapped something in a towel and tossed it in the trunk of the limo."

"You saw this guy who you say killed him?"

I nodded.

He brought both fists down this time. "No nodding, no shrugging, no batting your pretty eyes at me. Use your words. When I ask a question, you answer it, nice and loud and clear. Understand?"

I caught a nod halfway and answered a little too loudly, "Yes, I understand!"

Woody wasn't sure if the extra volume was the result of defiance or fear, but he let it go. "What did this mystery perp look like?"

"I didn't get a good look at him. He was wearing a coat and a hat, and I was a couple hundred feet away. I'd guess he was a little under six feet, medium build maybe – but, again, with the coat it was kind of hard to tell."

"White, black, or other?"

"Dark."

"Dark, huh? Black, Hispanic, or Asian?"

"His coat?"

“The man, Jerk-off!”

"I don't – uh, I couldn't tell. I told you I never saw his face. His coat was dark, though. Navy, dark gray, black. Something like that."

"Well, I'd better get a BOLO out right away! 'Be on the lookout for an average height man of average build and unknown race. May be wearing a dark coat.' We'll have him in cuffs in no time! You're sure it was a man, though, right?"

"Well, not certain, I guess. He moved like a man. But I'm not even sure what that means. It was just my impression that it was a man."

Woody raised his arms, fists clenched. They hung in the air for a moment, and then he lowered them slowly and placed them behind his head, where most people's neck would be, and rubbed the back of his head and shoulders.

"We're going to try one more time. You're going to give me answers that mean something – answers that get you or somebody else in front of a judge and jury asking for mercy – or you're going to be held for as long as the law allows before we charge you. No bail, no phone call, nothing but the company of some drunks and druggies for the next 36 hours. Now tell me what the hell happened out there!"

I walked him through it: the stakeout, the owl and the rat show, the whole thing. He stopped me a couple of times to ask more questions for which I had no answers,



but mostly just let me tell my story – as he should have done in the first place.

He had to know that I'm a private detective in good standing – or at least as good standing as any dick could be with the "real" police. He also had to know that no gun had been found on the scene, no implement that could have amputated the victim's hands, and no car that could have cut him in half. The odds were pretty slim that I had conspired with someone else and then hung around to talk to the police. He was just yanking my chain, because that's what assholes do. I pitied his mother.

After a few more minutes of repeated questions, including his favorite "Where are his hands?" the door opened and Squire came in.

"Do you have what you need for the moment, Woody?"

"As much as I'm going to get, I guess. Not exactly the observant type, this one." He shrugged and flipped his notebook closed. "This case is going to be a major pain in the ass. Respected citizen cut nearly in half, shot, and mutilated, and we've got nothing? I'm glad you're the one who gets to handle the media pricks, Lieutenant – and the dick pricks, too." He threw a last glare in my direction and headed for the door.

"The cuffs, Woody." I held my hands out. Woody glanced at Squire, who nodded, and then removed them.

After a shower, change of clothes and a quick check-in with Uncle Unctuous, I met Squire for coffee and cherry pie at Tuck's Diner. Tuck's Diner is a converted rail car. It's been a long time since Orman had passenger rail service, but when you sit in Tuck's you can almost hear the rhythmic chugging of a coal-fired engine and feel the gentle sway of a dining car.

That's because there's an appliance manufacturer next door with a metal-stamping machine that runs all day and most of the night, and the whole car rocks every time a customer enters or exits using the original metal steps.

Squire slid into the booth across from me. She moved with the grace of an athlete, which she had been in college: basketball and volleyball. She wore a well-tailored suit and a pleated Oxford shirt that shouted "white collar professional." The sidearm holstered under her left shoulder spoke more softly but delivered a stronger message.

"This is a fine mess you've gotten yourself into, isn't it Adam?"

"Well, this mess just kinda found me." I took another bite of pie, chewed it slowly, and swallowed with satisfaction. I figure Tuck's cherry pie is one item that is on the menu in both rat and people heaven. Not a crumb of it ever makes it into a dumpster. "Thanks for getting me out of there. If Woody had asked me where the guy's hands are one more time..."

"Woody's an ass, but he's a pretty good cop. I doubt he ever thought you had anything to do with it. Which is

more than I can say for me, when I first saw you. I thought you had finally lost it and gone all Hannibal Lecter on us. You were a sight. If not for the quick and dirty lab report that the blood on your gloves wasn't human, I'd have been leaning on you harder than he did."

"Yeah, I didn't consider how the homeless look would work against me if there was trouble. It's great for stake outs, though. Nobody even sees homeless people."

"Except for cops."

"And social workers, sometimes."

Squire knew this wasn't my favorite subject. I had spent my first couple of years in Orman on the street. Not technically homeless much of the time, but pretty hard to distinguish.

"Speaking of stake outs.... What can you tell me about your client?"

"Everything I know. He was happy to be helpful to the police, once I had given him a few lurid details about the murder." I gave Squire the rundown, and she seemed to be in agreement that my case had nothing to do with the murder. Just me being in exactly the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. Everybody has talents, and that's one of mine.

"You really strangled a rat?" she asked, before shoveling in a huge forkful of pie.

"Broke his neck. He was dying, and in pain. Hell, it just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I didn't

know some crazy son of a bitch with a hand fetish was about to drop a corpse in my lap."

"I've seen lots of owls around downtown. Eagles and hawks, too. We raze the forests and crush the cliffs into sand to make lumber and concrete for our buildings. Then the birds of prey wind up building their nests on the ledges of our high rises. There's something poetic about that."

Danielle Squire's that rare cop who has a thoughtful side and isn't embarrassed to show it. Her reputation as someone who thinks hard about things got her to her current rank of lieutenant fast. Normally, it would also put a pretty low ceiling on her career, as anything higher usually requires the kind of political instincts that aren't compatible with being thoughtful. Somehow, though, Squire manages to please her superiors and earn the respect of her subordinates – without pissing off either.

"Well, Woody was right about one thing," she sighed. "This is going to be a media cluster fuck. No one's got the story yet, but once the interns check out the morning blotter, I'll have print, TV, and the whole social media brigade on my ass. Even I would want to know the story about this one."

"Woody said the vic was somebody. Who was it?"

"According to the license and credit cards in his wallet, a guy named Ellis Bell. He's some kind of hotshot investment advisor."

"Maybe that's why he looked familiar. His face show up in the paper a lot, or maybe on TV?"

Squire shrugged. "He was a one-man shop with a few very big clients, as I hear it. More about discretion than self-promotion. Honestly, I don't know much about him, though." She took an 8x10 glossy photo out of her folder and slid it across the table to me. "That the guy you saw last night?"

The photo was a professional head shot, crisply focused against a soft gray background. Bell was a decent looking guy, with thick dark hair sculpted into a wave that started at the part and crested just above his ear. His nose was large for his face and a little crooked. It certainly looked like the guy I saw, at least the way he looked before he had half his face blown away. But something was off. I shook my head and slid the photo back.

"Yeah, that looks like him, but I couldn't swear to it."

Squire tucked the photo away. "His wife, who was soon to be his ex-wife according to his lawyer, is going to try and ID him at the morgue, but as you know...."

"Yeah, not a lot to look at there. Maybe he's got a tattoo or birthmark that she can confirm."

We ate and drank in companionable silence for a few minutes. I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew the victim, but I don't know any investment advisors. "You gonna look at the wife for hiring it out, Squire? Or are you thinking he pissed off a client?"

"No telling at this point. He sure pissed somebody off."

"Taking his hands is weird, and so is sticking the gun in his mouth and blowing half his face away instead of a quick shot to the temple. Why take the time to do that? He had to be trying to make it hard to ID the vic."

"Could be. But according to your statement, it only took a few seconds. Bang, chop, chop! And if they wanted to stall us IDing him, it was pretty careless to leave his wallet." Squire stood up and dropped a five on the table. "I've got to get back to headquarters. Good luck finding the Stab & Grab heiress."

## TEAM GINGER

She walked in to my office like she was walking right off a yacht.

On a plank.

She elbowed the door open, avoiding the doorknob. It's antique brass, with a splotchy patina of *verdi gris*. I think it gives the place some class.

The tall redhead stepped gingerly toward my desk, her high heels maneuvering around the more obvious stains on the carpet. I keep promising myself to replace it with laminate after my next big case. But I don't really have big cases.

Her head swiveled between the two available chairs in front of my desk, clearly unhappy with the selection. I stood up and waved at the offending furniture with what I thought could reasonably pass as graciousness.

“Please, have a seat Ms. –?”

“Forris. Gayle Forris. You are Mr. Perdue?” She remained standing. She had a lovely English accent, the kind you hear on the BBC or on a GPS instructing you to “turn left on Main Street and then right on Front.”

“I am, though you can call me Adam.” I sat on the edge of the desk, splitting the distance between remaining on my feet and sitting back down. “And what can I do for you, Ms. Forris?”

"I am hoping that you can locate my, uh, partner, Trent Argent." She didn't add, "And call me Gayle."

I found myself wanting to call her Gayle.

"What sort of partner is Mr. Argent? Business? Romantic? Your partner in crime, perhaps?"

"We live together, and we are romantically involved."

I sighed. It didn't look like I'd be getting to call her Gayle anytime soon. "Domestic cases are not my area of expertise." I indicated the card holder on the desk and she took one.

"Adam Perdue. LSI, Inc.," she read aloud. "Specialists in finding misplaced persons." She threw me a 100-watt smile that made me want to find a puddle just so I could throw my jacket over it in an act of unprovoked chivalry. She self-consciously lowered the wattage. "Misplaced persons?"

"Missing people no one really misses, mostly insurance and probate beneficiaries who can't be located, spouses who haven't signed their divorce papers, that sort of thing. Clients pay me to find them, so they can get signatures and close the file. It's my niche. I can recommend an agency that is very good with domestic cases, if you'd like."

I didn't want her to leave, but it probably would be better for everyone if she did before Julia returned from lunch. Julia is my assistant, and we were once "uh, partners." Our personal relationship is complicated, and



we carry what is probably an unhealthy load of jealousy and protectiveness toward one another.

With impeccable timing, Julia threw open the outer office door and breezed in. "I'm back!" she shouted, lowering her voice at the end, when she saw that I was with a client.

"Can you bring us a couple of cards for agencies that do domestic cases?"

"Pervy stuff or garden variety?"

I inclined my head toward Ms. Forris, who rolled her eyes.

"This is not a domestic case." She demonstrated her resolve not to be talked out the door by swallowing her distaste and lowering herself into one of the visitor chairs. Her bottom seemed to hover just over the cracked leather cushion rather than settle into it, but I got the message.

Julia retreated and gave me a look that let me know that she had noticed me eyeing our client's backside. Of course, I noticed her admiring it, too. Like I said, complicated.

"No offense, Ms. Forris, but missing boyfriends usually turn up. How long has he been gone?"

"Since Sunday. Three days. And his car is still parked in front of our flat. The police took a report yesterday but made it quite clear that they don't intend to do anything about it."

I nodded. "They have higher priorities. It's like if you call the fire department to get your cat out of a tree. They'll tell you that they've never found a cat skeleton in a tree and that when it gets hungry, it'll find its way home. It's a fair assumption that the same holds true for boyfriends."

"I got that impression. There are some special circumstances in Trent's case. That's why they recommended I come to you."

"And what are the special circumstances?"

"Trent works at the Veterans Assistance Center, night shift at the shelter. A couple of weeks ago, one of the regulars disappeared. He didn't think much of it at first. But this particular client receives a monthly disability check. When that arrived and a few more days passed without him making an appearance, Trent started asking around about him."

"Do you know the client's name?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I don't remember. Trent told me, but..."

She flushed from her forehead to her neck. I caught myself wondering how much lower the blush might go.

"... I didn't think it was important at the time, so it didn't register."

"Of course. Go on." I thought it was cute that she was embarrassed not to remember a homeless guy's name. Of course, I probably would have thought it was cute if she hocked up a loogie and spit it on the floor.