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CASE OF THE  
RUNAWAY  
ORGANGUTAN

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CASE OF THE  
RUNAWAY  
ORANGUTAN

A JAMES CARTWRIGHT PI  
MYSTERY

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BOOK THREE

Oliver Dean Spencer



ORIGINAL  
PRESS

for my brothers  
joseph, frank, and dean

*Lasting change is a series of compromises. And compromise is all right, as long your values don't change.*

Jane Goodall

# CHICAGO



# 01

HE FELL DOWN HARD—stone-cold dead, next to my feet. It didn't take much—just a pull of the trigger. The way I figured; a bullet always had its way of settling things. It asked no questions. Just did what it was told. And I hadn't planned on resolving my disagreement with the Thin Man that way. But he left me no choice. He pulled his Luger, deciding that one of his .28s was the only way to resolve the issue. Trouble was, he missed. But a .22 from my Colt didn't.

I called Lieutenant Ant over at the 3rd precinct to fill him in on the unfortunate turn of events. I told him where to find me, along with the stiff. I explained how I'd been working on a case involving an embezzler who I'd been tracking for a client. How it didn't turn out so good for him. In his usual huff and puff manner, he told me to hold tight, and he'd be there in ten. It turned out to be more like an hour, plus another two for his relentless questions. But finally, he let me go, satisfied with my side of the story. By the time I got back to my office, I was spent and had planned to head home right after. But in my line of work, nothing was ever straightforward.

I found her already seated there in my office; her back to me in the chair reserved for potential clients. When it came to new clients; first impressions and a healthy dose of skepticism were always in order. Except, everything about this unexpected visitor was telling me to turn and run. But I couldn't. It may have had something to do with those long, slender, aquiline pair of legs. The way they hung in a precarious and seductive angle from the edge of the wood-backed chair. Or her emerald, green eyes that had me transfixed, the way a tiger to its prey, seconds before it's about to pounce.

"Are you James Cartwright, the private investigator," she asked. A hint of a southern drawl coloring her voice.

"I am."

"And how does one go about hiring you?"

"They tell me a story, and if I figure there's something to it, I go from there."

"Very well, Mr. Cartwright—"

"Call me, James," I said, cutting in.

"I'd prefer to keep this formal. You know, so there's no misunderstanding," she retorted, accompanied by a wry smile.

"Of course, Miss..."

"Miss Stonewall," she threw out, not offering up her first name. It seemed she was serious about the formality. That was never a good sign. Experience told me she was hiding something—either her actual name or the true reason for her visit. Again, the thought crossed my mind to get out while I still could. But I suffered from two major personality traits. One was curiosity, the other, women. The combination of the two had gotten me in more hot water than I cared to remember.

"All right, Miss Stonewall," emphasizing her last name, "how can I help you?"

"Well, I'm sure you heard about the orangutan that escaped from the Chicago Zoo last week."

“Sure, it was all over the papers,” I said, surprised, and wondering what a missing orangutan had to do with me—especially one that escaped from a zoo three-hundred miles away.

“I represent The Mutual Trust Insurance Company. We insured the orangutan,” she explained, handing me a business card. I took it, giving it a once over. Her name and contact details were centered on the card in raised black ink. It still didn’t mean she was legit.

“So, what’s this orangutan worth?” I asked.

“About a hundred thousand.”

“Wow. That’s one expensive ape.”

“Yes, it is,” she returned with a faded smile.

“Any idea how and why it escaped?”

“The how, yes. The why, we still have no idea. The primatologist who cares for the orangutan discovered her escape route.”

“So, the ape’s female?”

“Yes, her name's Samantha or Sam for short. And this wasn’t the first time she tried to escape. She was good at it. But in every case, she wouldn’t wander far. And she always returned.”

“Except this time.”

“Exactly. No one’s sure why.”

“But I still don’t get what this has to do with me. I usually handle local cases, especially of the homo sapiens variety.”

“Sam was last spotted near a local park right here in your city,” she said, ignoring my rebuttal.

“That’s a hell of a way to travel, even for an ape,” I said.

“Agreed. Which got me thinking.”

“What? That she was kidnapped?”

“Sure, why not? The zoo would pay a sizable fee to get her back. Sam’s from the endangered Sumatran species. Less than eight thousand remain. It’d be an arduous process replacing her. Also, the zoo recently acquired a four-year-old orangutan from the Basel Zoo. They hoped that

Sam would act as its surrogate parent. The two seemed to bond well. Then Sam disappeared.”

“Where exactly is this Basel Zoo,” I asked, exposing my ignorance about zoos and geography.

“In Switzerland, of course,” she answered with a smug smile.

“Right. But what if Sam and this youngster didn’t bond as well as everyone thought? And Sam hightailed it out of there, hitching a ride on the first train out of Chicago.”

“Anything is possible but highly unlikely.” A twisted smirk followed her words at such an absurd suggestion.

“Whatever the case may be, I still don’t figure how I fit into all this. I track people, not animals. Besides, you’re not sure if someone took her. It’s only one of several possibilities.”

“Such as?”

“I’d have to give it some thought.”

“This may help change your mind,” she said, passing a plain white envelope across the desk toward me. I picked it up and had a peek inside. A quick count told me there were close to five thousand dollars in small bills held up in there. “There’s another five once you find Sam,” she added.

“I see. But if I were to take this case, I’d prefer payment by check.” As I passed the envelope back toward her, I added, “that way, everything remains above board. As you pointed out earlier, there wouldn’t be any chance for any misunderstandings.”

“I apologize if I’ve offended you, Mr. Cartwright. But I was under the impression that you preferred this method of payment.”

“Oh, yeah. By whom?”

“That’s not important,” she said, deflecting my question, “but finding Sam is. Will you take the case?”

“Let’s just say I’ll look into it and let you know.”

“That’s all I ask,” she answered, offering one final intoxicating smile. Then pulling out her checkbook, she wrote me a personal check to replace the five thousand dollars in cash. I couldn’t help wondering who suggested paying me off. I’d hold back cashing the check until I could be sure she was on the level. Either way, she’d piqued my curiosity. And once that happened, I was like a mad dog craving a bone—nothing would stop me.

# 02

MISS STONEWALL left me the contact details of the primatologist in charge of Sam. Her name was Piña Cordell. I contacted her before leaving the office. She was amicable to meeting with me. The three-hour drive to the Chicago Zoo was uneventful. Once there, I made myself known at the front gates and asked to see her. After a ten-minute wait, she showed. I pegged her to be in her early thirties, thin, attractive, and intelligent, with an olive skin complexion. But it was her eyes that caught my attention. They were full of light and optimism, which was a rare sighting back home in the Motor City. Her shoulder-length black hair hung furtively across her thin shoulders. She was sporting a dark blue blouse, accented by floral patterns, tucked into a pair of jeans.

“Hi. You must be Mr. Cartwright,” she said, as she walked toward me with her hand extended.

“Please, call me, James,” taking her slender hand into mine. By her expression, I assumed I had gripped it too hard. “Sorry,” I said, apologizing.

“You have quite the handshake, James,” offering a playful smile with her words.

“Comes with the territory,” I said, sounding foolish. I found myself nervous around her.

“So, how can I help in locating Sam?”

“Well...” I started, trying to regain some composure. “Miss Stonewall told me this wasn’t the first time Sam escaped.”

“That’s correct.”

“But this is a first for her not coming back.”

“Yes.”

“What’s so different about this time? Did the baby chimp have something to do with it?”

“It’s a baby orangutan,” she said correcting me, “and they’re very different from chimpanzees.”

“Yeah, I kinda knew that.”

“His name is Ombak,” offering an understanding smile, “the baby orangutan, that is. It derives from the Malay word, which means waves. Come, let me introduce him to you.”

We made our way through the zoo’s inner sanctum—a maze of enclosures that housed its inhabitants. On the way, we passed a proud of lions, a pair of zebras, and a giraffe—who I thought was sticking its neck out a bit too far. A peacock flashed its brilliant plume as we approached, hoping to attract a mate. I wasn’t sure if his interest was in Piña or me. Finally, we came to our intended destination.

Ombak was on his back, having tucked himself away in the corner, most likely sleeping. Our approach had awakened him. He moved to the center of his enclosure to check us out. His fur was bright orange, and he had a pair of the longest arms I’d ever seen.

“He’s very cute, in an orangutan kind of way,” I said.

“What? As in a face, only a mother could love?” she teased.

“Yeah. Something along those lines.” I replied, figuring I should probably be more careful with my remarks about her orangutans. She seemed very fond of them. And I figured she did like their looks.

Noticing my expression, she broke out into light laughter. I followed suit. Once the moment passed, I got back to the matter at hand.

“So, what was it you were saying about how Sam escaped?”

“Orangutans are intelligent and quite clever. I’m not sure how much you know about them.”

“I must confess. Nothing at all. I haven’t even seen one up close till now.”

“That’s a shame. We’d all be better off as a species if we spent even a few hours with them.”

“That may be true, but I could think of a few other things that could help straighten this world out.”

“What’s that?” she asked, intrigued.

“For one, teaching our kids to value life over money.”

“How so?”

“The way I figure, the biggest reason for crime usually comes down to one thing—greed. Or to put it another way, a sense of entitlement. We seem to breed this idea into our kids. By the time they’re adults, all they’ve got on their minds is to succeed, at whatever cost.”

“Why, you’re a romantic, Mr. Cartwright?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I see myself more a realist.”

“They’re the flip side of the same coin.”

“Haven’t given it much thought.” I lied. And for the life of me, I wasn’t sure why. Long ago I concluded I was neither a realist nor a romantic, but a hardened cynic—it was the only thing that kept me alive.

“You’re wrong about kids today,” she said, cutting into my thoughts. “Sure, some grow up believing themselves entitled. But millions live their lives in dire poverty. This is very true here in your country.”

“My country? What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not from the States?” I asked, taken by her assertion. She noted my reaction, but it didn’t seem to bother her.



“No, I was born in Ecuador. My family moved here when I was twelve. And I’ve never applied for citizenship. My conscience won’t allow it, not until things change.”

“Hey, I know we have problems, but so do most other countries,” I threw back a bit too defensively. Part of that had to do with my anger over the President’s latest policy changes. The guy seemed hell-bent on destroying the country from the inside out. “Wouldn’t being an American citizen allow you opportunities? Such as a secure job, research grants, and being part of the change.”

“Of course, it would. But then again, everything comes at a price, including the added pressure to alter one’s scientific findings. But by not committing to any one country, I’m free to follow my spirit and maintain a certain autonomy.”

“I appreciate and respect your convictions,” I said, wanting to defuse the situation. But if experience had taught me anything; it’s one thing to believe, and quite another to sustain it. A few seconds of uncomfortable silence followed. I broke it with a question. “You were about to tell me about Sam’s escape.”

“Yes. Well...” she said, giving me a questioning glance as a mother to a child. I could tell she wanted to discuss things further but decided against it. “What makes orangutans so unique are their abilities to conceptualize situations and resolve mathematical puzzles. Unlike other apes, orangutans take time to resolve problems rather than jump right in.”

“How's that?”

“Take, for example, those peg board puzzles. You know the ones where you have to slot different pegs into their appropriate holes?”

“I always get them confused,” I said, attempting a bit of humor.

“Somehow I doubt that.” There was that smile again. At least the coolness I was feeling moments earlier was thawing.

“No, it’s true,” I teased, “I’ve never been good with objects, but give me suspects, well that’s another thing. But as you were saying?”

Before answering, she gave me another of her inquisitive stares. Most likely, still uncertain what to make of me. “Well, chimps and gorillas will jam the peg into every prospective slot. More of a trial-and-error approach. Whereas orangutans will sit with each peg for some time. They'll smell it, play with it, even rub it against their fur as they glance back and forth from the peg to the board. Then once they resolved the puzzle; they'd slot the peg in the correct hole.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.” The glow of excitement was back in her eyes. “And that's what makes me so angry that Sam's gone. If something's happened to her, it will be another blow to her species. They are close to extinction, you know. When they're gone, we'll be losing a key part of our evolutionary puzzle.”

“The insurance lady figures someone may have grabbed her. What's your take on that?”

“It's a strong possibility but it's strange how it coincides with Ombak's arrival. Sam would never desert him. It goes against her maternal and instinctive nature.”

I was about to lecture her on how many times such instincts go sideways when something caught my eye. It appeared to be glimmering from the straw-lined floor of Ombak's cage.

“Listen, do you mind if I have a peek inside the cage?” I asked.

“Sure, I don't see why not? I'll go in first and comfort Ombak while you do your thing,” offering a conspiratorial smile.

She made her way to the baby orangutan, whispering comforting words. It seemed to work. Ombak immediately moved toward her. That wasn't the case when I entered. Ombak's bright suspect eyes locked onto my every move. Piña seeing his reaction motioned me to come toward them. She then asked me to hold out my palm. I did as she asked. Ombak brought his palm towards mine, sliding it over and cocking his head to one side, and giving my face a once over. He seemed satisfied that I

didn't present any danger. Or he figured that my ugly mug was also one that only a mother could love. Either way, he turned his attention back to Piña.

I moved to the place where I had spotted the reflection. I pulled back some straw, revealing a small object. Holding it between my index finger and thumb, I brought it eye level to have a closer look. If I didn't know any better, it looked like a diamond. I wasn't an expert on such matters, but judging from its brilliance and clarity, the item could be worth a bundle.

# 03

ONCE BOTH PIÑA and I were back outside the cage, I showed her what I'd found.

“Wow. Do you think it’s real? And how did it get here?”

“I’ll have an expert look at it, but my gut’s telling me it’s the genuine article. In terms of how it got there, your guess is as good as mine. But I have some theories.”

“Such as?”

“First, let me ask you. When did Ombak arrive?”

“About a week ago.”

“And Sam disappeared just after. Right?”

“Yes. What are you getting at, James? That this diamond has something to do with her disappearance?”

“The timeline fits.”

“But I still don’t see how this has to do with Sam's disappearance.”

“The insurance lady said that Ombak came from the Basel Zoo,” I pressed on.

“Yes.”

“And what protocols are at play with such transfers?”

“Well, the usual stuff. Documents such as a chain of custody, certification to the animal's health and—”

“What about accessories?” I asked, cutting her off.

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not sure about orangutans, but we humans need things like shoes and clothing. But we also require comfort to get us through hard times.”

“Depends on who you ask about needing clothes,” she answered, throwing in a playful grin. “But yes, Ombak had a large stuffed pink pig he'd cuddle and fall asleep with.”

“Next you're going to tell me that his favorite group was Pink Floyd.”

“You're into your pop culture, James.”

“Sure. Who doesn't know about that humongous pink pig that the band floated around during their gigs? Besides, some of my best friends are pigs, having been one myself,” I said. “Anyway, I try to keep with the latest fads, though jazz—Coltrane and Miles are more my cup of tea.

“I'm more of a classical gal. Bach, Bartok and Beethoven,” she volleyed back, with one of her intoxicating radiant smiles. But beneath the smile, her thoughts were on something else.

“Why did you leave the police force?” she asked.

“That's a long story for another day.” It came out sounding a bit too harsh. She had dropped her smile.

“Listen, I'm sorry, Miss Cordell, but—”

“Piña, please.”

“Piña. I didn't mean for that to come out as it did. My past has a way of triggering the worst in me, so I keep my head in the present.”

“I understand,” she said, looking back at Ombak, who was checking us out. I wonder what he made of us humans with all our quirks. “The pig's not here. It's always with him. I've no idea where it's gotten to.”

“When was the last time you remember seeing Ombak with

it?”

“A few days back. About the time Sam went missing. What are you thinking?” she asked, turning her attention back to me. “That someone smuggled the diamond inside the pig?”

“Yeah, makes sense. But not only one diamond. It wouldn’t have been worth all the effort. I figure there’s a lot more where this came from. And it would have cost a pretty penny to pull this off, such as paying off the right people.”

“So now what?”

“So, now I go looking for a stuffed pig. Hopefully, that will also lead us to Sam.”

END OF PREVIEW

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**OLIVER DEAN SPENCER** is an international crime fiction writer and artist, who spends his time between Rome, Italy and Montreal, Canada.

To date, he's published three novels as part of the James Cartwright PI series through Original Press. He is presently working on a collection of short, speculative, dark fiction entitled *Tales from the PI Café*, as well as his fifth crime fiction novel, *The Fool's Overture* (Book 2 in the Devon West Mystery Series).

Spencer received his MFA in Visual Arts from the University of Ottawa (2010) and his BFA in Fine Arts from Concordia University, Montreal (2008).

When Spencer's not writing he spends his time with his daughter or playing chess at a local café and painting.

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# ORIGINAL PRESS

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MYSTERY

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