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The Spellman Files

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Extract

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Prologue

San Francisco, Night

I duck into the parking garage, hoping to escape. But my boots echo on the slick cement, broadcasting my location to anyone listening. And I know they are listening. I make a mental note to myself not to wear these shoes again if there is a chance I'll get involved in a pursuit.

I start to run up the spiral driveway of the garage, knowing they'll never match my pace. The sound of my strained breath now masks the echo of my footsteps. Behind me, I hear nothing.

I stop in my tracks to listen more closely. One car door, then another, shuts and an engine turns over. I try to predict their next move as I scan the lot for Daniel's car.

Then I spot it—a midnight blue BMW—eclipsed on either side by two enormous SUVs. I rush to the newly waxed four-door sedan and put the key in the lock.

The scream of the car alarm hits me like a punch in the stomach. I'm breathless for a moment as I recover. I had forgotten about the security system. I drive a twelve-year-old Buick that unlocks with a *freakin' key!* the way it's supposed to.

My thumb fumbles with the remote device until the siren stops. I can hear the other car inching up the driveway, moving slowly just to torture me. I finally press the button that unlocks the door.

Car Chase #3

The nondescript Ford sedan cuts past my vehicle, giving me enough time to screech out of the parking space before it blocks my path down the driveway. As I zoom out of the garage, I check my rearview mirror and see the Ford right on my tail.

I shoot across the street, making a sharp left. My foot hits the floor. I am surprised by the smooth, rapid acceleration of the luxury vehicle. I realize there are reasons people buy these cars beyond concerns of vanity. I remind myself not to get used to it.

The speedometer reads 50 mph in no time flat. The Ford is about a hundred meters back, but closing in. I slow down to get them close on my tail and then overshoot the right turn onto Sacramento Street, but they know all my tricks and stay right behind me.

Speeding over two hills, the BMW, followed by the Ford, reaches downtown in record time. I check the fuel gauge. Maybe an hour of high-speed driving left. I turn right into an alley and sweep through to the other side, making a left turn onto a one-way street, going the wrong way. Two cars sound their horns and careen out of my trajectory. I check my mirror, expecting to have made some headway, but I can't shake them.

Driving south of Market Street, I accelerate one last time, more as an act of showmanship than an attempt to escape. I follow it up by slamming on my brakes. I do it just to rattle them, just to remind them that I am still in control.

The Ford screeches to a halt about ten feet behind the BMW. I turn off the ignition and take a few deep breaths. I casually get out of the car and walk over to the sedan.

I knock on the driver's-side window. A moment passes and the window rolls down. I put my hand on the hood of the car and lean in just a bit.

"Mom. Dad. This has to stop."

THE INTERVIEW

Chapter 1

Seventy-two Hours Later

A single lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, its dull glow illuminating the spare decor of this windowless room. I could itemize its contents with my eyes closed: one wooden table, splintered and paint-chipped, surrounded by four rickety chairs; a rotary phone; an old television; and a VCR. I know this room well. Hours of my childhood I lost in here, answering for crimes I probably did commit. But I sit here now answering to a man I have never seen before, for a crime that is still unknown, a crime that I am too afraid to even consider.

Inspector Henry Stone sits across from me. He places a tape recorder in the center of the table and switches it on. I can't get a good read on him: early forties, short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, crisp white shirt, and a perfectly tasteful tie. He might be handsome, but his cold professionalism feels like a mask. His suit seems too pricey for a civil servant and makes me suspicious. But everyone makes me suspicious.

"Please state your name and address for the record," says the inspector.

"Isabel Spellman. Seventeen ninety-nine Clay Street, San Francisco, California."

"Please state your age and date of birth."

"I'm twenty-eight. Born April 1, 1978."

"Your parents are Albert and Olivia Spellman, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"You have two siblings: David Spellman, thirty, and Rae Spellman, fourteen. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Please state your occupation and current employer for the record."

"I am a licensed private investigator with Spellman Investigations, my parents' PI firm."

"When did you first begin working for Spellman Investigations?" Stone asks.

"About sixteen years ago."

Stone consults his notes and looks up at the ceiling, perplexed. "You would have been twelve?"

"That is correct," I respond.

"Ms. Spellman," Stone says, "let's start at the beginning."

I cannot pinpoint the precise moment when it all began, but I can say for sure that the beginning didn't happen three days ago, one week, one month, or even one year ago. To truly understand what happened to my family, I have to start at the very beginning, and that happened a long time ago.

Part One

Antebellum

A LONG TIME AGO

My father, Albert Spellman, joined the San Francisco Police Department when he was twenty and one-half years old, just as his father, grandfather, and brother had done before him. Five years later he made inspector and was transferred to vice. Two years after that, while telling his informant a joke, Albert tripped and fell down two flights of stairs. The fall left him with an unreliable back that would cause him to collapse in pain without warning.

Forced into early retirement, Albert immediately went to work for Jimmy O'Malley, a one-time robbery inspector turned private investigator. The year was 1970. Although Jimmy was nearing eighty, O'Malley Investigations was still pulling in a respectable caseload. With my father on board, the business took off. Albert has an unusual gift with people, a goofy, affable charm that elicits immediate trust. His sense of humor is purely cheap vaudeville, yet everyone falls for it. Some of his routines—like sneezing Eastern European names—he never grows tired of. Only his children have suggested he work up some new material.

At six foot three and two hundred twenty pounds, you might imagine his physique would intimidate, but his easy gait always masked the strength beneath. His face seemed to defy description with features so mismatched, they looked like a collage of other faces. My mother used to say, *If you stared at him long enough, he was*

handsome. And my father would continue, *But your mother was the only one who had the patience.*

In 1974, during a routine insurance-company surveillance that concluded in Dolores Park, Albert spotted a petite brunette lurking behind a set of bushes flanking the Muni tracks. Intrigued by her unusual behavior, he dropped his paid surveillance detail to follow this mysterious woman. Within a short time, Albert determined that the suspiciously behaving brunette was doing some surveillance of her own. He came to this conclusion when she pulled a camera and an enormous telephoto lens out of her purse and began taking snapshots of a young couple embroiled on a park bench. Her camerawork was unsteady and amateurish and Albert decided to offer some professional assistance. He approached, either too quickly or too closely (the details are now a blur to both parties), and got kneed in the groin. My father would later say he fell in love as the pain subsided.

Before the brunette could plant another debilitating blow, Albert rattled off his credentials to subdue the surprisingly strong woman. The brunette, in turn, apologized, introduced herself as Olivia Montgomery, and reminded my father that sneaking up on women is both impolite and potentially dangerous. Then she offered an explanation for her amateurish spying and solicited some advice. It was revealed that the man still entangled on the park bench was Ms. Montgomery's future brother-in-law. The woman, however, was not her sister.

Albert played hooky the rest of the afternoon to aid and instruct Ms. Montgomery in her surveillance of one Donald Finker. Their efforts began at Dolores Park and ended at an Irish pub in the Tenderloin. Finker was none the wiser. Olivia would later call the day a great success, although her sister Martie would not. Several bus tokens, cab fares, and two rolls of film later, Olivia and Albert managed to catch Donald in the arms of three separate women (some he'd paid) and slipping money in the pockets of two separate bookies. Albert was impressed with Olivia's acumen and discovered that having a petite, quick-on-her-feet, twenty-one-year-old

brunette working a surveillance job was an invaluable asset. He didn't know whether to ask her out or offer her a job. Too torn to make that decision, Albert did both.

Three months later, Olivia Montgomery became Olivia Spellman in a small Las Vegas ceremony. Martie caught the bouquet, to her great astonishment, but thirty-three years later would still be unmarried. A year after that, Albert bought the business from Jimmy and changed its name to Spellman Investigations.

THE FIRSTBORN

David Spellman was born perfect. Eight pounds even, with a full head of hair and unblemished skin, he cried for a brief moment right after his birth (to let the doctor know he was breathing), then stopped abruptly, probably out of politeness. Within two months, he was sleeping seven hours straight and occasionally eight or nine.

While Albert and Olivia automatically considered their first child the picture of perfection, it wasn't until two years later, when I came along to provide a point of comparison, that they realized how flawless David really was.

David grew more attractive the older he got. While he bore no real resemblance to anyone in my family, his features were a collection of my mother's and father's best attributes, with a few of Gregory Peck's thrown in. He never suffered through an awkward stage, just an occasional black eye brought on by a jealous classmate (which somehow looked fetching on him). David excelled in school with little or no effort, possessing a brain for academics that has not been duplicated anywhere in our entire family tree. A natural athlete, he declined being captain of just about every sports team in high school to avoid the covetous backlashes that would often ensue. There was nothing sinister in his ungodly perfection. In fact, he possessed modesty beyond his years. But I was determined to kick out the legs of every chair he ever sat on.

The crimes I committed against my brother were manifold. Most went unpunished, as David was never a snitch, but there were others that could not escape the careful scrutiny of my ever-vigilant parents. As soon as I developed language skills, I began to document my crimes, not unlike a shop clerk logs inventory. The record of my crimes took the form of lists, followed by relevant details. Sometimes there were thumbnail sketches of a misdeed, like, "12-8-92. Erased hard drive on David's computer." Other times the lists were followed by a detailed rendering of the event, usually in the case of crimes for which I was caught. The details were necessary so that I could learn from my mistakes.

THE INTERROGATION ROOM

That is what we came to call it, but it was, in fact, our unfinished basement. Contents: one lightbulb, one table, four chairs, a rotary phone, and an old TV. Since it had the lighting and spare furnishings of a noir film, my parents could not resist staging all of our sentencing hearings in this primitive space.

I held a long-term reservation on the room, being my family's primary agitator. Below is a sampling of my basement interrogations. The list is by no means exhaustive:

Isabel, Age 8

I sit in one of the unbalanced chairs, leaning to one side. Albert paces back and forth. Once he is certain that I am beginning to squirm, he speaks.

"Isabel, did you sneak into your brother's room last night and cut his hair?"

"No," I say.

Long pause.

"Are you sure? Maybe you need some time to refresh your memory."

Albert takes a seat across the table and looks me straight in the eye. I quickly look down but try to maintain my ground.

"I don't know anything about a haircut," I say.

Albert places a pair of safety scissors on the table.

"Do these look familiar?"

"Those could be anyone's."

"But we found them in your bedroom."

"I was framed."

In fact, I was grounded for one week.

Isabel, Age 12

This time my mother does the pacing, carrying a laundry basket under her left arm. She puts the basket on the table and pulls out a wrinkled oxford shirt in a shade of pink so pale it is clearly not its intended color.

"Tell me, Isabel. What color is this shirt?"

"It's hard to say in this light."

"Hazard a guess."

"Off-white."

"I think it's pink. Are you willing to give me that?"

"Sure. It's pink."

"Your brother now has five pink shirts and not one white shirt to wear to school." (The school uniform code strictly says *white shirts only.*)

"That's unfortunate."

"I think you had a hand in this, Isabel."

"It was an accident."

"Is that so?"

"A red sock. I don't know how I missed it."

"Produce the sock in ten minutes. Otherwise, you're paying for five new shirts."

I couldn't produce the sock, because it didn't exist. However, I did manage to get the red food coloring out of my bedroom and into the neighbor's trash can without detection in that time frame.

I paid for those shirts.

Isabel, Age 14

By now my father has been permanently elected interrogator. Frankly, I think he was just missing his cop days; sparring with me kept him fresh.

Fifteen minutes pass in silence as he tries to make me sweat. But I'm getting better at this game and manage to look up and hold his gaze.

"Isabel, did you doctor the grades on your brother's report card?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. But I know you did it."

He places the report card on the table and slides it in front of me. (These were the old handwritten cards. All you had to do was pinch a blank one and solicit the services of a decent forger.)

"It's got your fingerprints all over it."

"You're bluffing." (I wore gloves.)

"And we had the handwriting analyzed."

"What do you take me for?"

Albert sighs deeply and sits down across from me. "Look, Izzy, we all know you did it. If you tell me why, we won't punish you."

A plea bargain. This is new. I decide to go for it, since I don't want to be trapped at home all week. I take a moment to respond, just so the confession doesn't come too easily.

"Everyone should know what it's like to get a C."

It took some time, but eventually I grew tired of trying to dethrone King David. There had to be a better way to pave my own path. No one could deny that I was a difficult child, but my true life of crime did not begin until I met Petra Clark in the eighth grade. We met in detention and bonded over our mutual (and fanatical) love for the 1960s sitcom *Get Smart.* I couldn't begin to estimate the number of hours we spent, stoned, watching repeats on cable, laughing so hard it hurt. It was only natural that we would soon become inseparable. It was a friendship based on common interests—Don Adams, beer, marijuana, and spray paint.

In the summer of 1993, when we were both fifteen, Petra and I

were suspected of committing a string of unsolved vandalisms in the Nob Hill district of San Francisco. Despite the numerous Neighborhood Watch meetings in our honor, none of the cases could be proven. At the time we would reflect upon our transgressions the way an artist might admire his own paintings. Petra and I challenged each other to push the boundaries of our misdemeanors. Our crimes were childish, yes, but they possessed a kind of creative energy that was absent from your everyday vandalism. The following is the first co-list Petra and I created; however, many more would follow.

UNPUNISHED CRIMES: SUMMER 1993

1. 6-25-93 Relandscaped Mr. Gregory's backyard.[1]
2. 7-07-93 Drive-by.
3. 7-13-93 Stole 5 basketballs, 3 field hockey sticks, 4 baseballs, and 2 baseball gloves from phys ed storage closet at Mission High School.
4. 7-16-93 Dyed Mrs. Chandler's toy poodle cobalt blue.
5. 7-21-93 Drive-by.
6. 7-24-93 Deposited a case of beer outside an AA meeting on Dolores Street.[2]
7. 7-30-93 Drive-by.
8. 8-10-93 Filled out subscription cards for *Hustler* magazine on behalf of an assortment of married men in the neighborhood.

Our staple activity was what we called the "drive-by." When lack of inspiration limited our nightly activities, garbage night provided a backup plan. It was simple, really: We'd sneak out of our homes after midnight. Petra would pick me up in her mom's 1978 Dodge Dart

1 Petra, having a way with scissors—even the garden-variety kind—created a topiary that resembled a hand with an extended middle finger.

2 Paid homeless man to buy beer.

(which Petra had stolen), and we'd sideswipe trash cans left out for the garbage truck. It wasn't so much the rush of destruction that appealed to me and Petra, but more the narrow escapes. By the end of summer, however, my luck had run out.

I found myself in the interrogation room once again. This time it was different, since it was a real interrogation room in a real police department. My father wanted me to give up my source and I refused.

8-16-93

The crime: Six hours earlier, I had snuck out of the house past midnight, hitched a ride to a party in the Mission, and picked up a guy who wanted to score some blow. Although cocaine wasn't my thing, the guy was sporting a leather jacket and a Kerouac novel and I have a weakness for tough guys who read. So I told him I knew a dealer—for reasons I'll get to later—and I made a call, asking if I could "cash in on that favor." Driving to my source's house, I made the leather jacket guy from the party as an undercover cop and demanded he drive me home. Instead, he drove me to the police station. When it was established that I was the daughter of Albert Spellman, a decorated ex-cop, Dad was called in.

Albert entered the Box still groggy with sleep.

"Give me a name, Izzy," he said, "and then we can go home and punish you for real."

"Any name?" I asked coyly.

"Isabel, you told an undercover police officer that you could score him some blow. You then made a phone call to a man you claimed was a dealer and asked if you could cash in on a favor. That doesn't look good."

"No, it doesn't. But the only real crime you've got me on is breaking curfew."

Dad offered up his most threatening gaze and said one last time, "Give me his name."

The name the cops wanted was Leonard Williams, Len to his

friends, high school senior. The truth was, I barely knew the guy and had never bought drugs from him. What I did know I pieced together through years of eavesdropping, which is how I learn most things. I knew Len's mother was on disability and addicted to painkillers. I knew his father had been killed in a liquor store shooting when Len was six years old. I knew that he had two younger brothers and the welfare checks did not feed them all. I knew Len dealt drugs like some kids get after-school jobs—to put food on the table. I knew Len was gay, and I never told anyone about it.

It was the night of Unpunished Crime #3. Petra and I broke onto school property to steal from the phys ed storage closet (I was convinced that a secondhand sporting-goods business would solve our cash-flow problem). I picked the lock to the storage closet and Petra and I moved the inventory into her car. But then I got greedy and remembered that Coach Walters usually kept a bottle of Wild Turkey in his desk drawer. While Petra waited in the car, I returned to the school grounds and caught Len and a football player making out in Coach Walters's office. Because I never said anything, Len thought he owed me. What he didn't know was that I was good at keeping secrets, having so many of my own. One more made no difference to me.

"I am not a snitch" was all I ever said.

My father took me home that night without uttering a single word. Nothing happened to Len. They had only a nickname to go on. As for me, I got off easy, at least compared to my father, who endured endless jeering from his former colleagues; they found it infinitely amusing that Al couldn't crack his own daughter as an informant. Yet I know that for a man who spent years working the streets, he understood the codes that criminals live by and to a certain extent respected my silence.

If you can imagine me without my litany of crimes or my brother as a point of comparison, you might be surprised to find that I stand

up all right on my own. I can enter a room and have its contents memorized within a few minutes; I can spot a pickpocket with the accuracy of a sharpshooter; I can bluff my way past any currently employed night watchman. When inspired, I have a doggedness you've never seen. And while I'm no great beauty, I get asked out plenty by men who don't know any better.

But for many years, my attributes (for what they're worth) were obscured by my defiant ways. Since David had cornered the market on perfection, I had to settle for mining the depths of my own imperfection. At times it seemed the only two sentences spoken in our household were *Well done, David* and *What were you thinking, Isabel?* My teenage years were defined by meetings at the principal's office, rides in squad cars, ditching, vandalism, smoking in the bathroom, drinking at the beach, breaking and entering, academic probation, groundings, lectures, broken curfews, hangovers, blackouts, illegal drugs, combat boots, and unwashed hair.

Yet I could never do as much damage as I intended, because David was always undoing it. If I missed a curfew, he covered for me. If I lied, he corroborated. If I stole, he returned. If I smoked, he hid the butts. If I passed out on the front lawn, he moved my lifeless body into my bedroom. If I refused to write a paper, he wrote it for me, even dumbing down the language to make it believable. When he discovered that I wasn't turning in his work on my behalf, he took to delivering the papers directly to the teachers' mailboxes.

What was so infuriating about David was that he *knew.* He knew that—to a certain extent—my failure was a reaction to his perfection. He understood that I was his fault and he genuinely felt contrite. My parents would occasionally ask me why I was the way I was. And I told them: They needed balance. Added together and divided evenly, David and I would be two exceedingly normal children. Rae would eventually throw everything off balance, but I'll get to that later.