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THE SPENCER FILES

A JAMES CARTWRIGHT PI
MYSTERY

BOOK ONE

Oliver Dean Spencer



ORIGINAL
PRESS

THE CASES

13 / TELL ME THAT YOU LOVE ME

20 / THE POLKA DOT CLUB

54 / THE SPANISH CURSE

91 / THE FINAL RING

138 / THE CONVERSATION

In memory of my parents Francesco and Celestina

TELL ME THAT YOU LOVE ME

for DEAN

I

I felt like a lonely cat, an aging tom ridden by obscure rage, looking for torn-ear trouble. I clipped that pitch off short and threw it away. Night streets were my territory and would be till I rolled in the last gutter.

— Ross Macdonald. *The Drowning Pool*

THE POUNDING RAIN HAD STOPPED as suddenly as it had begun. Sheets of silver-green neon clung hungrily to the wet black asphalt like some reptilian skin. The smell of raw sewage and death lingered in the air like a long-lost friend. A pool of liquid red had begun working its way under her—having jumped moments earlier from the office window above. Now lying there like some still frame, out of a front-page tabloid. Stone cold dead. Next to my feet.

They say that water cleanses. They also say that it makes up some seventy percent of our body weight. So, you'd figure that

nothing should stick—not the pain or sense of isolation, not the dirt and grime built up from being in my business. Not even the image of her short, fragile existence, now pinned to the cold pavement before me.

But perhaps the problem lies with the other thirty percent. All that fat content. That's where it settles in nice and easy. Sure, you could go on some sort of diet, see a shrink, confess to the local parish priest, or even just hide out in some bungalow equipped with a satellite TV with some two hundred plus channels. But where's that get you? A momentary lapse in memory—a blip on your timeline. In the end, it would all come flooding back—as it had done so many times before.

My name is James Cartwright. And I'm a private investigator.

II

IT ALL STARTED when she walked into my office that night, unannounced. She told me she was in trouble. So, I asked what kind. She said it was of the killing kind. Wanted to know if I could be trusted. I said up to a point, depending on who got killed. She then broke down. Tears began jamming up her face, and her body started shaking out like a rag doll, strung out on some wire.

I said, “have a smoke.”

She took one eagerly from the pack. I grabbed one as well. I cracked the matchstick on the edge of the table, and it burst into a pinpoint flame. She cupped her shaking hands around mine and lit her smoke. Then I lit mine. This seemed to calm her.

She told me she was seventeen going on twenty-two when she left home to find a new life in the city. She wanted to get into acting, to be a big star someday. I said that was swell, but a tough racket to break into. She said she knew that going in. She thought

maybe, she'd get a lucky break and go from there. I told her lucky breaks always came with a price.

She thought about that for a moment, then said, “sometimes that break is worth the price of admission.” I nodded my head in agreement.

She then told me about the murder. About how she had pulled the trigger, but how someone else was going down for it. I asked who. She said it was someone she was sweet on. Max was his name. That he had a past with the law but wanted to protect her, on account of love. Told her he loved her, and that she had her whole life ahead of her.

“He had made it sound so simple,” she said. “He told me he'd do some time, but they'd be back together again, one day soon.”

The District Attorney thought different. He was a young and rising star who was trying to make a name for himself. He was pushing for the death penalty—even though the evidence was circumstantial and pointed to self-defense.

So, I asked her, “why come to me now?”

“Cause now I've got the evidence to free him.”

“What evidence?”

“The gun. That did the killing.”

III

I GOT A HOLD OF A CONTACT of mine in the state department to get a fix on the situation. He said Max was scheduled to hit the chair in seventy-two hours, so I'd better work fast. I turned back to her and asked, "how long have you had the gun?"

"A few months. I've been talking to the cops, the papers, the governors' office, anyone who would listen. But they all ignored me. Said there was nothing they could do. Said the gun meant nothing now. For all they knew, Max had told her where to find it." I had to agree with that logic.

"So, you just happened to have this gun with you, during the killing?"

"Well, I was told by the other girls to be careful. They had heard things. I must admit, I was a bit scared, so I asked around where I could get a gun just in case. That's when I met Max."

"He supplied you the gun?"

"Yes."

“And you let the gun do the talking, instead of getting yourself out of harms ’way.”

“I had no choice. I needed the money. And this creep was the break I was looking for. He was a big producer and had all the connections. I held him off at first, but then he became aggressive. He started calling me at all hours, following me around. I had planned to get out of the scene after meeting Max. But on that final night of the film shoot, he attacked me.”

“Were there any witnesses?”

“There was someone. An actor. She saw him follow me up to my room. But until now, I had no idea where to find her. She just disappeared.”

“And now you do?”

“Well, yes. I ran into her several days ago. She’d been turning tricks down on the South Side. She’s agreed to come forward.”

I called my contact back and gave him the details of what I just learned. He promised to look into it. I then told her that all we could do now was wait. So, we waited. The call came a couple of minutes before midnight—the slated time of Max’s execution. The DA’s office said the execution was a go. She saw the answer in my eyes. Before I could stop her—she made for the open window. And jumped.

THE FINAL RING

for BRIAN & MAI

I

Mike Hammer

- *You're never around when I need you.*

Velda

- *You never need me when I'm around.*

Mickey Spillane (Kiss Me, Deadly, 1952)

IT WAS ABOUT FOUR IN THE MORNING when I got the call. The phone's incessant ring—at first a distant hum, kept rising in volume—clawing at the surface of my subconscious like some crazed snow crab in a midsummer's heat wave. I tried ignoring it—tossing and turning and hoping to get back to sleep, but to no avail.

I finally gave in and got up, balancing myself on the edge of my bed. Even if the phone hadn't rung, I would have woken up. A

recurring nightmare that I'd been having over the past few weeks usually kicked in around this time.

As a private investigator, reality sometimes got scrambled up inside one's head. That included one's dreams. When it came to mine, it seemed, someone always ended up dead—usually murdered, and for obvious reasons—love, greed, or plain stupidity.

In this one specific recurring dream, I was shot point blank by an unknown assailant. There was no face—only its presence taunting me through deserted city streets. I had no idea if the assailant was a man, women, or thing. It'd keep shifting its shape and movements; its fleeting shadow playing out like something out of a *Nosferatu* film, where everything became harsh and over-exaggerated.

But, as such nightmares go, I'd always wake up before the bullet's impact—gasping for air and drenched in a cold sweat. A cloud of dread and anxiety would then hang over me throughout the day, wondering if today—was that day.

The phone was still demanding my attention, so I pulled it hard against my ear. With a course, broken and uncertain voice I attempted a response, “Yeah, Cartwright here.” The female voice on the other end seemed out of sorts. The voice sounded familiar, but who I couldn't place.

“James. James, is that you?”

“Well, yes—if it's JC you're looking for, you've got the right number.”

“James. It's Ann. Ann Mercer. Shelby's wife.”

I suddenly made the connection. Shelby was my partner when I was with the Detroit Police Force, some fifteen years back. I hadn't spoken to either Shelby or Ann for the past five years since they moved up north to Toronto.

“What's going on, Ann?” Knowing it must be important if she was calling me in the middle of the night.

“It's about Shelby. He's. Well. He needs your help.”

“For what?”

“He's been arrested. For murder.”

There was a long pause as I got my mind up to speed with what Ann had just thrown at me. Shelby had been a stand-up cop—never got his hands dirty with drugs or payoffs. But like me, he wasn't a saint either. While on the force, we both had our own brand of justice. We both tried to play it by the book, but sometimes the rules had to be bent. In the process, we pissed off the wrong people.

“What do you mean arrested for murder? Who? When?” I heard myself asking with an edge of anger rising in my voice.

“Another cop. A few days back.” I could hear her voice wavering, “please James. You must come. We need you.”

“But Ann, what can I do? My PI license isn't any good up there. I'm sure this is all some misunderstanding.” But I knew full well that arresting an ex-cop was not something other cops took lightly. They must have some hard evidence on Shelby.

“When did a little thing like a license ever stop you, James?” Ann said, inserting a bit of humor to a stressful situation. But she had a point. Kissing up to bureaucrats was never my strong suit.

“Ok Ann. One question before I decide. Do you think he's innocent?”

“Yes. With all my heart.”

“That's good enough for me. I'll be on the next flight out.”

II

THE BOEING 737 SET DOWN on the Toronto Pearson International tarmac around two that afternoon. Ann was waiting for me as I passed security and entered the main lobby. I spotted her right off. She still had the looks and presence of someone with high confidence and stature. Perhaps a bit older—certifiable by the white strands gracing her shoulder-length, raven black hair. And in need of a lot more sleep than myself.

As soon as Ann saw me, she ran over and gave me one of her famous gorilla hugs. All I could do was let the embrace take me. Once she was satisfied that she'd crushed every bone in my body, she released her grip. I responded with a compliment.

“Ann, you look great.”

“James.” I got the teacher look from under her wire-frame glasses. “I never understood how you could be such a great cop, but such a terrible liar.”

“It takes a lot of patience. And practice.” We both broke into light laughter. But it didn't last long.

“So, Ann. Fill me in. What the hell is going on?”

“I will, James, all in good time. First, let's get you home. You can have a quick shower and shave.” It was Ann's motherly instincts kicking in. “Then you can go see Shelby. He wants to give you the total breakdown himself. Doesn't want to leave out any of the details.”

That was Shelby for you. Obsessed with details and facts. I told him once that he reminded me of Sergeant Joe Friday from the TV series *Dragnet*. He had then turned to me with his broad face and deadpan look and quoted Friday to a tee: *just the facts, ma'am*. We burst into tears. From there on in, whenever Shelby thought we were drifting off course on a case, he'd throw out that Friday line. And it'd work every time.

As Ann drove us closer to the city's core, I couldn't help feeling a sense of foreboding, that I was heading in the wrong direction. One from which I may never return.

III

SHELBY WAS IN LOCKUP at a maximum-security facility known as the East. The East was the nickname given to the former Metropolitan Toronto East Detention Center in the borough of Scarborough, just east of Toronto proper. After the usual procedural checks by personal, they steered me into a sterile, fluorescent-lit eight by eight white room. Shelby was already there, seated behind a four by six oak veneer table. At first glance, he seemed in good shape, but his posture and eyes told a different story. He was worried.

“James. So nice to see you. Sorry if I don't get up and shake hands, but you know.” Smiling, he lifted his arms to expose his handcuffed wrists.

“Shelby, if I didn't know you any better, I'd say you were enjoying your stint here. After all, you always said that to be a good cop one had to have the makings of a master criminal.”

“Did I say that? I must have been some young, naïve rookie who figured he knew it all, and in the process, could change the world.”

“That about sums you up.” We both broke into laughter. Once the laughter had finally subsided, I asked, “so, Shelby, what can you tell me?”

Before answering, Shelby took a quick glance behind him at the security personnel stationed at the door, hinting that the authorities may be recording our conversation. Returning his gaze, he hit me with the opening lines from *Dragnet* with his Friday voice.

“What I'm about to tell you is all true. But the names have been changed to protect the innocent.” I returned a conspiratorial look and joined in on his charade.

“OK, Friday. That's fine. Give me the facts. And only the facts.”

“Well, I was doing my shift—I work security over at Gracie Foods when the perp entered the store. The store's quite busy at that time of day.”

“What time was that?”

“Around lunchtime, 12:30 or thereabouts. Anyway, a customer had been complaining about the lack of parking, so I didn't notice the perp go in.”

“What made you take notice?”

“Gunshots,” giving me a mischievous grin, “from the back of the store. And then all hell broke loose. I rushed over, gun drawn, to see what was going on. But when I got there, this girl couldn't be more than twenty was on the floor. Been shot several times in the chest. I checked for vitals, but no go. She was gone.”

“What did you do next?”

“I gave chase. The obvious place the perp would have gone was through the back door leading to the loading dock. But by the time I got there, he was nowhere in sight. The workers out back were on their lunch break so no witnesses there.”

“Did you get a description?”

“Some witnesses say he was thinly built, about six-foot-one with jet black hair. He was dressed in black—black t-shirt, pants, and cap. He had on a pair of white sneakers. But no one got a good look at his face. I figure they were in shock.”

“Could be a professional hit.”

“My thinking as well.”

“So, what's this got to do with you killing a cop?”

“Don't know?”

“Don't know or can't tell me.”

“Both. I didn't kill any cop. You know me, James. What are the odds that I would do such a thing?”

I didn't have an answer for him. In my line of work, anything was possible. Even the most gentle and well-behaved person could

wake up one day and turn into a killer. It always came down to circumstance. Shelby must have noticed my train of thought and decided to interject.

“I know what you're thinking, James. Anything's possible. But not this time. The coincidences are just too obvious.”

“And why's that?”

“The murdered cop.”

“Yeah?”

“Was the father, of the girl murdered at Gracie's.

END OF PREVIEW