BLUE LABYRINTH
Also by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child

**Agent Pendergast Novels**
- White Fire
- Two Graves*
- Cold Vengeance*
- Fever Dream*
- Cemetery Dance
- The Wheel of Darkness
- The Book of the Dead**
- Dance of Death**
- Brimstone**
- Still Life with Crows
- The Cabinet of Curiosities
- Reliquary†
- Relic†

*The Helen Trilogy
**The Diogenes Trilogy
†Relic and Reliquary are ideally read in sequence

**Gideon Crew Novels**
- The Ice Limit
- Thunderhead
- Riptide
- Mount Dragon

**By Douglas Preston**
- The Kraken Project
- Impact
- The Monster of Florence
  (with Mario Spezi)
- Blasphemy
- Tyrannosaur Canyon
- The Codex
- Ribbons of Time
- The Royal Road
- Talking to the Ground
- Jennie

- Cities of Gold
- Dinosaurs in the Attic

**By Lincoln Child**
- The Third Gate
- Terminal Freeze
- Deep Storm
- Death Match
- Utopia
- Tales of the Dark 1–3
- Dark Banquet
- Dark Company
Lincoln Child dedicates this book to his daughter,
Veronica

Douglas Preston dedicates this book to
Elizabeth Berry
and
Andrew Sebastian
BLUE LABYRINTH
The stately Beaux-Arts mansion on Riverside Drive between 137th and 138th Streets, while carefully tended and impeccably preserved, appeared to be untenanted. On this stormy June evening, no figures paced the widow’s walk overlooking the Hudson River. No yellow glow from within flowed through the decorative oriel windows. The only visible light, in fact, came from the front entrance, illuminating the drive beneath the building’s porte cochere.

Appearances can be deceiving, however—sometimes intentionally. Because 891 Riverside was the residence of FBI Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast—and Pendergast was a man who valued, above all, his privacy.

In the mansion’s elegant library, Pendergast sat in a leather wing chair. Although it was early summer, the night was blustery and chill, and a low fire flickered on the grate. He was leafing through a copy of the Manyōshū, an old and celebrated anthology of Japanese poetry, dating to AD 750. A small tetsubin, or cast-iron teapot, sat on a table beside him, along with a china cup half-full of green tea. Nothing disturbed his concentration. The only sounds were the occasional crackle of settling embers and rumble of thunder from beyond the closed shutters.

Now there was a faint sound of footsteps from the reception hall beyond and Constance Greene appeared, framed in the library doorway. She was wearing a simple evening dress. Her violet eyes and
dark hair, cut in an old-fashioned bob, offset the paleness of her skin. In one hand she held a bundle of letters.

“The mail,” she said.

Pendergast inclined his head, set the book aside.

Constance took a seat beside Pendergast, noting that, since returning from what he called his “Colorado adventure,” he was at last looking like his old self. His state of mind had been a cause of uneasiness in her since the dreadful events of the prior year.

She began sorting through the small stack of mail, putting aside the things that would not interest him. Pendergast did not like to concern himself with quotidian details. He had an old and discreet New Orleans law firm, long in the employ of the family, to pay bills and manage part of his unusually extensive income. He had an equally hoary New York banking firm to manage other investments, trusts, and real estate. And he had all mail delivered to a post office box, which Proctor, his chauffeur, bodyguard, and general factotum, collected on a regular basis. At present, Proctor was preparing to leave for a visit to relatives in Alsace, so Constance had agreed to take over the epistolary matters.

“Here’s a note from Corrie Swanson.”

“Open it, if you please.”

“She’s attached a photocopy of a letter from John Jay. Her thesis won the Rosewell Prize.”

“Indeed. I attended the ceremony.”

“I’m sure Corrie appreciated it.”

“It is rare that a graduation ceremony offers more than an anesthetizing parade of platitudes and mendacity, set to the tiresome refrain of ‘Pomp and Circumstance.’” Pendergast took a sip of tea at the recollection. “This one did.”

Constance sorted through more mail. “And here’s a letter from Vincent D’Agosta and Laura Hayward.”

He nodded for her to scan it. “It’s a thank-you note for the wedding gift and once again for the dinner party.”

Pendergast inclined his head as she put the letter aside. The month before, on the eve of D’Agosta’s wedding, Pendergast had hosted a private dinner for the couple, consisting of several courses he
had prepared himself, paired with rare wines from his cellar. It was this gesture, more than anything, that had convinced Constance that Pendergast had recovered from his recent emotional trauma.

She read over a few other letters, then put aside those of interest and tossed the rest on the fire.

“How is the project coming, Constance?” Pendergast asked as he poured himself a fresh cup of tea.

“Very well. Just yesterday I received a packet from France, the Bureau Ancestre du Dijon, which I’m now trying to integrate with what I’ve already collected from Venice and Louisiana. When you have the time, I do have a couple of questions I’d like to ask about Augustus Robespierre St. Cyr Pendergast.”

“Most of what I know consists of oral family history—tall tales, legends, and some whispered horror stories. I’d be glad to share most of them with you.”

“Most? I was hoping you’d share them all.”

“I fear there are skeletons in the Pendergast family closet, figurative and literal, that I must keep even from you.”

Constance sighed and rose. As Pendergast returned to his book of poetry, she walked out of the library, across the reception hall lined with museum cabinets full of curious objects, and through a doorway into a long, dim space paneled in time-darkened oak. The main feature of the room was a wooden refectory table, almost as long as the room itself. The near end of the table was covered with journals, old letters, census pages, yellowed photographs and engravings, court transcripts, memoirs, reprints from newspaper microfiche, and other documents, all arranged in neat stacks. Beside them sat a laptop computer, its screen glowing incongruously in the dim room. Several months before, Constance had taken it upon herself to prepare a genealogy of the Pendergast family. She wanted both to satisfy her own curiosity and to help draw Pendergast out of himself. It was a fantastically complex, infuriating, and yet endlessly fascinating undertaking.

At the far end of the long room, beyond an arched door, was the foyer leading to the mansion’s front door. Just as Constance was about to take a seat at the table, a loud knock sounded.
Constance paused, frowning. They rarely entertained visitors at 891 Riverside Drive—and never did one arrive unannounced.

Knock. Another rap resounded from the entryway, accompanied by a low grumble of thunder.

Smoothing down her dress, Constance walked down the length of the room, through the archway, and into the foyer. The heavy front door was solid, with no fish-eye lens, and she hesitated a moment. When no third rap came, she undid the upper lock, then the lower, and slowly opened the door.

There, silhouetted in the light of the porte cochere, stood a young man. His blond hair was wet and plastered to his head. His rain-spattered features were fine and quintessentially Nordic, with a high-domed forehead and chiseled lips. He was dressed in a linen suit, sopping wet, which clung to his frame.

He was bound with heavy ropes.

Constance gasped, began to reach out to him. But the bulging eyes took no notice of the gesture. They stared straight ahead, unblinking.

For a moment, the figure remained standing, swaying ever so slightly, fitfully illuminated by flashes of lightning—and then it began to fall, like a tree toppling, slowly at first and then faster, before crashing facedown across the threshold.

Constance backed up with a cry. Pendergast arrived at a run, followed by Proctor. Pendergast grasped her, pulled her aside, and quickly knelt over the young man. He gripped the figure by the shoulder and turned him over, brushing the hair from his eyes, and feeling for the pulse that was so obviously absent beneath the cold flesh of the neck.

“Dead,” he said, his voice low and unnaturally composed.

“My God,” Constance said, her own voice breaking. “It’s your son Tristram.”

“No,” Pendergast said. “It’s Alban. His twin.”

For just a moment longer he knelt by the body. And then he leapt to his feet and, in a flash of feline motion, disappeared into the howling storm.
Pendergast sprinted to Riverside Drive and paused at the corner, scanning north and south along the broad avenue. The rain was now coming down in sheets, traffic was light, and there were no pedestrians. His eye lit upon the closest vehicle, about three blocks south: a late-model Lincoln Town Car, black, of the kind seen on the streets of Manhattan by the thousands. The license plate light was out, leaving the details of the New York plate unreadable.

Pendergast ran after it.

The vehicle did not speed up, but continued at a leisurely pace down the drive, at each cross street moving through one set of green lights after another, steadily gaining distance. The lights turned yellow, then red. But the vehicle continued on, running a yellow and a red, never accelerating, never slowing.

He pulled out his cell phone and punched in a number as he ran. "Proctor. Bring the car. I’m headed south on Riverside."

The Town Car had almost disappeared, save for a faint pair of taillights, wavering in the downpour, but as the drive made the slow curve at 126th Street even those disappeared.

Pendergast continued on, pursuing at a dead run, his black suit jacket whipping behind him, rain stinging his face. A few blocks ahead, he saw the Town Car again, stopped at another light behind two other vehicles. Once again, he pulled out his phone and dialed.
“Twenty-Sixth Precinct,” came the response. “Officer Powell.”

“This is SA Pendergast, FBI. In pursuit of a black Town Car, New York license plate unidentified, traveling southbound on Riverside at One Hundred Twenty-Fourth. Operator is suspect in a homicide. Need assistance in motor vehicle stop.”

“Ten-four,” came the dispatcher. And a moment later: “We have a marked unit in the area, two blocks over. Keep us posted on location.”

“Air support as well,” Pendergast said, still at a dead run.

“Sir, if the vehicle operator is only a suspect—”

“This is a priority target for the FBI,” Pendergast said into the phone. “Repeat, a priority target.”

A brief pause. “We’re putting a bird in the air.”

As he put the phone away, the Town Car suddenly veered around the cars idling at the red light, jumped the curb and crossed the sidewalk, tore through a set of flower beds in Riverside Park, churning up mud, then headed the wrong way down the exit ramp to the Henry Hudson Parkway.

Pendergast called dispatch again and updated them on the vehicle’s location, followed it up with another call to Proctor, then cut into the park, leapt over a low fence, and sprinted through some tulip beds, his eyes locked on the taillights of the car careening down the off-ramp onto the parkway, the screech of tires floating back to his ears.

He vaulted the low stone wall on the far side of the drive, then half ran, half slid down the embankment, scattering trash and broken glass in an attempt to cut the vehicle off. He fell, rolled, and scrambled to his feet, chest heaving, soaked with rain, white shirt plastered to his chest. He watched as the Town Car pulled a U-turn and came blasting down the exit helix toward him. He reached for his Les Baer, but his hand closed over an empty holster. He looked quickly around the dark embankment, then—as brilliant light slashed across him—was forced to roll away. Once the car had passed, he rose again to his feet, following the vehicle with his eyes as it merged into the main stream of traffic.
A moment later a vintage Rolls-Royce approached and braked rapidly to the curb. Pendergast opened the rear door and jumped in.

“Follow the Town Car,” he told Proctor as he strapped himself in.

The Rolls accelerated smoothly. Pendergast could hear faint sirens from behind, but the police were too far back and would no doubt get hung up in traffic. He plucked a police radio from a side compartment. The chase accelerated, the Town Car shifting lanes and dodging cars at speeds that approached a hundred miles an hour even as they entered a construction area, concrete barriers lining both shoulders of the highway.

There was a lot of chatter on the police radio, but they were first in pursuit. The chopper was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly a series of bright flashes came from the traffic ahead, followed instantly by the report of gunshots.

“Shots fired!” Pendergast said into the open channel. He understood immediately what was happening. Ahead, cars veered wildly right and left, panicking, along with the flashes of additional shots. Then a crump, crump, crump sounded as multiple vehicles piled into each other at highway speed, causing a chain reaction that quickly filled the road with hissing, ruined metal. With great expertise, Proctor braked the Rolls and steered into a power slide, trying to maneuver it past the chain reaction of collisions. The Rolls hit a concrete barrier at an angle, was deflected back into the lane, and was hit from behind by a driver who rammed into the pileup with a deafening crash of metal. In the backseat, Pendergast was thrown forward, stopped hard by his seat belt, then slammed back. Partially stunned, he heard the sound of hissing steam, screams, shouts, and the screeching of brakes and additional crashes as cars continued to rear-end each other, mingling with a rising chorus of sirens and now, finally, the thwap of helicopter blades.

Shrugging off a coating of broken glass, Pendergast struggled to collect his wits and remove the seat belt. He leaned forward to examine Proctor.

The man was unconscious, his head bloody. Pendergast fumbled
for the radio to call for help, but even as he did so the doors were pulled open and paramedics were pushing in, hands grasping at him.

“Get your hands off me,” Pendergast said. “Focus on him.”

Pendergast shrugged free and exited into the sweeping rain, more glass falling away as he did so. He stared ahead at the impene-trable tangle of cars, the sea of flashing lights, listening to the shouts of paramedics and police and the thud of the useless, circling chopper.

The Town Car was long gone.
As a classics major from Brown University and a former environmental activist, Lieutenant Peter Angler was not a typical officer of the NYPD. However, there were certain traits he shared with his fellow cops: he liked to see his cases solved clean and fast, and he liked to see perps behind bars. The same single-minded drive that had motivated him to translate Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War* during his senior year in 1992, and to sink nails into old-growth redwoods to frustrate chain-saw loggers later that same decade, also caused him to rise through the ranks to Lieutenant–Commander Detective Squad at the young age of thirty-six. He organized his investigations like military campaigns, and made sure that the detectives under his supervision performed their duty with thoroughness and precision. The results that such a strategy obtained were a source of lasting pride to Angler.

Which was precisely why this current case gave him such a bad feeling.

Admittedly, the case was less than twenty-four hours old. And his squad could not be blamed for the lack of progress. Everything had been handled by the book. The first responders had secured the location, taken statements, held the witnesses until the technical investigators arrived. Those investigators, in turn, had thoroughly processed the scene, surveying and searching and collecting evidence. They had
worked closely with the crime scene unit, with the latents team, the forensic investigators, photographers, and the M.E.

No—his dissatisfaction lay with the unusual nature of the crime itself... and, ironically, with the father of the deceased: a special agent in the FBI. Angler had read a transcript of the man’s statement, and it was remarkable for its brevity and lack of helpful information. While not exactly hindering the CSU, the agent had been curiously unwilling to allow them any more access to his residence than had been necessary beyond the perimeter of the crime scene—even to the point of refusing to let an officer use a bathroom. The FBI was not officially on the case, of course, but Angler had been prepared to give the man courtesy access to the case files, if he’d wished it. But the agent had made no such request. If Angler hadn’t known better, he would almost have assumed this man Pendergast didn’t want his son’s murderer to be caught.

Which was why he’d decided to interview the man himself, in—he glanced at his watch—precisely one minute.

And precisely one minute later, the agent was ushered into his office. The man who did the ushering was Sergeant Loomis Slade, Angler’s aide-de-camp, personal assistant, and frequent sounding board. Angler took in the salient details of his visitor with a practiced glance: tall, lean, blond-white hair, pale-blue eyes. A black suit and a dark tie of severe pattern completed the ascetic picture. This was anything but your typical FBI agent. Then again, given his residences—an apartment in the Dakota, a veritable mansion on Riverside Drive where the body had been dumped—Angler decided he shouldn’t be surprised. He offered the agent a chair, then sat back down behind his desk. Sergeant Slade sat in a far corner, behind Pendergast.

“Agent Pendergast,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

The man in the black suit inclined his head.

“First of all, let me offer my condolences on your loss.”

The man did not reply. He did not look bereaved, exactly. In fact, he betrayed no expression at all. His face was a closed book.

Angler’s office was not like that of most lieutenants in the NYPD. Certainly, it had its share of case files and stacks of reports. But the
walls displayed, instead of commendations and photo ops with brass, a
dozen framed antique maps. Angler was an avid cartographic collector. Normally, visitors to the office were immediately drawn to
the page from LeClerc’s French Atlas of 1631, or Plate 58 from Ogilby’s Britannia Atlas, showing the road from Bristol to Exeter, or—
his pride and joy—the yellowed, brittle fragment from the Peutinger Table, as copied by Abraham Ortelius. But Pendergast gave the collection not even a passing glance.

“I’d like to follow up on your initial statement, if you don’t mind. And I ought to say up front that I will have to ask some awkward and uncomfortable questions. I apologize in advance. Given your own law enforcement experience, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Naturally,” the agent replied in a mellifluous southern accent, but with something hard behind it, metallic.

“There are several aspects to this crime that, frankly, I find baffling. According to your statement, and that of your—” a glance at the report on his desk—“your ward, Ms. Greene, at approximately twenty minutes past nine last evening, there was a knock on the front door of your residence. When Ms. Greene answered it, she found your son, his body bound with thick ropes, on your doorstep. You ascertained he was dead and chased a black Town Car south on Riverside Drive while calling nine-one-one. Correct?”

Agent Pendergast nodded.

“What gave you the impression—initially, at least—that the murderer was in that car?”

“It was the only vehicle in motion at the time. There were no pedestrians in sight.”

“It didn’t occur to you that the perpetrator could have been hiding somewhere on your grounds and made good his escape by some other route?”

“The vehicle ran several lights, drove over a sidewalk and through a flower bed, entered the parkway on an exit ramp, and made an illegal U-turn. In other words, it gave a rather convincing impression of trying to elude pursuit.”

The dry, faintly ironic delivery of this statement irritated Angler.
Pendergast went on. "May I ask why the police helicopter was so dilatory?"

Angler was further annoyed. "It wasn’t late. It arrived five minutes after the call. That’s pretty good."

"Not good enough."

Seeking to regain control of the interview, Angler said, rather more sharply than he intended: "Getting back to the crime itself. Despite a careful canvassing of the vicinity, my detective squad has turned up no witnesses beyond those on the West Side Highway who saw the Town Car itself. There were no signs of violence, no drugs or alcohol in your son’s system; he died of a broken neck perhaps five hours before you found him—at least, that’s the preliminary assessment, pending the autopsy. According to Ms. Greene’s statement, it took her about fifteen seconds to answer the summons. So we have a murderer—or murderers—who takes your son’s life, binds him up—not necessarily in that order—props him against your front door while in a state of rigor mortis; rings your doorbell; gets back into the Town Car; and manages to get several blocks before you yourself could effect pursuit. How did he, or they, move so quickly?"

"The crime was flawlessly planned and executed."

"Well, perhaps, but could it also be that you were in shock—perfectly understandable, given the circumstances—and that you reacted less quickly than indicated in your statement?"

"No."

Angler considered this terse answer. He glanced at Sergeant Slade—as usual, silent as a Buddha—and then back again at Pendergast. "Then we have the, ah, dramatic nature of the crime itself. Bound with ropes, planted at your front door—it displays certain hallmarks of a gangland-style killing. Which brings me to my main line of questioning, and again, excuse me if some of these are intrusive or offensive. Was your son involved in any mob activity?"

Agent Pendergast returned Angler’s gaze with that same featureless, unreadable expression. "I have no idea what my son was involved in. As I indicated in my statement, my son and I were estranged."

Angler turned a page of the report. "The CSU, and my own
detective squad, went over the crime scene with great care. The scene was remarkable for its lack of obvious evidence. There were no latents, either full or partial, save those of your son. No hair or fiber, again save that of your son. His clothes were brand new—and of the most common make—and on top of that, his deceased body had been carefully washed and dressed. We retrieved no bullet casings from the highway, as the shots must have been fired from within the vehicle. In short, the perps were familiar with crime scene investigation techniques and were exceptionally careful not to leave evidence. They knew exactly what they were doing. I’m curious, Agent Pendergast—speaking from a professional capacity, how would you account for such a thing?”

“Again, I would merely repeat that this was a meticulously planned crime.”

“The leaving of the body at your doorstep suggests the perpetrators were sending you a message. Any idea what that message might be?”

“I am unable to speculate.”

Unable to speculate. Angler looked at Agent Pendergast more searchingly. He’d interviewed plenty of parents who had been devastated by the loss of a child. It wasn’t uncommon for the sufferers to be numb, in shock. Their answers to his questions were often halting, disorganized, incomplete. But Pendergast wasn’t like that at all. He appeared to be in complete possession of his faculties. It was as if he did not want to cooperate, or had no interest in doing so.

“Let’s talk about the, ah, mystery of your son,” Angler said. “The only evidence he is, in fact, your son is your statement to that effect. He is in none of the law enforcement databases we’ve checked: not CODIS, not IAFIS, not NCIC. He has no record of birth, no driver’s license, no Social Security number, no passport, no educational record, and no entry visa into this country. There was nothing in his pockets. Pending the DNA check against our database, from all we’ve learned it appears your son, essentially, never existed. In your statement, you said he was born in Brazil and was not a U.S. citizen. But he’s not a Brazilian citizen, either, and that country has no record of
him. The town you indicate he grew up in doesn’t seem to exist, at least officially. There’s no evidence of his exit from Brazil or entry into this country. How do you explain all this?”

Agent Pendergast slowly crossed one leg over the other. “I can’t. Again, as I mentioned in my statement, I only became aware of my son’s existence—or the fact that I had a son—some eighteen months ago.”

“And you saw him then?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“In the Brazilian jungle.”

“And since then?”

“I have neither seen nor communicated with him.”

“Why not? Why haven’t you sought him out?”

“I told you: we are—were—estranged.”

“Why, exactly, were you estranged?”

“Our personalities were incompatible.”

“Can you say anything about his character?”

“I hardly knew him. He took delight in malicious games; he was an expert at taunting and mortification.”

Angler took a deep breath. These non-answers were getting under his skin. “And his mother?”

“In my statement you will see that she died shortly after his birth, in Africa.”

“Right. The hunting accident.” There was something odd about that as well, but Angler could only deal with one absurdity at a time. “Might your son have been in some kind of trouble?”

“I have no doubt of it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I have no idea. He was eminently capable of managing even the worst trouble.”

“How can you know he was in trouble without knowing what sort?”

“Because he had strong criminal tendencies.”

They were just going around and around. Angler had the strong feeling Pendergast was not only uninterested in helping the NYPD
catch his son’s killer, but was probably withholding information, as well. Why would he do that? There was no guarantee the body was even that of his son. True, there was a remarkable resemblance. But the only identification was Pendergast’s own. It would be interesting to see if the victim’s DNA returned any hits in the database. And it would be simple to compare his DNA with Pendergast’s—which, since he was an FBI agent, was already on file.

“Agent Pendergast,” he said coldly. “I must ask you again: Do you have any idea, any suspicion, any clue, as to who killed your son? Any information about the circumstances that might have led to his death? Any hint of why his body would be deposited on your doorstep?”

“There is nothing in my statement that I am able to expand upon.”

Angler pushed the report away. This was only the first round. In no way was he finished with this man. “I don’t know what’s stranger here—the specifics of this killing, your non-reaction to it, or the non-background of your son.”

Pendergast’s expression remained absolutely blank. “O brave new world,” he said, “that has such people in’t.”

“’Tis new to thee,” Angler shot back.

At this, Pendergast showed the first sign of interest of the entire interview. His eyes widened ever so slightly, and he looked at the detective with something like curiosity.

Angler leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk. “I think we’re done for the present, Agent Pendergast. So let me close by saying simply this: You may not want this case solved. But it will be solved, and I’m the man who’s going to do it. I will take it as far as it leads, if necessary to the doorstep of a certain uncooperative FBI agent. Is that understood?”

“I would expect no less.” Pendergast rose, stood, and—nodding to Slade as he opened the door—exited the office without saying another word.

Back at the Riverside Drive mansion, Pendergast strode purposefully through the reception hall and into the library. Moving toward one of the tall bookcases full of leather-bound volumes, he pulled aside
a wooden panel, exposing a laptop computer. Typing quickly, using passwords when necessary, he first accessed the NYPD file servers, then the database of open homicide cases. Jotting down certain reference numbers, he moved next to the force’s DNA database, where he quickly located the forensic test results for DNA samples collected from the supposed Hotel Killer, who had traumatized the city with brutal murders in upscale Manhattan hotels a year and a half earlier.

Even though he was logged in as an authorized user, the data was locked and would not allow for alteration or deletion.

Pendergast stared at the screen for a moment. Then, plucking his cell phone from his pocket, he dialed a long-distance number in River Pointe, Ohio. It was answered on the first ring.

“Well,” came the soft, breathless voice. “If it isn’t my favorite Secret Agent Man.”

“Hello, Mime,” Pendergast replied.

“How can I be of assistance today?”

“I need some records removed from an NYPD database. Quietly, and without a trace.”

“Always happy to do what I can to subvert our boys in blue. Tell me: does this have anything to do with—what was that name again—Operation Wildfire?”

Pendergast paused. “It does. But please, Mime: no further questions.”

“You can’t blame me for being curious. But never mind. Do you have the necessary reference numbers?”

“Let me know when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now.”

Slowly and distinctly, eyes on the screen, fingers on the laptop’s trackpad, Pendergast began reciting the numbers.
It was six thirty that evening when Pendergast’s cell phone rang. The screen registered unknown number.

“Special Agent Pendergast?” The voice was anonymous, monotonal—and yet familiar.

“Yes.”

“I am your friend in need.”

“I’m listening.”

A dry chuckle. “We met once before. I came to your house. We drove beneath the George Washington Bridge. I gave you a file.”

“Of course. Regarding Locke Bullard. You’re the gentleman from—” Pendergast stopped himself before mentioning the man’s place of employment.

“Yes. And you are wise to leave those pesky government acronyms out of unprotected cell phone conversations.”

“What can I do for you?” Pendergast asked.

“You should ask instead: What can I do for you?”

“What makes you think I need help?”

“Two words. Operation Wildfire.”

“I see. Where shall we meet?”

“Do you know the FBI firing range on West Twenty-Second Street?”

“Of course.”

Pendergast entered through the double doors of the long, low building at the corner of Twenty-Second Street and Eighth Avenue, showed his FBI shield to the woman at the security barrier, descended a short flight of stairs, showed his shield again to the range master, picked up several paper targets and a pair of ear protectors, and entered the range proper. He walked along the forward section, past agents, trainees, and firearms instructors, to firing bay 16. There were protective sound baffles between every two firing bays, and he noticed that both bay 16 and the one beside it, 17, were empty. The report of gunfire from the other bays was only partially muffled by the baffles, and—always sensitive to sound—Pendergast fitted the hearing protection over his ears.

As he was laying out four empty magazines and a box of ammunition on the little shelf before him, he sensed a presence enter the bay. A tall, thin, middle-aged man in a gray suit, with deep-set eyes and a face rather lined for his age, had entered it. Pendergast recognized him immediately. His hair was perhaps a little thinner than the only other time Pendergast had seen him—some four years before—but in every other way he looked unchanged, bland, still surrounded with an air of mild anonymity. He was the sort of person that, if you passed him on the street, you would be unable to furnish a description even moments later.

The man did not return Pendergast’s glance, instead pulling a Sig Sauer P229 from his jacket and placing it on the shelf of bay 17. He did not don hearing protection, and with a discreet motion—still not looking Pendergast’s way—he made a motion for the agent to remove his own.

“Interesting choice of venue,” Pendergast said, looking down-range. “Rather less private than a car under the approach to the George Washington Bridge.”

“The very lack of privacy makes it even more anonymous. Just two feds, practicing at a firing range. No phones to tap, no wires to record. And of course, with all this racket, no chance for eavesdropping.”

“The range master’s going to remember the appearance of a CIA
operative at an FBI range—especially since you fellows usually don’t carry concealed weapons.”

“I have my share of alternative identities. He won’t remember anything specific.”

Pendergast opened the box of ammo and began loading the magazines.

“I like your custom 1911,” the man said, glancing at Pendergast’s weapon. “Les Baer Thunder Ranch Special? Nice-looking piece.”

“Perhaps you’d care to tell me why we’re here.”

“I’ve been keeping something of an eye on you since our first meeting,” the man said, still without making eye contact. “When I learned of your involvement in initiating Wildfire, I grew intrigued. A low-profile but intense monitoring operation, by certain members of both the FBI and CIA, for the location of a youth who may or may not be calling himself Alban, who may or may not be in hiding in Brazil or adjoining countries, who speaks Portuguese, English, and German fluently, and who above all things should be considered exceptionally capable and extremely dangerous.”

Instead of replying, Pendergast clipped a target—a marksman bull’s-eye with a red central X—to the rail and, pressing the out button on the baffle to his left, ran it out the full twenty-five yards. The man beside him clipped on an FBI qualification target—a gray bottle-like shape, without scaling or marking—and ran it out to the end of bay 17.

“And just today I get wind of an NYPD report in which you state that your son—also named Alban—was left on your doorstep, dead.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence. Hence, this meeting.”

Pendergast picked up one of the magazines, charged his weapon.

“Please don’t think me rude if I ask you to get to the point.”

“I can help you. You kept your word on the Locke Bullard case and saved me a lot of trouble. I believe in reciprocation. And like I said, I’ve kept track of you. You’re a rather interesting person. It’s entirely possible that you could be of assistance to me again, down the road. A partnership, if you will. I’d like to bank that.”

Pendergast didn’t respond.
“Surely you know you can trust me,” the man said over the muffled, yet omnipresent, sound of gunfire. “I’m the soul of discretion—as are you. Any information you give me stops with me. I may have resources you wouldn’t otherwise have access to.”

After a moment, Pendergast nodded once. “I’ll accept your offer. As for background, I have two sons, twins, whose existence I only learned of a year and a half ago. One of those sons—Alban—is, or was, a sociopathic killer of a most dangerous type. He’s the so-called Hotel Killer, a case that remains open and unsolved by the NYPD. I wish the case to remain so, and have taken steps to ensure that it shall. Shortly after I became aware of his existence, he disappeared into the jungles of Brazil and was neither seen nor heard from until he appeared on my doorstep last night. I always believed that he would surface one day…and that the results would be catastrophic. For that reason, I initiated Operation Wildfire.”

“But Wildfire never received any hits.”

“None.”

The nameless man charged his own weapon, racked a bullet into the chamber, took aim with both hands, and discharged the entire magazine into the qualification target. Every shot landed within the gray bottle. The sound was deafening within the baffled space.

“Until yesterday, who knew that Alban was your son?” the man asked as he ejected his magazine.

“Only a handful of people—most of them family or house help.”

“And yet someone not only located and captured Alban, but also managed to kill him, leave him on your doorstep, and then escape practically undetected.”

Pendergast nodded.

“In short, our perp was able to do what the CIA and FBI could not, plus a lot more.”

“Exactly. The perpetrator has great ability. He may well be in law enforcement himself. Which is why I have no faith the NYPD will make any headway on this case.”

“I understand Angler’s a good cop.”

“Alas, that’s the problem. He’s just good enough to become a
gross impediment to my own effort to find the killer. Better that he were incompetent.”

“Which is why you’re being so unhelpful?”
Pendergast said nothing.
“Your other son?”
“I’ve arranged for him to be in protective custody abroad.”
The man loaded another magazine into the Sig, released the slide, emptied the magazine into the target, and pressed the button to reel the target in. “And what are your feelings? About the murder of your son, I mean.”
Pendergast did not answer for a long time. “In the parlance of the day, the best answer would be: I am conflicted. He is dead. That is a good outcome. On the other hand . . . he was my son.”

“What are your plans when—or if—you find the responsible party?”
Again, Pendergast did not reply. Instead he raised the Les Baer in his right hand, left hand behind his back, in an unsupported stance. Briskly, shot after careful shot, he emptied the magazine into the target, then quick-changed to a fresh magazine, shifted the gun into his left hand, turned to face the target once again, this time from the other way, and—much faster now—again fired all seven rounds. Then he pressed the in button on the wall of the baffle to reel back the target.
The CIA operative looked over. “You tore the bull’s-eye completely out. One-handed, and a bladed stance, no less—using both strong and weak hands.” There was a pause. “Was that your answer to my question?”
“I was merely taking advantage of the moment to hone my skills.”
“You don’t need honing. In any case, I’ll put my resources to work immediately. As soon as I find out anything, I’ll let you know.”
“Thank you.”
The operative nodded. Then, fitting his earmuffs to his head, he put the Sig Sauer to one side and began refilling his own magazines.
Lieutenant Vincent D’Agosta began climbing the broad, granite steps of the main entrance to the New York Museum of Natural History. As he did so, he glanced up through the noon light at the vast Beaux-Arts façade—four city blocks long, in the grand Roman style. This building held very bad memories for him…and it seemed like an unpleasant twist of fate that he would find himself entering it again, now of all times.

Just the night before, he had returned from the best two weeks of his life: a honeymoon, with his new bride Laura Hayward, at the Turtle Bay Resort on the fabled North Shore of Oahu. They’d spent the time sunbathing, walking the miles of pristine beach, snorkeling Kuilima Cove—and, of course, getting to know each other even more intimately. It had been, quite literally, paradise.

So it had been a nasty shock to report to work that morning—a Sunday, no less—and find himself assigned as lead detective on the murder of a technician in the Museum’s Osteology Department. Not only was he saddled with a case the minute he got back…but he’d have to conduct his investigation in a building that he’d really, really wished he never had to enter again.

Nevertheless, he was determined to bring closure to this case and bring the perp to justice. It was exactly the kind of bullshit killing that gave New York a bad name—a random, senseless, vicious murder of
some poor guy who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He stopped to catch his breath—damn, he’d have to go on a diet after the past two weeks of poi, kalua pig, opihi, haupia, and beer. After a moment, he continued up the stairs and passed through the entrance into the vastness of the Great Rotunda. Here he paused again to pull out his iPad and refresh himself on the details of the case. The murder had been discovered late the previous evening. All the initial crime scene work had been completed. D’Agosta’s first task would be to re-interview the security guard who had discovered the body. Then he had a date with the public relations director who—knowing the Museum—would be more concerned with neutralizing bad press than solving the crime. There were another half a dozen names on his list of interviewees.

He showed his shield to one of the guards, signed in, got a temporary ID, then made his way across the echoing expanse, past the dinosaurs, past another checkpoint, through an unmarked door, and down a series of labyrinthine back corridors to Central Security—a journey he remembered all too well. A uniformed guard sat, alone, in the waiting area. As D’Agosta entered, he jumped to his feet.

“Mark Whittaker?” D’Agosta asked.

The man nodded rapidly. He was short—about five foot three—and portly, with brown eyes and thinning blond hair.

“Lieutenant D’Agosta, homicide. I know you’ve been over all this before, and I’ll try not to take up more of your time than necessary.” He shook the man’s limp, sweaty hand. In his experience, private security guards were one of two types—wannabe cops, resentful and pugnacious, or mild-mannered door shakers, cowed and intimidated by the real McCoy. Mark Whittaker was definitely of the latter breed.

“Can we chat at the crime scene?”

“Sure, yes, of course.” Whittaker seemed eager to please.

D’Agosta followed him on another lengthy journey back out of the bowels and into the public areas of the Museum. As they walked through the winding corridors, D’Agosta couldn’t help glancing at the exhibits. It had been years since he’d set foot in this place, but it didn’t
seem to have changed much. They were walking through the dark-
ened, two-story African hall, past a herd of elephants, and from there
into the Hall of African Peoples, Mexico and Central America, South
America, hall after echoing hall of cases full of birds, gold, pottery,
sculpture, textiles, spears, clothing, masks, skeletons, monkeys... He
found himself panting and wondering how the hell it was he could
hardly keep up with this fat little guard.

They made their way into the Hall of Marine Life and Whittaker
finally came to a stop at one of the more distant alcoves, which had
been sealed off with yellow crime scene tape. A Museum guard stood
before the tape.

"The Gastropod Alcove," D'Agosta said, reading the name off a
brass plaque that stood beside the opening.

Whittaker nodded.

D'Agosta showed his shield to the guard, ducked under the tape,
and motioned Whittaker to follow. The space beyond was dark and
the air dead. Glass cabinets covered the three walls of the alcove,
stuffed full of shells of all sizes and shapes, from snails to clams to
whelks. Waist-high display cases, sporting still more shells, stood
before the cabinets. D'Agosta sniffed. This had to be the least-visited
place in the entire damn Museum. His eye fell on a queen conch,
pink and shiny, and for a moment he was transported back to one
particular evening on the North Shore of Hawaii, the sand still warm
from the just-departed sun, Laura lying beside him, the creamy surf
curling around their feet. He sighed and hauled himself back to the
present.

He glanced below one of the display cases, where a chalk outline
and several evidence tags were visible, along with a long, long rivulet
of dried blood. "When did you find the body?"

"Saturday night. About eleven ten."

"And you came on duty at what time?"

"Eight."

"This hall was part of your normal shift?"

Whittaker nodded.

"When does the Museum close on Saturdays?"
“Six.”

“How often do you patrol this hall, after hours?”

“It varies. The rotation can be anywhere from half an hour to every forty-five minutes. I have a card I have to swipe as I go along. They don’t like us to make our rounds on a regular schedule.”

D’Agosta took out of his pocket a floor plan of the Museum he had grabbed on the way in. “Could you draw on here your rounds of duty or whatever you call it?”

“Sure.” Whittaker fumbled a pen out of his pocket and drew a wandering line on the map, encompassing much of the floor. He handed it back to D’Agosta.

D’Agosta scrutinized it. “Doesn’t look like you normally go into this particular alcove.”

Whittaker paused for a moment, as if this might be a trick question. “Not usually. I mean, it’s a cul-de-sac. I walk past it.”

“So what made you look into it at eleven pm last night?”

Whittaker dabbed at his brow. “The blood had run out into the middle of the floor. When I shone my light in, the . . . the beam picked it up.”

D’Agosta recalled all the blood from the SOC photographs. A reconstruction of the crime indicated that the victim, an older technician named Victor Marsala, had been bludgeoned over the head with a blunt instrument in this out-of-the-way alcove, his body stuffed beneath the display case, minus watch, wallet, and pocket change.

D’Agosta consulted his tablet. “Any special events going on yesterday evening?”

“No.”

“No sleepovers, private parties, IMAX shows, after-hours tours? Things of that nature?”

“Nothing.”

D’Agosta already knew most of this, but he liked to go over familiar ground with a witness, just in case. The coroner’s report indicated that the time of death had been around ten thirty. “In the forty minutes leading up to your discovery of the body, did you see anyone
or anything unusual? A tourist after hours, claiming to be lost? A Museum employee out of his or her normal working area?"

“I didn’t see anything odd. Just the usual scientists and curators working late.”

“And this hall?”

“Empty.”

D’Agosta nodded out past the alcove, toward a discreet door in the far wall with a red exit sign over it. “Where does that lead?”

Whittaker shrugged. “Just the basement.”

D’Agosta considered. The South American gold hall wasn’t far away, but it hadn’t been touched, nothing had been stolen or disturbed. It was possible Marsala, on his way out after completing a late-night assignment, had disturbed some bum, taking a catnap in this desolate corner of the Museum, but D’Agosta doubted the story was even that exotic. What was unusual about the case was that the killer had apparently managed to leave the Museum without notice. The only way out at that time of the night was through a heavily guarded checkpoint on the lower level. Was the killer a Museum employee? He had a list of everyone working late that night, and it was surprisingly long. Then again, the Museum was a big place with a staff of several thousand.

He asked Whittaker a few more perfunctory questions, then thanked him. “I’m going to look around, you can head back on your own,” he said.

He spent the next twenty minutes poking around the alcove and adjoining areas, regularly referring to the crime scene photos on his tablet. But there was nothing new to see, nothing to find, nothing that appeared to have been overlooked.

Fetching a sigh, D’Agosta stuffed the iPad back into his briefcase and headed off in the direction of the public relations department.
Observing an autopsy ranked low on the list of Lieutenant Peter Angler’s favorite activities. It wasn’t that he had a problem with the sight of blood. In his fifteen years on the force, he’d seen more than his share of dead bodies—shot, stabbed, bludgeoned, run over, poisoned, pancaked on the sidewalk, cut in pieces on the subway tracks. Not to mention his own injuries. And he was no shrinking violet: he’d drawn his gun in the line of duty a dozen times and used it twice. He could deal with violent death. What made him uneasy was the cold, clinical way in which a corpse was systematically taken apart, organ by organ, handled, photographed, commented on, even joked about. That and, of course, the smell. But over the years he’d learned to live with the task, and he approached it with stoic resignation.

There was something about this autopsy, however, that gave it a particularly macabre cast. Angler had seen a lot of autopsies—but he’d never seen one that was being keenly observed by the victim’s own father.

There were five people in the room—living people, anyway: Angler; one of his detectives, Millikin; the forensic pathologist in charge of the autopsy; the assisting diener, short and shriveled and hunched like Quasimodo—and Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast.

Of course, Pendergast had no official status here. When Pendergast made his bizarre request, Angler had considered denying him
access. After all, the agent had been uncooperative in the investigation to date. But Angler had done some checking up on Pendergast and learned that—while he was known in the Bureau for his unorthodox methods—he was also held in awe for his remarkable success rate. Angler had never seen a dossier so full of both commendations and censures. So in the end he decided it simply wasn’t worth trying to bar the man from the autopsy. After all, it *was* his son. And besides, he had a pretty good sense that Pendergast would have found a way to be present, no matter what he said.

The pathologist, Dr. Constantinescu, also seemed to know of Pendergast. Constantinescu looked more like a kindly old country doctor than a medical examiner, and the presence of the special agent had thrown him for a loop. He was as tense and nervous as a cat in a new house. Time and again, as he’d murmured his medical observations into the hanging mike, he’d paused, glanced over his shoulder at Pendergast, then cleared his throat and begun again. It had taken him almost an hour to complete the external examination alone—which was remarkable, given the almost total absence of evidence to discover, collect, and label. The removal of the clothing, photography, X-rays, weighing, toxicity tests, noting of distinguishing marks, and the rest of it had gone on forever. It was as if the pathologist was afraid of making the slightest mistake, or had a strange reluctance to get on with the work. The diener, who didn’t seem to be in on the story, was impatient, rocking from one foot to the other, arranging and rearranging instruments. Throughout it all Pendergast stood motionless, somewhat back from the others, the gown like a shroud around him, eyes moving from Constantinescu to the body of his son and back again, saying nothing, expressing nothing.

“No obvious external bruises, hematomas, puncture wounds, or other injuries,” the pathologist was saying into the microphone. “Initial external examination, along with X-ray evidence, indicates that death resulted from a crushing injury to the cervical vertebrae C3 and C4, along with possible lateral rotation of the skull, transecting the spinal column and inducing spinal shock.”

Dr. Constantinescu stepped back from the mike, cleared his
throat yet again. “We, ah, we’re about to commence with the internal examination, Agent Pendergast.”

Still Pendergast remained motionless, save perhaps for the slightest inclination of his head. He was very pale; his features were as set as any Angler had seen on a man. The more he got to know this Pendergast, the less he liked him. The man was a kind of freak.

Angler turned his attention back to the body lying on the gurney. The young man had been in excellent physical condition. Staring at the corpse’s sleek musculature and lines graceful even in death, he was reminded of certain depictions of Hektor and Achilles in Black Figure pottery paintings attributed to the Antiope Group.

We’re about to commence with the internal examination. The body wasn’t going to be beautiful much longer.

At a nod from Constantinescu, the diener brought over the Stryker saw. Firing it up, the pathologist moved it around Alban’s skull—as it cut bone, the saw made a distinct, grinding whine that Angler hated—and removed the top of the head. This was unusual: in Angler’s experience, usually the brain was the last of the organs to be removed. Most autopsies began with the standard Y-incision. Perhaps it had something to do with the cause of death being a broken neck. But Angler felt a more likely cause was the other observer in the room. He stole a glance toward Pendergast. The man looked, if anything, even paler, his face more closed than ever.

Constantinescu examined the brain, carefully removed it, placed it on a scale, and murmured some more observations into the mike. He took a few tissue samples, handed them to the diener, and then—without looking over this time—spoke to Pendergast. “Agent Pendergast . . . are you planning on an open casket viewing?”

For a moment, silence. And then Pendergast replied. “There will be no viewing—or funeral. When the body is released I’ll make the necessary arrangements to have it cremated.” His voice sounded like a knife blade scraping against ice.

“I see.” Constantinescu replaced the brain in the skull cavity, and hesitated. “Before continuing, I should like to ask a question. The X-rays appeared to show a rounded object in the . . . deceased’s
stomach. And yet there are no scars on the body to indicate old gunshot wounds or surgical procedures. Are you aware of any implants the body might have contained?"

“I am not,” Pendergast said.

“Very well.” Constantinescu nodded slowly. “I will make the Y-incision now.”

When nobody spoke, the pathologist took up the Stryker saw again, making cuts in the left and right shoulders and angling them down so they met at the sternum, then completing the incision in a single line to the pubis with a scalpel. The diener handed him a set of shears and Constantinescu completed the opening of the chest cavity, lifting away the severed ribs and flesh and exposing the heart and lungs.

Behind Angler’s shoulder, Pendergast remained rigid. A certain odor began to spread through the room—an odor that always stayed with Angler, much like the whine of the Stryker.

One after the other, Constantinescu removed the heart and the lungs, examined them, weighed them on the scale, took tissue samples, murmured his observations into the mike, and placed the organs in plastic bags for returning to the body during the final, reconstitution phase of the autopsy. The liver, kidneys, and other major organs were given the same treatment. Then the pathologist turned his attention to the central arteries, severing them and making quick inspections. The man was working rapidly now, the polar opposite of his dawdling with the preliminaries.

Next came the stomach. After inspection and weighing, photographing and tissue sampling, Constantinescu reached for a large scalpel. This was the part Angler really hated: examination of the stomach contents. He moved a little farther away from the gurney.

The pathologist hovered over the metal basin in which the stomach lay, working on it with gloved hands, now and then using the scalpel or a pair of forceps, the diener leaning in close. The smell in the room grew worse.

Suddenly there came a noise: a loud clink of something hard in the steel container. The pathologist audibly caught his breath. He
murmured to the diener, who handed him a fresh pair of forceps. Reaching into the metal basin that held the stomach and its contents, Constantinescu lifted something with the forceps—something roundish, slick with opaque fluids—and turned to a sink, where he carefully rinsed it off. When he turned back, Angler saw to his vast surprise that what lay between the forceps was a stone, irregular in shape and just a little larger than a marble. A deep-blue stone—a precious stone.

In his peripheral vision, he saw that Pendergast had, finally, reacted. Constantinescu held the stone up in the forceps, staring at it, turning it this way and that. "Well, well," he murmured.

He put it into an evidence bag and proceeded to seal it. As he did so, Angler found that Pendergast had stepped to his side, staring at the stone. Gone was the remote, unreadable expression, the distant eyes. There was now a sudden hunger in them, a need, that almost pushed Angler back.

"That stone," Pendergast said. "I must have it."

Angler wasn’t quite sure he’d heard correctly. "Have it? That stone is the first piece of hard evidence we’ve come across."

"Exactly. Which is why I must be given access to it."

Angler licked his lips. "Look, Agent Pendergast. I realize it’s your son who’s on that gurney, and that this can’t be easy for you. But this is an official investigation, we have rules to obey and procedures to follow, and with evidence so short here you must know—"

"I have resources that can help. I need that stone. I must have it." Pendergast stepped closer, skewering Angler with his gaze. "Please."

Angler had to consciously keep from retreating before the intensity of Pendergast’s gaze. Something told him that please was a word Pendergast used rather infrequently. He stood silent a moment, torn between conflicting emotions. But the exchange had one strong effect on Angler—he was now persuaded that Pendergast actually did want to find out what had happened to his son. He suddenly felt sorry for the man.

"It needs to be logged as evidence," he said. "Photographed, fully described, cataloged, entered into the database. Once all that
is complete, you may sign it out from Evidence, but only with the chain-of-custody protocols strictly observed. It must be returned within twenty-four hours.

Pendergast nodded. “Thank you.”

“Twenty-four hours. No longer.”

But he found himself speaking to Pendergast’s back. The man was moving swiftly toward the door, the green gown flapping behind him.
The Osteology Department of the New York Museum of Natural History was a seemingly endless warren of rooms tucked under broad rooftops, reachable only by a massive set of double doors at the end of a long corridor containing the Museum’s fifth-floor offices, and thence by a gigantic, slow-moving freight elevator. When D’Agosta had stepped into that elevator (and found himself sharing the space with the carcass of a monkey stretched out on a dolly), he realized why the department was situated so far from the public spaces of the Museum: the place stank—as his father would have said—like a whorehouse at low tide.

The freight elevator boomed to a stop, the doors opened, top and bottom, and D’Agosta stepped out into the Osteology Department, looked around, and rubbed his hands together impatiently. His next scheduled interview was with Morris Frisby, the chair of both the Anthropology and Osteology Departments. Not that he held out much hope for the interview, because Frisby had just returned this morning from a conference in Boston, and had not been in the Museum at the time of the technician’s death. More promising was the youth shuffling over to meet him, one Mark Sandoval, an Osteology technician who’d been out for a week with a bad summer cold.

Sandoval closed the main Osteology door behind them. He looked as if he was still sick as a dog; his eyes were red and swollen,
his face pale, and he was dabbing at his nose with a Kleenex. At least, D’Agosta thought, the guy was spared the terrible smell. Then again, he was probably used to it.

“I’m ten minutes early for my meeting with Dr. Frisby,” D’Agosta said. “Mind showing me around? I want to see where Marsala worked.”

“Well…” Sandoval swallowed, glanced over his shoulder.

“Is there a problem?” D’Agosta asked.

“It’s…” Another glance over the shoulder, followed by a lowering of voice. “It’s Dr. Frisby. He’s not too keen on…” The voice trailed off.

D’Agosta understood immediately. No doubt Frisby was a typical Museum bureaucrat, jealous of his petty fiefdom and gun-shy about adverse publicity. He could picture the curator: tweed jacket trailing pipe dottle, pink razor-burned wattles quivering in fussy consternation.

“Don’t worry,” D’Agosta said. “I won’t quote you by name.”

Sandoval hesitated another moment and then began leading the way down the corridor.

“I understand you were the person who worked most closely with Marsala,” D’Agosta said.

“As close as anybody could, I suppose.” He still seemed a little on edge.

“He wasn’t popular?”

Sandoval shrugged. “I don’t want to speak ill of the dead.”

D’Agosta took out his notebook. “Tell me anyway, if you don’t mind.”

Sandoval dabbed at his nose. “He was… well, a hard guy to get along with. Had something of a chip on his shoulder.”

“How so?”

“I guess you could say he was a failed scientist.”

They walked past what looked like the door of a gigantic freezer.

“Go on.”

“He went to college, but he couldn’t pass organic chemistry—and without that, you’re dead meat as far as a PhD in biology goes. After college he came to work here as a technician. He was really good at working with bones. But without an advanced degree he could only
go so far. It was a real sore point. He didn’t like the scientists ordering him around, everyone had to walk on eggshells with him. Even me—and I was the closest thing to a friend Victor had here. Which isn’t saying much.”

Sandoval led the way through a doorway on the left. D’Agosta found himself in a room full of huge metal vats. Overhead, a row of gigantic vents were busily sucking out the air, but it didn’t seem to help—the smell was much stronger.

“This is the maceration room,” Sandoval said.

“The what?”

“The maceration room.” Sandoval dabbed at his nose with the Kleenex. “See, one of the main jobs here in Osteology is to receive carcasses and reduce them to bones.”

“Carcasses? As in human?”

Sandoval grinned. “In the old days, sometimes. You know, donations to medical science. Now it’s all animals. The larger specimens are placed in these maceration vats. They’re full of warm water. Not sterile. Leave a specimen in a vat long enough, it liquefies, and when you pull the plug all you have left are the bones.” Sandoval pointed to the nearest soup-filled vat. “There’s a gorilla macerating in that one at the moment.”

Just then, a technician came in pushing the dolly with the monkey on it. “And that,” said Sandoval, “is a snow monkey from the Central Park Zoo. We’ve a contract with them—we get all their dead animals.”

D’Agosta swallowed uncomfortably. The smell was really getting to him now, and the spicy fried Italian sausages he’d had for breakfast weren’t sitting all that well.

“That was Marsala’s primary job,” Sandoval said. “Overseeing the maceration process. He also worked with the beetles, of course.”

“Beetles?”

“This way.” Sandoval walked back out into the main corridor, passed several more doors, then stepped into another lab. Unlike the maceration room, this space was full of small glass trays, like aquariums. D’Agosta walked up to one and peered within. Inside, he saw
what appeared to be a large, dead rat. It was swarming with black beetles, busily engaged in gorging themselves on the carcass. He could actually hear the noise of their munching. D’Agosta stepped back quickly with a muttered curse. His breakfast stirred dangerously in his stomach.

“Dermestid beetles,” Sandoval explained. “Carnivorous. It’s how we strip the flesh from the bones of smaller specimens. Leaves the skeletons nicely articulated.”

“Articulated?” D’Agosta asked in a strangled voice.

“You know—wiring the bones together, mounting them on metal frames for display or examination. Marsala cared for the beetles, watched over the specimens that were brought in. He did the degreasing, too.”

D’Agosta didn’t ask, but Sandoval explained anyway. “Once a specimen is reduced to bones, it’s immersed in benzene. A good soaking turns them white, dissolves all the lipids, gets rid of the odor.”

They returned to the central hallway. “Those were his main responsibilities,” Sandoval said. “But as I told you, Marsala was a whiz with skeletons. So he was often asked to articulate them.”

“I see.”

“In fact, the articulation lab was the place Marsala made his office.”

“Lead the way, please.”

Dabbing at his nose again, Sandoval continued down the seemingly endless corridor. “These are some of the Osteology collections,” he said, gesturing at a series of doors. “The bone collections, arranged taxonomically. And now we’re entering the Anthropology collections.”

“Which are?”

“Burials, mummies, and ‘prepared skeletons’—dead bodies collected by anthropologists, often from battlefields during the Indian wars—and brought back to the Museum. Something of a lost art. We’ve been forced to return a lot of these to the tribes in recent years.”

D’Agosta glanced into an open doorway. He could make out row after row of wooden cabinets with rippled glass doors, within which lay innumerable sliding trays, each with a label affixed to it.

After passing another dozen or so storage rooms, Sandoval
showed D’Agosta into a lab full of workbenches and soapstone-topped tables. The stench was fainter here. Skeletons of various animals sat on metal frames atop the benches, in various stages of completion. A few desks were pushed up against the far wall, computers and a variety of tools sitting on them.

“That was Marsala’s desk,” Sandoval said, pointing at one.

“Did he have a girlfriend?” D’Agosta asked.

“Not that I know of.”

“What did he do in his off hours?”

Sandoval shrugged. “He didn’t talk about it. He more or less kept to himself. This lab was practically his home—he worked long hours. Didn’t have much of an outside life, it seemed to me.”

“You say he was a prickly guy, hard to work with. Was there anyone in particular that he clashed with?”

“He was always getting into spats.”

“Anything that really stood out?”

Sandoval hesitated. D’Agosta waited, notebook in hand.

“There was one thing,” Sandoval said at last. “About two months back, a curator of mammalogy came in with a suite of extremely rare, almost extinct bats he’d collected in the Himalayas. Marsala put them in some of the dermestid beetle trays. Then he . . . messed up. He didn’t check them as frequently as he should have, left them too long. That wasn’t like Marsala at all, but at the time he seemed to have something on his mind. Anyway, if you don’t take the specimens out of the trays in time, they can be ruined. The hungry beetles chew through the cartilage and the bones get disarticulated and then they eat the bones themselves. That happened to the bat specimens. The bat scientist—he’s a little crazy, like a lot of curators—went nuts. Said some terrible things to Marsala in front of the whole Osteology staff. Really pissed Marsala off, but he couldn’t do anything about it, because he was the one at fault.”

“What was the name of this mammalogy curator?”

“Brixton. Richard Brixton.”

D’Agosta wrote down the name. “You said Marsala had something else on his mind. Any idea what it was?”
Sandoval thought a moment. “Well, around that time he’d started working with a visiting scientist on some research.”

“Is that uncommon?”

“On the contrary—it’s very common.” Sandoval pointed out the door toward a room across the hall. “That’s where visiting scientists examine bones. They’re coming in and out all the time. We get scientists from all over the world. Marsala didn’t usually work with them, though—his attitude problem and all that. In fact, this was the first scientist he’d worked for in almost a year.”

“Did Marsala say what kind of research it was?”

“No. But at the time, he’d seemed pretty pleased with himself. As if he anticipated a feather in his cap or something.”

“You recall this scientist’s name?”

Sandoval scratched his head. “I think it was Walton. But it might have been Waldron. They have to sign in and out, get credentialed. Frisby keeps a list. You could find out that way.”

D’Agosta looked around the room. “Anything else I should know about Marsala? Anything unusual, or odd, out of character?”

“No.” Sandoval blew his nose with a mighty honk.

“His body was found in the Gastropod Alcove off the Hall of Marine Life. Can you think of any reason why he should have been in that section of the Museum?”

“He never went there. Bones—this lab—was all he cared about. That’s not even on the way out.”

D’Agosta made another notation.

“Any other questions?” Sandoval asked.

D’Agosta glanced at his watch. “Where can I find Frisby?”

“I’ll take you there.” And Sandoval led the way out of the lab and up the corridor—heading back into the foulest section of the department.
Dr. Finisterre Paden backed away from the X-ray diffraction machine he had been hunched over, only to find himself ricocheting off what appeared to be a pillar of black cloth. He recoiled with a sharp expostulation and found himself staring up at a tall man clad in a black suit, who had somehow materialized behind him and must have been hovering, inches away, as he worked.

“What on earth?” Paden said furiously, his small, portly frame jiggling with affront. “Who let you in here? This is my office!”

The man did not react, and continued gazing down at him with eyes the color of white topaz and a face so finely modeled that it could have been carved by Michelangelo.

“Look here, who are you?” Paden asked, regaining his curatorial equilibrium. “I’m trying to get some work done and I can’t have people barging in!”

“I’m sorry,” said the man in a soothing voice, taking a step back.

“Well, so am I,” said Paden, somewhat mollified. “But this is really an imposition. And where’s your visitor’s badge?”

The man reached into his suit and removed a brown leather wallet.

“That’s no badge!”

The wallet fell open, revealing a dazzle of blue and gold.

"The name is Pendergast, Special Agent A. X. L. Pendergast. May I sit down?"

Paden swallowed. "I suppose so."

With a graceful flourish, the man parked himself in the only chair in the office other than Paden’s and crossed his legs, as if readying himself for a long stay.

"Is this about the murder?" Paden asked breathlessly. "Because I wasn’t even in the Museum when that happened. I don’t know anything about it, never met the victim. On top of that, I’ve no interest in gastropods. In my twenty years here, never been in that hall, not even once. So if that’s what…"

His voice trailed off as the man slowly raised a delicate hand.

"It isn’t about the murder. Won’t you sit, Dr. Paden? It is your office, after all."

Paden took a wary seat at the worktable, folded and unfolded his arms, wondering what this was about, why Museum security hadn’t notified him, and if he should answer questions or perhaps call a lawyer. Except he had no lawyer.

"Really, Dr. Paden, I do ask your forgiveness for the sudden intrusion. I have a small problem I need your help with—in informally, of course."

"I’ll do what I can."

The man extended one hand, closed. Like a magician, he opened it slowly to reveal a blue stone. Paden, relieved that it was a mere identification problem, took the stone and examined it. "Turquoise," he said, turning it over. "Tumbled." He took a loupe off the worktable, placed it in his eye, and looked more closely. "It appears to be natural stone, not stabilized and certainly not reconstituted, oiled, or waxed. A fine, gemmy specimen, of an unusual color and composition. Most unusual, in fact. I’d say it’s worth a fair amount of money, perhaps more than a thousand dollars."

"What makes it so valuable?"

"Its color. Most turquoise is sky blue, often with a greenish cast. But this stone is an unusually deep, deep blue, almost in the ultraviolet
spectrum. That, along with its surrounding golden matrix, is very rare.”

He removed the loupe, held the stone back out to the FBI agent. “I hope I’ve been of assistance.”

“Indeed you have,” came the honeyed return, “but I was hoping you might tell me where it came from.”

Paden took it back, examined it for a longer period of time. “Well, it’s certainly not Iranian. I’d guess it’s American—southwestern. Startling deep-azure color with a golden spiderweb matrix. I would say this most likely comes from Nevada, with Arizona or Colorado as outside possibilities.”

“Dr. Paden, I was told you were one of the world’s foremost experts on turquoise. I can see already that I was not deceived.”

Paden inclined his head. He was surprised to meet someone from law enforcement as insightful, and as gentlemanly, as this fellow.

“But you see, Dr. Paden, I need to know the exact mine it came from.”

As he spoke, the pale FBI agent looked at him most intensely. Paden smoothed his hand over his bald pate. “Well, Mr., ah, Pendergast, that’s a horse of a different color.”

“How so?”

“If I can’t recognize the source mine from an initial visual examination—and in this case I can’t—then testing of the specimen would be required. You see—” and here Paden drew himself up as he launched into his favorite subject—“turquoise is a hydrous phosphate of copper and aluminum, which forms by the percolation of water through a rock with many cavities and empty spaces, usually volcanic. The water carries dissolved copper sulfides and phosphorous, among other things, which precipitate in the interstices as turquoise. Southwestern turquoise almost invariably occurs where copper sulfide deposits are found among potassium feldspar bearing porphyritic intrusives. It can also contain limonite, pyrites, and other iron oxides.” He rose and, moving fast on stubby legs, walked to a massive cabinet, bent over, and pulled open a drawer. “Here you see a
small but exquisite collection of turquoise, all from prehistoric mines. We use it to help archaeologists identify the source of prehistoric turquoise artifacts. Come, take a look.”

Paden waved the agent over, then took the turquoise sample from him and rapidly compared it with others in the drawer. “I don’t see anything close to a match here, but turquoise can vary in appearance even from one part of a mine to another. And this is only a small sampling. Take this piece of Cerrillos turquoise, for example, from the Cerrillos mines south of Santa Fe. This rare piece comes from the famed prehistoric site known as Mount Chalchihuitl. It’s ivory with a pale-lime matrix, of great historical value, even if it isn’t the finest quality. And here we have examples of prehistoric turquoise from Nevada—”

“How terribly interesting,” Pendergast said smoothly, stemming the flow of words. “You mentioned testing. What sort of testing would be necessary?”

Paden cleared his throat. It had been mentioned to him more than once that he had a tendency to run on. “What I’ll have to do is analyze your stone—turquoise and matrix—using various means. I’ll start with proton-induced X-ray emission analysis, in which the stone is bombarded with high-speed protons in a vacuum, and the resulting X-ray emission analyzed. Fortunately, here at the Museum we have an excellent mineralogy lab. Would you care to see it?” He beamed at Pendergast.

“No, thank you,” said Pendergast. “But I’m delighted you’re willing to do the work.”

“But of course! This is what I do. Mostly for archaeologists, of course, but for the FBI—I am at your service, Mr. Pendergast.”

“I almost forgot to mention to you my little problem.”

“Which is?”

“I need the work done by noon tomorrow.”

“What? Impossible! It will take weeks. A month, at least!”

A long pause. “But would it be physically possible for you to complete the analysis by tomorrow?”

Paden felt his scalp prickle. He wasn’t sure that this man was
quite as pleasant and easygoing as he seemed at first. “Well.” He cleared his throat. “It’s physically possible, I suppose, to get some preliminary results by then, but it would mean working nonstop for the next twenty hours. And even then I might not succeed.”

“Why not?”

“It would all depend on whether this particular type of turquoise has been analyzed before, with its chemical signature recorded in the database. I’ve done quite a lot of turquoise analyses for archaeologists, you see. It helps them figure out trade routes and so forth. But if this piece comes from a newer mine, we might never have analyzed it. The older the mine, the better the chance.”

A silence. “May I ask you, Dr. Paden, to kindly undertake this task?”

Paden smoothed his pate again. “You’re asking me to stay up for the next twenty hours, working on your problem?”

“Yes.”

“I have a wife and children, Mr. Pendergast! Today’s a Sunday—normally I wouldn’t even be here. And I am not a young man.”

The agent seemed to take this in. Then, with a languid motion, he reached into his pocket and removed something, again holding it in his closed hand. He reached out and opened the hand. Inside was nestled a small, glittering reddish-brown cut stone of about a carat. Instinctively, Paden reached out to take it, screwed the loupe into his eye, and examined it, turning it this way and that. “Oh my. Oh my, my. Strongly pleochroic…” He grabbed a small, handheld UV light from the table and switched it on. The stone instantly changed color, becoming a brilliant neon green.

He looked up, his eyes wide. “Painite.”

The FBI agent bowed his head. “I was not deceived in thinking you were a most excellent mineralogist.”

“Where in heaven’s name did you get this?”

“My great-grand-uncle was a collector of oddities, which I inherited along with his house. I plucked this from his collection, as an inducement. It’s yours—provided you accomplish the task at hand.”
“But this stone must be worth . . . good heavens, I hesitate to even put a price on it. Painite is one of the rarest gemstones on earth!”

“My dear Dr. Paden, the information on what mine that turquoise came from is far more precious to me than that stone. Now: can you do it? And,” he added dryly, “are you sure your wife and children won’t object?”

But Paden was already on his feet, placing the turquoise in a zip-lock bag and thinking ahead to the many chemical and mineralogical tests he would need to perform. “Object?” he said over his shoulder as he departed into the inner sanctum of his laboratory. “Who the hell cares?”
After three wrong turns and two stops to ask directions, Lieutenant D’Agosta finally managed to find his way out of the maze of the Osteology Department and down to the ground floor. He crossed the Great Rotunda toward the entrance, walking slowly, deep in thought. His meeting with the chief curator, Morris Frisby, had been a waste of time. None of the other interviews had shed much light on the murder. And he had no idea how the perp effected egress from the Museum.

He’d been wandering the Museum since early that morning, and now both his feet and the small of his back ached. This was looking more and more like a typical piece-of-shit New York City murder case, random and brainless—and as such, a pain in the ass to clear. None of the day’s leads had panned out. The consensus was that Victor Marsala had been an unpleasant person but a good worker. Nobody at the Museum had reason to kill him. The only possible suspect—Brixton, the bat scientist, who’d had a row with Marsala two months before—had been out of the country at the time of the murder. And besides, a weenie like that just wasn’t the type. Members of D’Agosta’s team had already interviewed Marsala’s neighbors in Sunnyside, Queens. They all labeled him as quiet, a loner who kept to himself. No girlfriend. No parties. No drugs. And quite possibly no friends, except perhaps the Osteology technician, Sandoval. Parents lived in Missouri, hadn’t
seen their son in years. The body had been found in an obscure, rarely visited section of the Museum, missing wallet, watch, and pocket change. There was little doubt in D’Agosta’s mind: this was just another robbery gone bad. Marsala resisted and the dumb-ass perp panicked, killed him, and dragged him into the alcove.

To make matters worse, there was no lack of evidence—if anything, D’Agosta and his team were already drowning in it. The crime scene was awash in hair, fiber, and prints. Thousands of people had tramped through the hall since it was last mopped and the cases wiped down, leaving their greasy traces everywhere. He had a brace of detectives reviewing the Museum’s security videos, but so far they’d found nothing suspicious. Two hundred employees had worked late last night—so much for taking weekends off. D’Agosta could see it now, all too plainly: he’d beat his head against the case for another week or two, wasting his time in vain dead-end investigations. Then the case would be filed and slowly grow cold, another squalid unsolved homicide, with its megabytes of interview transcripts, digitized photos, and SOC analyses washing around the NYPD’s database like dirty water at the base of a pier, serving no purpose other than dragging down his clearance rate.

As he turned toward the exit and quickened his step, he spied a familiar figure: the tall form of Agent Pendergast, striding across the polished marble floor, black suit flapping behind him.

D’Agosta was startled to see him—particularly here, in the Museum. He hadn’t seen Pendergast since the private dinner party the FBI agent had hosted the month before in celebration of his impending wedding. The meal, and the wines, had been out of this world. Pendergast had prepared it himself with the help of his Japanese housekeeper. The food was unbelievable... At least until Laura, his wife, had deconstructed the printed menu the following day, and they realized they had eaten, among other things, fish lips and intestine soup (Sup Bibir Ikan) and cow’s stomach simmered with bacon, cognac, and white wine (Tripes à la Mode de Caen). But perhaps the best part of the dinner party was Pendergast himself. He had recovered from the tragedy that had befallen him eighteen months before,
and returned from a subsequent visit to a ski resort in Colorado having lost his pallor and skeletal gauntness, and now he looked fit both physically and emotionally, if still his usual cool, reserved self.

“Hey, Pendergast!” D’Agosta hurried across the Rotunda and seized his hand.

“Vincent.” Pendergast’s pale eyes lingered on D’Agosta for a moment. “How good to see you.”

“I wanted to thank you again for that dinner. You really went out of your way, and it meant a lot to us. Both of us.”

Pendergast nodded absently, his eyes drifting across the Rotunda. He seemed to have something on his mind.

“What are you doing here?” D’Agosta asked.

“I was... consulting with a curator.”

“Funny. I was just doing the same thing.” D’Agosta laughed.

“Like old times, eh?”

Pendergast didn’t seem to be amused.

“Look, I wonder if I could ask you a favor.”

A vague, noncommittal look greeted the question.

D’Agosta plowed ahead gamely. “No sooner do I get back from my honeymoon than Singleton dumps this murder case on me. A technician in the Osteology Department here was found last night, head bashed in and stuffed into an out-of-the-way exhibit hall. Looks like a robbery that escalated into homicide. You’ve got such a great nose for these things that I wonder if I could just share a few details, get your take...”

During the course of this mini-speech, Pendergast had grown increasingly restive. Now he looked at D’Agosta with an expression that stopped him in midsentence. “I’m sorry, my dear Vincent, but I fear that at present I have neither the time nor the interest to discuss a case with you. Good day.” And with the shortest of nods, he turned on his heel and strode briskly in the direction of the Museum’s exit.
Deep within the stately German Renaissance confines of the Dakota, at the end of a succession of three interconnected and very private apartments, beyond a sliding partition of wood and rice paper, lay an uchi-roji: the inner garden of a Japanese teahouse. A path of flat stones wound sinuously between dwarf evergreens. The air was full of the scent of eucalyptus and the song of unseen birds. In the distance sat the teahouse itself, small and immaculate, barely visible in the simulacrum of late-afternoon light.

This near-miracle—a private garden, in exquisite miniature, set down within the fastness of a vast Manhattan apartment building—had been designed by Agent Pendergast as a place for meditation and rejuvenation of the soul. He was now sitting on a bench of carved keyaki wood, set just off the stone path and overlooking a tiny goldfish pond. He remained motionless, gazing into the dark waters, where orange-and-white fish moved in desultory fashion, mere shadows.

Normally, this sanctuary afforded him relief from the cares of the world, or at least a temporary oblivion. But this afternoon, no peace was to be found.

A chirp came from the pocket of his suit jacket. It was his cell phone, its number known to less than half a dozen people. He glanced at the incoming call and saw UNKNOWN NUMBER displayed.

“Yes?”
“Agent Pendergast.” It was the dry voice of the unnamed CIA operative he had met with at the firing range two days before. On prior occasions, the man’s voice had contained a trace of wryness, as if detached from the workaday goings-on of the world. Today the irony was absent.

“Yes?” Pendergast repeated.

“I’m calling because I knew you’d want to hear the bad news sooner rather than later.”

Pendergast gripped the phone a little tighter. “Go on.”

“The bad news is that I have no news at all.”

“I see.”

“I’ve deployed some serious assets, expended a great deal of currency, and called in favors both locally and abroad. I’ve had several undercover operatives risk exposure, on the chance that certain foreign governments might be hiding information related to Operation Wildfire. But I’ve come up empty-handed. No sign that Alban ever surfaced in Brazil or elsewhere abroad. No records of his entering the country—I’ve had facial-recognition server farms at both Customs and Homeland Security working on it, without a hit. No local or federal law enforcement bread-crumb trails that have led anywhere.”

Pendergast took this in without a word.

“It’s still possible something will surface, of course—some nugget from an unexpected quarter, some database we overlooked. But I’ve exhausted everything in the standard bag of tricks—and then some.”

Still Pendergast said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” came the voice over the cell phone. “It’s…it’s more than a little mortifying. In my job, with the tools at my disposal, one gets used to success. I fear I may have seemed overconfident at our last meeting, raised your hopes.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Pendergast said. “My hopes were not raised. Alban was formidable.”

There was a brief silence before the man spoke again. “One thing you might want to know. Lieutenant Angler, the NYPD’s lead investigator on your son’s homicide…I took a look at his internal reports. He’s got a decided interest in you.”
“Indeed?”

“Your lack of cooperation—and your behavior—aroused his curiosity. Your appearance at the autopsy, for example. And your interest in that lump of turquoise, which you convinced the NYPD to loan you and which is now, I understand, overdue. You may be heading for a problem with Angler.”

“Thank you for the advice.”

“Don’t mention it. Again, I’m sorry I don’t have more. I still have eyes on the ground. If there’s any way I can be of further assistance, call the main number at Langley and ask for Sector Y. Meanwhile, I’ll let you know of any change in status.”

The line went dead.

Pendergast sat for a moment, staring at the cell phone. Then he slipped it back into his pocket, stood up, and made his way down the stone walkway and out of the tea garden.

In the large kitchen of the apartment’s private quarters, Pendergast’s housekeeper, Kyoko Ishimura, was at work chopping scallions. As the FBI agent passed through, she glanced over and—with a deaf person’s economy of gesture—indicated there was a telephone message waiting. Pendergast nodded his thanks, then continued down the hall to his office, stepped inside, picked up the phone, and—without taking a seat at the desk—retrieved the message.

“Um, ah, Mr. Pendergast.” It was the rushed, breathy voice of Dr. Paden, the mineralogist at the Museum. “I’ve analyzed the sample you left me yesterday with X-ray diffraction, brightfield microscopy, fluorescence, polarization, diascopic and episcopic illumination, among other tests. It is most definitely natural turquoise: hardness 6, refractive index is 1.614 and the specific gravity is about 2.87, and as I mentioned earlier there is no indication of stabilization or reconstitution. However, the sample exhibits some, ah, curious phenomena. The grain size is most unusual. I’ve never seen such semi-translucence embedded in a large spiderweb matrix. And the color . . . it doesn’t come from any of the well-known mines, and there is no record of its chemical signature in the database . . . In short, I,
Ah, fear it is a rare sample from a small mine that will prove difficult to identify, and that more time than I expected will be needed, perhaps a lot more time, so I’m hoping that you will be patient and won’t ask for the return of the painite while I...”

Pendergast did not bother to listen to the rest of the message. With a jab of his finger, he deleted it and hung up the phone. Only then did he sit down behind his desk, put his elbows on the polished surface, rest his chin on tented fingers, and stare off into space, seeing nothing.

Constance Greene was seated in the music room of the Riverside Drive mansion, playing softly on a harpsichord. It was a gorgeous instrument, made in Antwerp in the early 1650s by the celebrated Andreas Ruckers II. The beautifully grained wood of the case had been edged in gilt, and the underside of the top was painted with a pastoral scene of nymphs and satyrs cavorting in a leafy glade.

Pendergast himself had little use for music. But—while Constance’s own taste was by and large limited to the baroque and early classical periods—she was a superb harpsichordist, and Pendergast had taken enjoyment in acquiring for her the finest period instrument available. Other than the harpsichord, the room was simply and tastefully furnished. Two worn leather armchairs were arranged before a Persian carpet, bookended by a brace of identical standing Tiffany lamps. One wall had a recessed bookcase full of sheet music of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers in urtext editions. The opposite wall held half a dozen framed pages of faded handwritten scores, original holographs of Telemann, Scarlatti, Handel, and others.

Not infrequently, Pendergast would glide in, like a silent spectator, and take a seat in one of the chairs while Constance was playing. This time, Constance glanced up to see him standing framed in the doorway. She arched an eyebrow, as if to ask whether she should cease playing, but he simply shook his head. She continued with the Prelude no. 2 in C-sharp Minor from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. As she worked her way effortlessly through the short piece, wickedly fast and dense with ostinato passages, Pendergast did not take his accustomed seat, but instead roamed restlessly around the room, plucking...
a book of sheet music from the bookcase, leafing through it idly. Only when she was done did he move over to one of the leather armchairs and sit down.

“You play that piece beautifully, Constance,” he said.

“Ninety years of practice tends to improve one’s technique,” she replied with a ghost of a smile. “Any further word about Proctor?”

“He’ll pull through. He’s out of the ICU. But he’ll need to spend a few more weeks in the hospital, and then a month or two more in rehabilitation.”

A brief silence settled over the room. Then Constance rose from the harpsichord and took a seat in the opposite armchair. “You’re troubled,” she said.

Pendergast did not immediately reply.

“Naturally, it’s about Alban. You haven’t said anything since—since that evening. How are you doing?”

Still Pendergast said nothing, continuing to leaf idly through the book of sheet music. Constance, too, remained silent. She, more than anyone, knew that Pendergast intensely disliked discussing his feelings. But she also sensed instinctively that he had come to ask her advice. And so she waited.

At last, Pendergast closed the book. “The feelings I have are those that no father would ever wish for. There’s no grief. Regret—perhaps. Yet I’m also conscious of a sense of relief: relief that the world will be spared Alban and his sickness.”

“Understandable. But… he was your son.”

Abruptly, Pendergast flung the volume aside and stood up, pacing back and forth across the carpet. “And yet the strongest sensation I feel is bafflement. How did they do this? How did they capture and kill him? Alban was, if anything, a survivor. And with his special gifts… it must have taken enormous effort, expenditure, and planning to get him. I’ve never seen such a well-executed crime, one that left only the evidence meant to be left and no more. And most puzzling of all—why? What is the message being conveyed to me?”

“I confess I’m as mystified as you are.” Constance paused. “Any results from your inquiries?”
“The only real evidence—a piece of turquoise found in Alban’s stomach—is resisting identification. I just had a call about it from Dr. Paden, a mineralogist at the Museum of Natural History. He doesn’t seem confident of success.”

Constance watched the FBI agent as he continued to pace. “You mustn’t brood,” she said at last in a low voice.

He turned, made a dismissive motion with one hand.

“You need to throw yourself into a fresh case. Surely there are plenty of unsolved homicides awaiting your touch.”

“There is never a shortage of jejune murders out there, unworthy of mental application. Why should I bother?”

Constance continued to watch him. “Consider it a distraction. Sometimes I enjoy nothing more than playing a simple piece written for a beginner. It clears the mind.”

Pendergast wheeled toward her. “Why waste my time with some trifle, when the great mystery of Alban’s murder is staring me in the face? A person of rare ability seeks to draw me into some sort of malevolent game of his own devising. I don’t know my opponent, the name of his game—or even the rules.”

“And that’s exactly why you should immerse yourself in something totally different,” Constance said. “While awaiting the next development, take up some small conundrum, some simple case. Otherwise . . . you’ll lose your equilibrium.”

These last five words were spoken slowly, and with conviction. Pendergast’s gaze drifted to the floor. “You’re right, of course.”

“I suggest this because—because I care for you, and I know how obsessive and unhappy this bizarre case could make you. You’ve suffered enough.”

For a moment, Pendergast remained still. Then he glided forward, bent toward her, took her chin in one hand, and—to her great astonishment—kissed her gently.

“You are my oracle,” he murmured.
Vincent D’Agosta sat at the table in the small area he had claimed as his forward office in the New York Museum of Natural History. It had taken a heavy hand to pry it loose from the Museum’s administration. Grudgingly they had given up a vacant cubby deep within the Osteology Department, which was thankfully far from the reeking maceration tanks.

Now D’Agosta listened as one of his men, Detective Jimenez, summarized their review of the Museum’s security tapes for the day of the murder. In a word: zip. But D’Agosta put on a show of listening intently—he didn’t want the man to think his work wasn’t appreciated.

“Thank you, Pedro,” D’Agosta said, taking the written report.

“What next?” Jimenez asked.

D’Agosta glanced at his watch. It was quarter past four. “You and Conklin knock off for the day, go out and have a cold one, on me. We’ll be holding a status meeting in the briefing room tomorrow morning at ten.”

Jimenez smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

D’Agosta watched his departing form. He’d have given just about anything to join the guys in hoisting a few. But no: there was something he had to do. With a sigh, he flipped quickly through the pages
of Jimenez’s report. Then, putting it aside, he pulled his tablet from his briefcase and began preparing a report of his own—for Captain Singleton.

Despite his team’s best efforts, and two days during which more than a hundred man-hours of investigative work had been expended, not a single decent lead had surfaced in the murder of Victor Marsala. There were no eyewitnesses. The Museum’s security logs had picked up nothing unusual. The big question was how the damn perp had gotten out. They’d been beating their heads against that question from the beginning.

None of the enormous amount of forensic evidence they’d gathered was proving relevant. There appeared to be no good motive for murder among Marsala’s co-workers, and those who bore even the faintest grudge against him had ironclad alibis. His private life was as boring and law abiding as a damn bishop’s. D’Agosta felt a prickling of personal affront that, after all his time on the job, Captain Singleton should toss him an assignment like this.

He began drafting his interim report for Singleton. In it, he summarized the steps the investigation had taken, the persons interviewed, the background checks on Marsala, the forensic and SOC data, the analysis of the Museum’s security tapes, and the statements of the relevant security guards. He pointed out that the next step, should Singleton decide to authorize it, would be an expansion of the interview process beyond the Osteology Department. It would mean the wholesale interviewing, cross-correlation, and background examination of all the Museum staff who had worked late that evening—in fact, perhaps the entire Museum staff, whether they had worked late or not.

D’Agosta guessed Singleton wouldn’t go for that. The expense in time, manpower, and cost was too high, given the small chance a lead would turn up. No: he would likely assign a reduced force to the case, let it move to the back burner. In time, that force, too, would be reassigned. Such was the way of the cold case.

He finished the report, read it over quickly, transmitted it to
Singleton, and then shut down his tablet computer. When he looked up, he saw—with a sudden shock—that Agent Pendergast was seated in the lone chair across from the tiny desk. D’Agosta had neither seen nor heard him come in.

“Jesus!” D’Agosta said, taking a deep breath to recover from the surprise. “You just love creeping up on people, don’t you?”

“I admit to finding it amusing. Most people are about as aware of their surroundings as a sea cucumber.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. So what brings you here?”

“You, my dear Vincent.”

D’Agosta looked at him intently. He had heard, the day before, about the murder of Pendergast’s son. In retrospect, D’Agosta understood why Pendergast had been so short with him in the Museum’s rotunda.

“Look,” he began a little awkwardly, “I was really sorry to hear about what happened. You know, when I approached you the other day, I didn’t know about your son, I’d just returned from my honeymoon and wasn’t up on departmental business—”

Pendergast raised a hand and D’Agosta fell silent. “If anyone should apologize, it should be me.”

“Forget it.”

“A brief explanation is in order. Then I would deem it appropriate if the subject was not raised again.”

“Shoot.”

Pendergast sat forward in his chair. “Vincent, you know I have a son, Alban. He was deeply sociopathic. I last saw him a year and a half ago, when he disappeared into the Brazilian jungle after perpetrating the Hotel Killings here in New York.”

“I didn’t hear that.”

“Since then, he never surfaced… until his corpse was placed upon my doorstep four nights ago. How this was effected and who did it, I have no idea. A Lieutenant Angler is investigating, and I fear he is inadequate to the task.”

“Know him well. He’s a damned good detective.”
“I have no doubt he is competent—which is why I had an associate with excellent computer skills delete all DNA evidence of the Hotel Killer from the NYPD files. You may recall that you once made an official report that Alban and the Hotel Killer were one and the same. Luckily for me, that report was never taken seriously. Be that as it may, it would not do to have Angler run my son’s DNA against the database and come up with a hit.”

“Jesus Christ, I don’t want to hear any more.”

“In any case, Angler is up against a most unusual killer and will not succeed in finding him. But that is my concern, not yours. Which brings me to why I’m here. When last we spoke, you had a case you wished to solicit my advice on.”

“Sure. But you must have more important things to do—”

“I would be glad of the diversion.”

D’Agosta stared at the FBI agent. He was as gaunt as usual, but he seemed perfectly composed. The ice-chip eyes returned the look, regarding him coolly. Pendergast was the strangest man he’d ever met, and God only knew what was going on below the surface.

“Okay. Great. I warn you, though, it’s a bullshit case.” D’Agosta went over the details of the crime: the discovery of the body; the particulars of the scene; the mass of forensic evidence, none of which seemed germane; the reports of the security guards; the statements of the curators and assistants in the Osteology Department. Pendergast took it all in, utterly motionless save for the occasional blink of his silvery eyes. Then a shadow appeared in the cubicle, and Pendergast’s eyes shifted.

D’Agosta looked over his shoulder, following Pendergast’s gaze, and saw the tall, heavyset form of Morris Frisby, head of the department. When D’Agosta had first interviewed him, he had been surprised to find not the slope-shouldered, nearsighted curator he’d expected, but a man who was powerful and feared by his staff. D’Agosta had felt a little intimidated himself. The man was wearing an expensive pin-striped suit with a red tie, and he spoke with a crisp, upper-class New York accent. At well over six feet in height,
he dominated the tiny space. He looked from D’Agosta to Pendergast and back, radiating irritation at the continued presence of the police in his domain.

“You’re still here,” he said. It was a statement rather than a question. 

“The case hasn’t been solved,” said D’Agosta.

“Nor is it likely to be. This was a random crime committed by someone from the outside. Marsala was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The murder has nothing to do with the Osteology Department. I understand you’ve been repeatedly interviewing my staff, all of whom have a great deal of work, important work, on their plates. Can I assume that you’ll be finishing up your investigation in short order and allowing my staff to continue their work in peace?”

“Who is this man, Lieutenant?” Pendergast asked mildly.

“I am Dr. Morris Frisby,” he said crisply, turning to Pendergast. He had dark-blue eyes with very large whites, and they focused on a person like klieg lights. “I am the head of the anthropology section.”

“Oh, yes. Promoted after the rather mysterious disappearance of Hugo Menzies, if I’m not mistaken.”

“And who might you be? Another policeman in mufti?”

With a languid motion, Pendergast reached into his pocket, removed his ID and shield, and waved them at Frisby à la distance.

Frisby stared. “And how is it the feds have jurisdiction?”

“I am here merely out of idle curiosity,” said Pendergast breezily. “A busman’s holiday, I presume. How nice for you. Perhaps you can tell the lieutenant here to wrap up his case and cease his pointless interruptions of my department’s time and taxpayer dollars, not to mention the occupation of our departmental space.”

Pendergast smiled. “My idle curiosity might lead to something more official, if the lieutenant feels his work is being hindered by an officious, small-minded, self-important bureaucrat. Not you, of course. I speak in general terms only.”

Frisby stared at Pendergast, his large face turning an angry red.

“Obstruction of justice is a serious thing, Dr. Frisby. For that reason I’m so glad to hear from the lieutenant how you’ve been extending your full cooperation to him and will continue to do so.”
Frisby remained rigid for a long moment. And then he turned on his heel to leave.

“Oh, and Dr. Frisby?” Pendergast continued, still in his most honeyed tone.

Frisby did not turn around. He merely paused.

“You may continue your cooperation by digging up the name and credentials of the visiting scientist who recently worked with Victor Marsala and giving them to my esteemed colleague here.”

Now Frisby did turn back. His face was almost black with rage. He opened his mouth to speak.

Pendergast beat him to it. “Before you say anything, Doctor, let me ask you a question. Are you familiar with game theory?”

The chief curator did not answer.

“If so, you would be aware that there is a certain subset of games known to mathematicians and economists as zero-sum. Zero-sum games deal with resources that neither increase nor decrease in amount—they only shift from one player to the other. Given your present frame of mind, were you to speak now, I’m afraid you might say something rash. I would feel it incumbent to offer a rejoinder. As a result of this exchange, you would be mortified and humiliated, which—as dictated by the rules of game theory—would increase my influence and status at your expense. So I’d suggest the most prudent course of action would be for you to remain silent and go about securing the information I asked for with all possible haste.”

While Pendergast had been speaking, an expression quite unlike any D’Agosta had ever seen before crept slowly over Frisby’s face. He said nothing, merely swayed a little, first backward, then forward, like a branch caressed by a breeze. Then he gave what might have been the smallest of nods and disappeared around the corner.

“Ever so obliged!” Pendergast said, leaning over in his seat and calling after the curator.

D’Agosta had watched this exchange without a word. “You just put your boot so far up his ass, he’ll have to eat his dinner with a shoehorn.”

“I can always count on you for a suitable bon mot.”
“I’m afraid you made an enemy.”

“I’ve had long experience with this Museum. There is a certain subset of curators who behave in their little fiefdoms like a liege lord. I tend to be severe with such people. An annoying habit, but very hard to break.” He rose from his chair. “And now, I’d very much like to have a word with that Osteological technician you mentioned. Mark Sandoval.”

D’Agosta heaved himself to his feet. “Follow me.”