



Part 2

"For god's sake, Smithback, you're on a roll here. If you quit now, I'll fire you."

Roger Smithback held his cellphone away from his ear while he fumbled to turn down the volume. "It's only a leave of absence," he said. "To write a book."

"A book?" Smithback's editor, Kraski, shouted. "What kind of book?"

"A biography. Of sorts. It's something my brother was working on when he passed."

"A biography of who?"

"Pendergast. You know, the FBI agent who handled the Brokenhearts case, and the case with all those feet washing up on Captiva Island."

"Forget it. It won't sell."

"Look, Mr. Kraski, it's something I really have to do. For my brother."

"You're leaving the paper at an awkward time. Who's going to take over the crime beat?" Kraski lowered his voice and tried to lay on the charm. "You're the best, Smithback. I can't replace you."

That stung; Smithback had worked hard to get this position on the Miami paper. But then he recalled that he'd never gotten the raise he was promised, because of "financial difficulties" at the paper. Well, he had "financial difficulties" too. Everyone did. But it wouldn't do to rile up Kraski by reminding him of the unfulfilled promise.

"I just need six months. I'll be back."

"There may not be a job waiting for you, Smithback. Think about that."

"I'll take my chances." He couldn't help but add, "and if not, I know an editor at the Tampa Bay *Times* who said I could have a job there anytime I wanted—"

"Don't pull that crap on me, Smithback. Okay, you can have your six months. Unless the bottom falls out of this rotten old world, I'll keep your position open. But this is a hell of an awkward time."

"I realize that, and I'm sorry. If I stumble on any good stories, I'll bring them to you first."

"Okay, okay. Fine." There was a long silence, and then Kraski said, gruffly, "Good luck,

Smithback, and... take care.”

After hanging up, Smithback leaned back in his chair and exhaled. That was one unpleasant task taken care of. The next was arranging his “office.”



By the end of the day this, too, was done. He had pushed his bed against the far wall of the bedroom and rolled up the ratty rug, which, when he took a good look at it, was so threadbare and disgusting that he ended up putting it out on the sidewalk for the trash collectors. On the old rolltop desk he'd inherited from his brother, he had stacked Bill's notebooks in order, the short manuscript, and his own notes pertaining to the Pendergast project. On the wall above he had put up a large corkboard, on which he'd created a rough—for now—timeline of Pendergast's life, with labels indicating dates, colored strings, and a few photographs of his close relatives. It was patterned after the kind of diagram they prepared in a homicide division briefing room for murder investigations.

He was proud of the effort, although a lot needed to be filled in. There was a photograph of Great-Aunt Cornelia, the crazy poisoner; one of Pendergast; and directly beside the agent's photo a large, black space containing a question mark.

He had a file containing photos of other people he wanted to interview, which in time he intended to pin up in the appropriate spots. There was that New York City cop that Pendergast often worked with, Vincent D'Agosta, and his wife Laura Hayward. There was Pickett and Agent Coldmoon, whom he'd met when Pendergast was involved with the two Florida cases. There was that pretty ward of Pendergast's, Constance. There was an odd photo he had found posted on a dark web site, blurred and stamped confidential, showing a bunch of people in tactical gear posing for the camera: several faces, including that of what he felt sure was a young Pendergast had been crudely circled. In a separate file was a set of photos labeled "Helen Esterhazy Pendergast: family??"

Assembling this had taken a lot of time—Pendergast, and the people who surrounded him, didn't have easily accessible personal information. Now, as he contemplated how much he still didn't know, he felt increasingly intimidated by the job at hand. There were so many blanks on that timeline, long stretches of Pendergast's life about which he knew nothing. He would do his best to fill these in—but it would take travel, questioning, connecting, teasing out

threads and following them. He had the chops; he knew that. It was no different than the cases he'd covered—just bigger.

A lot bigger.

The best way to start—as his brother himself had written in his fragmentary manuscript—was to go back to the beginning: to Pendergast's childhood and perhaps even beyond. And that meant going to New Orleans and visiting Pendergast's childhood home.

Roger Smithback walked down Dauphine Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans. It was the third time he had walked down the same damn street, scrutinizing house numbers and marking them on a hand-sketched map. He knew that Rochenoire, the original Pendergast family mansion, had been situated along this street somewhere near the Audubon Cottage. That would put it in the block between St. Louis Street and Conti Street—or at least, so he assumed. But despite all his research skills, he hadn't been able to find an actual street number for the mansion; ironically it seemed that, because it was such a well-known house, an address hadn't been necessary.

He had learned, through hours spent in a dusty newspaper archive, that the house had burned down more than three decades before, taking the lives of Pendergast's parents. That was a mysterious and horrific event he certainly needed to explore. But what had replaced the house? Nothing along that stretch of road seemed to fit the bill—except perhaps for the ugly parking lot opposite the old Audubon cottage. And it was only a candidate because everything around it was of much older vintage than a mere three decades. Rochenoire couldn't have been replaced by a parking lot...could it?

There was a small kiosk in the lot and Smithback could see an old man sitting in it, reading a newspaper. He strolled up to him.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The man slowly raised his head. "Which car is yours, young fellow?"

"I don't have a car, at least not in here. I wanted to ask you a question. If you don't mind." He saw now that the man wasn't just old, but very old. This encouraged him. Old people knew history.

"My name is Smithback," he continued, "and I'm doing some research on the history of New Orleans."

The man gave a slow nod.

"And I was wondering—did an old mansion used to occupy this area? A mansion that burned down?"

"Yes, son. It surely did. They called it Rochenoire."

At this, Smithback felt that familiar tingle in the back of his neck that came when he was hitting paydirt, getting the scoop.

"What happened? How did it end up a parking lot?"

"Well, now," the old man said. "Nobody really knows what happened. It was quite a while back." He paused, looked at Smithback a little speculatively. "There were rumors... about that family."

"You mean the Pendergast family?"

"That's it exactly. Pendergast. Rumors about dark goings on."

"Dark? What sort of dark?"

"I don't know, but the story is, the rumors got so bad that a mob came and burned down the place and the family with it. I remember that fire. I was living up on North Miro Street then. We heard the alarms and saw the smoke and I came down to see, but by the time I got here the mansion was just smoking ruins and the mob had dispersed. I don't think putting a torch to the place was intentional—but then, you never know."

"And the family burned with it? The whole family?"

"I don't know who all died, but we didn't see any of them around here after that. It was an important New Orleans family, but they just seemed to disappear. The ruins were bulldozed, and they put up this parking lot. I retired from the National Cash Register company ten years back, but I needed something to fill my time and make a few extra dollars—so here I am."

"Is there anyone else I could talk to who knows about the fire?"

The old parking attendant ran a knotty hand over his head. "Well, now, funny you should ask. A few years ago a man came by with a big plantation-style hat on, and he wandered around looking sad and lost. He came back three or four times. Just to look around,

said he knew the family. Name of Bertin.”

“First name, by any chance?”

“I’ve got a steel trap memory, Mr. Smithback—you see, I remember names—and I can assure you he never told me his first name.”

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