



Part 4

The strange spell that had come over the room was broken by the entrance of the maid carrying a silver platter. Madame Brissot drew what sounded like a quiet sigh of relief as the woman laid out china tea cups, cream and sugar and a plate of beignets.

“Thank you, my dear,” she said to the maid, who curtsied and left.

She removed the tea cozy and poured out cups for both of them, adding milk and sugar. “Now, where was I?” she asked.

“The burning of the Pendergast mansion,” Roger Smithback replied. “Roche-noire.”

“Yes. Of course.” She took a sip of tea. “The family had a library, with books going back centuries. There were quite a few strange Pendergast ancestors, I’ve been told, mad scientists and quack doctors and what have you, and some of those books were not suitable for a boy, especially one like...like the brother of Aloysius.”

Curious, Smithback thought, how this old woman seemed so hesitant to mention the name of Diogenes.

“He was a very curious boy—in the wrong sort of way,” she went on. I’m told he spent days in that library, wheeling the ladder with the brass wheels

about, squeak squeak squeak, and climbing up for the most obscure books kept intentionally on the top shelves. He got his hands on a book called the *Quinque Capitulis de Lucifugus Rofocalus*—the *The Five Chapters of Lucifuge Rofocale*.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

“Lucifuge Rofocale is the name of a lesser demon. But not all that lesser, if you understand me; only one step below Lucifer himself. As I understand it, I mean.”

“I see.” Smithback pushed the cell phone that he using to record a little farther across the tea table. How would this ancient matriarch know about such things? He wondered if it had anything to do with her unwillingness to mention the boy’s name aloud.

“It was an old book, published in the 16th century. According to the story I heard, he, ah...he decided to follow the directions in the book to raise that particular demon. While he couldn’t exactly read Latin fluently, he apparently puzzled his way through it.”

“How old was he then?”

“Eleven. Perhaps twelve—a precocious twelve. The book, unfortunately, outlined a hideous, five-step path to raising this demon. It involved the killing of certain animals in particular ways, the collection and burning of certain herbs, and the digging up of coffins to retrieve...certain items.”

“Jesus,” said Smithback.

“Good to invoke that name,” said Brissot. “Dogs and cats began turning up killed and mutilated. Everyone was terribly upset. You can imagine the effect that had in that wealthy quarter of town. Other religions—or rites, if you will—besides Christianity run deep in New Orleans, and fear of them has never fully gone away. The mutilations were most hideous.”

“Um, can you tell me what sort?”

The old woman went still again for a long moment. Finally, she said: “No. No, I won’t.”

When the old woman refused to give him any details about what Diogenes had done, Roger Smithback nodded.

“But it was the disturbing of the dead that put the neighborhood in a real uproar. Not far from the mansion, on Basin Street, is St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, one of the most famous in New Orleans. It is where Marie Laveau is buried.”

“Marie Laveau?”

“The voodoo queen, or so it’s claimed. One wouldn’t actually dig up a body in New Orleans, of course, because of the water table. But several mausoleums were broken into—he was good at picking locks, I was informed—the marble coffins inside smashed, and the dead disturbed.”

“How?”

Brissot paused, and gave a long sigh. “Removal of hair. Fingernails. Teeth. I won’t say anymore, except that these acts followed, to the letter, the directions in that terrible book. You can imagine the uproar this caused. But nobody knew who was perpetrating it—except one person. Her name was Josephine Villere, a rather strange, middle-aged French lady, and she was the Pendergasts’ cook. She caught...the boy one day with pieces of one of the animals he butchered. She confronted him, and he brazenly admitted what he was doing. She tried to get him to stop, but he simply taunted her, daring her to reveal it, and finally—after the incidents in the cemetery—she told his parents.”

“Do you have their first names?”

“Linnaeus and Isabella.” She paused to sip her tea and pick up a beignet.

“The parents were horrified and tried to speak to their son about it, but he was obdurate and defiant. So they made arrangements to send him away to boarding school, as they had done with Aloysius. He was furious at the cook for telling on him, and so he—what is the word?—framed her.”

“How did he do that?”

The woman nibbled on her beignet.

“At this point, young man, you understand that everything I’ve heard is second-hand. I can’t be sure how much is true, although I suspect that most or all of it is. In any case, it was apparently fiendishly clever for such a young boy. He killed a cat, mutilated it, put it in her freezer, and contrived for it to be found. Word got out, the neighborhood was in an uproar, and a group assembled and arrived at the house to demand the cook come out. They were going to take her to the police station. Or so they said later. But from what I heard, it looked more like a mob than a posse comitatus. Mr. and Mrs. Pendergast, who of course knew the cook was innocent but didn’t want the truth to be revealed, came out to try to reason with the crowd. There were some who’d been drinking, of course. I also believe there was an agitator in the crowd: a person from a family with a long, enmity to the Pendergasts, going back centuries. That, at any rate, was what Bertin told me.”

“Do you know the name of this other family?”

“Barbeaux. Over the generations, the Pendergast family had accumulated more than their share of enemies, for a variety of reasons. In any case, the parents refused to give up the cook; the crowd got unruly; shots were fired; and then, somehow, that fire was started. Bertin thought the Barbeaux family member might have done it under the cover of the unruly crowd. But today, it’s impossible to know for sure. But it was a dreadful fire, and it was hungry. That was an old house, with many wooden timbers, stuffed with bric-a-brac, books and papers. The parents didn’t escape, nor did poor Villiers, but Bertin, who knew about the passageway out of the crypt and had a key to its entrance, managed to save the young boy who was the cause of it all, along with some servants. He led them downstairs and through the secret passage to safety. Of course, as soon as the fire started in earnest, the crowd dispersed. Nothing could be proved and nobody was arrested. The ruins of the house were bulldozed. It was a vacant lot briefly, before the entire area was sealed in asphalt.”

She finished her tea and poured herself another, Smithback hadn’t touched his, so enthralled was he by the story. He now took a few gulps and ate a beignet.

“I wonder,” he asked, “does that passageway still exist?”

“You’d have to break into the Pendergast mausoleum at St. Louis No. 1 to find out. I would not think that advisable.”

“Right. Of course.”

She finished her second cup of tea and said, brightly, “Well, we’ve had a lovely tea, but it is now time for my rest.”

Smithback thanked her most effusively and went off, so thrilled with what he’d learned that he even smiled at the sour-faced butler.

Next on the agenda: breaking into the Pendergast mausoleum.



At two o'clock in the morning, Smithback shimmied over the crumbling brick wall that surrounded the St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and with a penlight headed to the far corner where the Pendergast mausoleum was located. It was a clammy night and the air smelled of decay. Mists drifted in skeins close to the ground. He had scoped the place out earlier in the day, and it had taken him quite a long time to find the mausoleum, so crowded and confusing was the cemetery, with its narrow, crooked alleyways between tombs. The Pendergast mausoleum consisted of a miniature temple with pillars in grey limestone. A stone shield above the door showed a lidless eye over two moons: one crescent, the other full, and below that a crouching lion.

Smithback squeezed through the mausoleum's iron gate, which was broken and rusted partly open, and went to the bronze door of the mausoleum. The lock resisted all his attempts to open it. He could see it had recently been cleaned and oiled. After struggling for a while, he gave up. There was a tiny gridded window in the bronze door, and by standing on tiptoes he could just look inside, playing the penlight beam around. The walls on either side were lined with marble crypts, some with names and dates, and some with just deaths' heads. Taking out his notebook he copied down all the names he could see, with their birth and death dates. There was one odd crypt in the back at the bottom that was larger than the others and had a bronze instead of a marble door. It was the only crypt that looked large enough for someone to crawl into easily, and Smithback was pretty sure this must be the door to the passageway Brissot talked about. It was for a one Edmond Pendergast, 1815 – 1910. He copied it down in his book.

Frustrated, he retreated and climbed back over the wall from the cemetery. He would have to figure out a way to get through that formidable bronze door, one way or another. He was determined to find that passageway. But that would have to await a future visit to New Orleans, because his next stop was 891 Riverside Drive, New York City.

Illustrations courtesy of Chris Royal. [For more about his work, click here.](#)