



## Part 5

Roger Smithback asked the Uber driver to leave him off at Riverside Drive and 132nd Street, which he figured from Google maps was about five blocks south of Pendergast's house. He walked northwards, looking at the building facades. Here, Riverside Drive split into two streets, one major boulevard running along the river, and a side street up higher, where the buildings were. It was a beautiful sunny day and the Hudson River was shimmering in the morning light, the birds chirping in Riverside Park. Smithback felt a rush of optimism as to how well his project seemed to be going so far.

As the Drive curved around, he saw what was unmistakably the mansion at 891 Riverside Drive. It stood on its own lot, an impressive architectural masterpiece, with stately brick apartment buildings on either side. He reached the façade of the building and stood on the sidewalk, looking up at it. There was a front door, evidently never used, for the iron gate was padlocked and the path to it overgrown with weeds. The real entrance was a porte-cochere to one side, facing West 138th Street. Turning the corner at a jaunty pace, he went down the porte-cochere to the oaken door. A well-worn brass doorbell was fixed on the limestone frame, and he gave it a firm press. So thick was the door that he could hear no sound inside.

He waited.

And now a small grill in the door opened up, and a man's deep voice spoke. "Yes?"

"My name is Roger Smithback," he began, "and I'd like to meet with Agent Pendergast."

A silence, and then: “Do you have an appointment?”

“Ah, no. You see, I’m—” he began, but the voice interrupted.

“Mr. Pendergast does not see guests without an appointment.”

“I realize that, Mr. ah—”

“Proctor.”

“Mr. Proctor, but you see, I’m the brother of Bill Smithback.” When nothing happened, he continued. “You know, Bill Smithback, an old, old friend who worked closely with Mr. Pendergast. I need to talk to Pendergast about Bill and...other things.”

The disembodied voice said: “Make an appointment.”

“But I’m Bill Smithback’s brother. For God’s sake, the man whose life Pendergast saved in this very house! Mr. Proctor, if you could please just tell Mr. Pendergast I’m here, I’m sure he’ll want to—”

The grill slid shut.

Smithback rang the bell again and then knocked. And waited. Nothing. Now he was feeling irritated and disrespected. Surely Pendergast would see him. Bill had talked incessantly about his close relationship with the Special Agent. Who the hell was this Proctor, anyway?

He knocked louder. “Mr. Proctor? Mr. Proctor! I don’t think Agent Pendergast will be happy when he learns how rude you were to me!”

*Bang, bang.* “Mr. Proctor! Damn it, just tell Pendergast I’m here! I’ve come all the way from Florida, for chrissakes!”

The door abruptly opened with a whoosh of air. Standing squarely inside it was the solid figure of a man, at least six feet five inches tall, with a chiseled face and cleft chin, staring down at Smithback with piercing brown eyes.

“Leave the property,” the man said, his voice so quiet and low it was far more threatening than if he’d been shouting.

Smithback, frightened, took a step back, and then another.

“That’s right,” came the cool, even voice. “Now keep going.”

Smithback kept going, until he was back on Riverside Drive. And then he began to feel not just irritated, but angry. The man was certainly not a butler or any other kind of servant—not with that aggressive attitude. Who the hell was he?

Smithback took the subway back to the tiny studio apartment he had rented in Queens and thought about how he was going to get that interview with Pendergast. He had to get his email address or cell number somehow. He was sure Pendergast would be willing to see him. And he would tell him all about that prick Proctor and his high-handed attitude. A man like that should be fired.

But in the meantime, he had another lead he wanted to follow up. From his brother’s notes, he had learned that Pendergast had a great-aunt named Cornelia who had committed a hideous crime--poisoning her entire family--and had been shut up at the Mount Mercy Hospital for the Criminally Insane on Little Governor’s Island in the East River. That had been a while ago, but he figured he could go out there, posing as a relative of Cornelia, and see if he could wangle a visit with her or pick up some information. Poisoning your whole family—that was something else. That was worth a story in itself.

Christ, this Pendergast had some crazy relatives: Diogenes, Cornelia, a quack

doctor named Comstock who'd made a fortune selling some toxic patent medicine. And another crazy ancestor, going back even farther, named Antoine, who wasted his time looking for the elixir of eternal life.

Little Governor's Island was connected by a short causeway to Governor's Island, which in turn was connected to Queens by the 59th Street Bridge. After the incident with Proctor, Smithback had thought through this new line of investigation rather carefully and decided that arriving in a chauffeured limousine might help cut through the bureaucratic encumbrance he expected to meet in trying to interview Cornelia.

The limousine hummed along the one-lane road that traversed Little Governor's Island. A morning fog lay along the marshes bordering the river, and they passed a row of dead trees framing a set of iron gates and a small guard house. A bronze plaque read *Mount Mercy Hospital for the Criminally Insane*. Beyond and partly hidden by a lawn-covered hill, he could see the turrets and gables of a great Gothic revival structure in brown brick, with dark stone trim.

A security guard stepped out of the booth. He was a big, bear-like man with blond hair. "Can I help you?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Yes," said Smithback, proffering his driver's license. "I'm a relative of Cornelia Delamere Pendergast, who is an inmate here, and I wish to visit her."

"Cornelia Pendergast?" He hesitated, frowned, then took the license and looked down at it for a moment. He looked up. "I'm sorry, but can you tell me what this is about?"

"Just a visit from a family member, that's all."

The guard handed back the license. "Mr. Smithback, Cornelia Pendergast passed away two years ago."

This floored Smithback, but only temporarily. "Oh no, how terrible. I... Well, officer, there's been a bitter rift in the family... Word never reached me. I'm so sad to hear this... and I never got a chance to say goodbye."

"I'm very sorry," said the guard, and he sounded genuine.

Smithback thought fast. "Could I possibly speak to one of the doctors who cared for her? This is a terrible shock and I'd... I'd like to have emotional closure."

"Hold on." The guard went into the booth. When he came back out a few minutes later, he said, "It looks like that's possible. Park in the lot to the right. Check in at reception."

"Thank you, sir, thank you so much."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

The limo eased forward on a long asphalt drive, in poor repair, webbed with tarred-over cracks. It crested the rise and the huge pile came into full view. Everything gave the impression of neglect.

The limo pulled up into the small parking lot. "Please wait here," Smithback said to the driver, and walked up to the grand entrance.