



Part 7

Using Yelp, Smithback had chosen a bar that looked like a place the guard might like: a quiet, somewhat upscale but comfortable spot not far from the man's neighborhood—but not too close, either. He arrived at six and sent the driver off to get the guard, who arrived twenty minutes later. The driver and car were costing him a damn fortune, but he had that tingling sense in the back of his neck that told him it was going to be worth it.

The guard came lumbering over to the table and Smithback stood up. "Thanks for coming. The name's Roger Smithback, as you know."

"Anthony Korhonen."

They sat down and ordered beers.

"So Anthony, tell me about my Aunt Cornelia," said Smithback, surreptitiously turning on the recorder of the cellphone in his shirt pocket.

"She was already at Mount Mercy when I arrived. That was almost twenty years ago. But it didn't take long for me to hear the story: gossip, the usual chatter."

"What did she do?" Smithback already knew a fair amount from newspaper archives, but he wanted to dig deeper.

"She poisoned her family."

"Why?"

"Well...are you really sure you want to hear about this?"

"I do," said Smithback, nodding gravely.

The beers arrived, and the guard took a gulp of his. "The story is she thought they'd been taken over by demons. Possessed. She felt it was her duty

to save the world from the evil they were about to unleash. The doctors said she was completely bonkers, and as a result she was never put on trial. They just locked her up in Mount Mercy. From what I saw of her when I arrived, I'd have to agree. She lived in a fantasy world. Complete denial of the reality around her."

"How did she poison them?"

"The way I heard it, on a picnic. Watercress sandwiches, I think, loaded with some kind of poison."

"Her whole family?"

The guard looked at him curiously. "Wouldn't you know this already? I mean, you're a relative."

Smithback thought fast. In his eagerness, he'd forgotten that. "I mentioned a family rift. That branch of the family is estranged from ours, and we haven't communicated for decades. That's why I've had to work so hard to find closure. A very tragic situation—I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry." The man paused. "It was the entire family, husband and two children."

"What kind of poison?"

"Someone in the family was a chemist, they said, and he had a basement workshop full of the stuff. She stole it from there."

Smithback decided not to push too far for specifics. "And when you arrived, what was she like? Her behavior, I mean."

Well, I hope you won't take offense when I say she was scary as hell. She dressed all in black and ordered everyone around, thinking they were her servants. I think in her mind she was back in that mansion of hers, issuing orders, drinking gin and eating fine food. She never acknowledged she was in a mental hospital, even when she was in restraints—which was a lot of the time."

"Why restraints?"

"If you got too close, she'd lash out. Try to put out your eyes. She did it, too—three times."

"She put out someone's *eye*?"

"Sure did. That bony hand would just come shooting up with no warning, claw-like finger right into the eye. They had to clip her nails when they realized she'd grown them into weapons. Then they used restraints and aides finally had to wear goggles. Mostly the aides just kept their distance. She was like a rattlesnake when she struck, it was that fast. I mean, *three* times she succeeded."

"And when she died? What happened?"

"Over time she got crazier and crazier. Suffered a couple of strokes. Finally had some kind of fatal seizure."

Something had just changed in the guard's voice. "Do you believe it?" Smithback asked.

There was a silence.

"I've come this far," Smithback said. "I'd just as soon hear it all."





"There were rumors," the guard said.

"What kind?"

"I was working the gate by that time—and boy, was I glad to get off the floor. It takes a toll. Look, this is all totally off the record, right?"

"Of course. Absolutely."

"I heard that some aides got together and did it. One distracted her, while the other hit her upside the head."

"*What?*" This was completely unexpected. "But wouldn't that kind of attack have been obvious?"

The man shook his head. "A sharp blow with the palm of a hand, above the hairline, can shake a person's brain so hard it'll cause a fatal hemorrhage. Especially an old person with a history of strokes. That's the kind of thing aides can learn in an institution like that—how to hurt someone without leaving a mark. Like I said, working there takes a toll. I never did anything like that, but there were some real sadists..." Suddenly, the man grew cautious. "Don't ask me to give you any names."

"No, no, of course not," Smithback said, feeling a little sick to his stomach. "I appreciate your candor. We can change the subject. Did she ever have visitors?"

"Her nephew came frequently—Special Agent Pendergast. He was an FBI agent, a real gentleman. Never caught his first name. Sometimes he had a cop from the NYPD in tow." Korhonen finished his beer. "Oh, yeah: he had another relative in there for a while. Young woman. His ward, they said. First name... let's see... Constance."

"Wait. *Constance Greene* was at Mount Mercy?"

The guard nodded. "Briefly. She came right after Cornelia died. I remember her name because she wasn't like the others. Real quiet. Real pretty, too, but strange. Intense. Of course, any sort of fraternizing was totally forbidden. She was as dangerous as Cornelia, they said. Murdered her own child. And then, when she escaped—what an uproar that caused! First time in Mount Mercy history. Things only got weirder after that. Next, we heard she'd actually been kidnapped. Then she was released when it all turned out to be a mistake, they said. She hadn't killed her child, it was alive after all. Really bizarre story."

"I'll say. Listen, thanks, Anthony—I really appreciate your help. Another beer?"

The guard checked his watch. "Sure. I've got twenty minutes before the wife starts kicking up a fuss."

Smithback ordered another round, then settled back in his chair. "Wow, I had no idea. Constance Greene."

On the way back to his tiny, rented studio in Queens, Smithback thought about his project's progress. Pendergast's life was like the proverbial onion: peeling back layers after layers, only to find even more below. And Constance, who he'd met a few times in Florida, was buried in those layers far more deeply than he'd ever imagined.

It occurred to him that if he could persuade her to cooperate, to help

him, he would gain access to a trove of material. That meant going back to Riverside Drive and contriving a way to meet with her.

And that, in turn, meant getting past the formidable Proctor—who, it seemed, guarded the mansion as effectively as Cerberus guarded the gates of the underworld.



Images are of Bonaventure Cemetery, Savannah, Georgia, photographs by Douglas Preston. The cemetery is an important setting in the novel, *Bloodless*.