



# The Lost Souls of Kennebec Avenue

*A Murder Mystery*

*A tale of murder, madness, and the ghosts that linger  
in the shadows of Long Beach*



*A Mystery Unveiled*  
*November 2025*

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*CHAPTER 1*

## Prologue

*1925-10-12 • MONTROSE MANSION*

The letter arrived on a Tuesday morning, embossed with the seal of a generational wealth management firm.

"Miss Montrose,

We are writing to inform you that you are the heir to the Montrose family estate located at 266 Kennebec Avenue, Long Beach, California. The property has been held in trust for several decades, and our records indicate you are the closest living relative with a legal claim..."

The Heiress—tired of her overbearing family, hungry for independence—saw opportunity. A mansion of her own? In Long Beach? How glamorous. How perfect. How bad could it be?

The Fiduciary who tracked her down was thorough, pedantic, obsessed with proper documentation. They'd been managing the Montrose, Crane, and Whitmore estates for years. The mansion had been an eyesore, a wasted asset, abandoned for decades. If they could get someone to finally claim it, perhaps they could close this particular chapter of frustration.

So the Heiress moved in, expecting elegance and independence.

She discovered, instead, that she was not alone.



## CHAPTER 2

# Cordelia's Lover

1923-09-02 • MONTROSE MANSION



Cordelia Montrose, a young woman of 24 was sitting by a large bay window of her room in her family's mansion in Long Beach, her long brown hair loosely pinned at the sides falling in waves to her shoulders. Her large brown eyes were alive and dreamy as she was looking at a darkening garden and thinking of her first love, her childhood sweetheart named Oliver...

She unlocked a small silver clasp of her diary and wrote:

October 15th, 1923

My heart is like a wounded bird,

That flutters when I hear your name,

And every tender, whispered word

Sets my foolish soul aflame...

She pressed her pen to the page, preparing to continue, when her mother's voice rang sharply from downstairs.

"Cordelia! Cordelia! What are you still doing up there! It's time to go!"

Cordelia's shoulders sagged. Another dinner party. Her father hosted them every other week for his business associates—endless evenings where she was expected to sit prettily and smile at whichever eligible bachelor her parents had deemed "suitable."

She closed the diary with a soft click and tucked it into the drawer of her writing desk.

The men were interchangeable, really. Each one arrived in the same dark suit and pomaded hair, clutching the same cigar. They all had that peculiar glazed look in their eyes—as if someone had wound them up like mechanical toys and set them to drone about profit margins with a deadening enthusiasm until their springs ran down. Even the young ones, barely past thirty, somehow managed to seem ancient, fossilized by their own tedium.

Her mother called them "excellent prospects." Cordelia thought they could bore a person to death at twenty paces.

"Cordelia! Now!"

*1923-09-03 • WHITMORE HOUSE*

Cordelia woke that morning with a dull throb behind her temples—whether from the cigar smoke or the crushing boredom of the previous evening's conversations, she couldn't say. She had to see Alice.

She walked briskly through downtown Long Beach, her heels clicking against the pavement as she approached the Whitmore house. It was a handsome Victorian, though the paint had begun to peel near the eaves and the front garden had grown a bit wild. Still, it had character.

Lost in rehearsing her complaints, she nearly collided with someone coming down the front steps.

"Oh! You must be Cordelia."

She looked up sharply—and her breath caught.

The man before her was nothing like the waxwork figures from last night's dinner. His skin was bronze from the sun, his eyes an impossible shade of blue, like the ocean on a clear day. Dark blond hair fell across his forehead, windswept and careless. He wore no tie, his shirt collar open at the throat.

"Alice has been waiting for you," he continued, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "I'm Thomas. Her brother."

"Yes, I—" Cordelia's voice came out smaller than intended. She cleared her throat. "Alice mentioned you'd be returning this fall."

"Guilty as charged. Shall we?" He gestured toward the door with an easy grace entirely foreign to the stiff, formal men of her parents' world.

Inside, Alice appeared in a flurry of excitement. "Oh, you've met! Finally!" She clasped Cordelia's hands, her eyes dancing. "Isn't he just as I described? And Cordelia, you must hear his stories—shipwrecks and storms and ports in the Orient. Each tale is more thrilling than the last!"

Cordelia embraced her friend, then stole another glance at Thomas. Tall, sun-weathered, with the easy posture of someone accustomed to ship decks rather than drawing rooms. And he had tales.

They settled in the modest parlor—worn furniture but comfortable, books stacked haphazardly, nothing like the pristine, untouched perfection of her own home.

"Well," Alice prompted, settling into the sofa with relish, "tell us about last night's torture. How many identical men did your mother parade before you this time?"

Cordelia laughed despite herself. "I honestly couldn't say. They blend together—same suits, same cigars, same glassy expressions while droning on about stocks and bonds. I've decided they must be manufactured somewhere. A factory that produces Suitable Young Men, all from the same mold."

Thomas, leaning against the mantelpiece, let out a genuine laugh. "I used to sit through evenings exactly like that," he said, his voice warm but edged with something darker. "Watched my father's face grow grayer at each one, watched him chase those same conversations about markets and margins." He paused, his blue eyes distant for a moment. "Then it all vanished. Just like that. One bad investment, one banking panic, and decades of 'security' gone like smoke."

He straightened, his expression clearing. "That's why I chose the sea. People say a merchant captain isn't a respectable profession for a gentleman." He shrugged, unbothered. "But there isn't a single morning I wake up regretting it. Not when I have blue skies overhead and salt spray on my face. Not when I'm living instead of slowly fossilizing in some office, worrying about numbers in a ledger."

Cordelia found she couldn't look away from him.

"That sounds," she said softly, "absolutely wonderful."

*1923-12-05 • MONTROSE MANSION*

December arrived, and with it, a creeping dread Cordelia could no longer ignore. Her courses hadn't come. Then another month passed. The morning sickness began in earnest—she'd barely make it through breakfast before needing to excuse herself.

She tried to hide it, but mothers notice everything.

It happened one morning when Cordelia fled the breakfast table for the third time that week. Her mother followed her upstairs, found her pale and trembling by the basin.

"How long?" Her mother's voice was ice.

Cordelia couldn't speak.

"How. Long."

"Two months," Cordelia whispered. "Perhaps three."

The slap came swift and sharp. Then silence—worse than any shouting. Her mother's face had gone white, her hands shaking with barely controlled fury.

"That sailor," she said finally, the word dripping with venom. "You've ruined us. Ruined everything."

1923-12-07 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*Mother knows.*

*I kept hoping I would wake one morning and discover this was all a terrible dream, but it's been three months now, and there's no denying it any longer.*

*Thomas won't reach port until spring at the earliest. Even if I wrote to him today, the letter wouldn't arrive for months. He's out there somewhere on the Pacific, completely unaware, while I'm trapped here watching Mother's face grow colder by the hour.*

*I can't even tell Alice. How could I? "Your brother and I—we were foolish—and now I'm—" No. I can't bear to see the shock in her eyes. The disappointment.*

*And Father. Oh God, Father.*

*Mother says I'll have to face him tonight. I can imagine his stone cold expression.*

*What will he do? What can he do? Send me away? Disown me? Force me to—*

*I can't think about it. I can't.*

*Thomas, where are you?*

1924-07-01 • LETTER FROM MARGARET MONTROSE

Cordelia,

Your father and I have made arrangements for your... situation.

The Sullivan family has agreed to accept the child as their own. This is a matter of significant discretion and consequence.

You will remain away until such time as we determine it safe for you to return.

A suitable story regarding European travel has been established.

You will not deviate from this narrative under any circumstances. The reputations of this family—your

siblings' marriage prospects, your father's business standing, our position in society—depend entirely on absolute silence.

The child will be cared for. That should be sufficient consolation. You made your choice, and now we are managing the consequences of your indiscretion. The Sullivan family has agreed that periodic photographs may be sent, but under no circumstances are you to make contact, acknowledge the arrangement, or reveal your knowledge of the child's location. This is not negotiable. To do so would confirm what we have worked so carefully to conceal.

Your duty now is to restore your reputation through a suitable marriage. We are pursuing several possibilities. You will cooperate fully with our efforts.

Return when notified. Not before.

Your Mother

P.S. - Do not attempt to write to the child. Any correspondence will be destroyed.

*1924-08-01 • LONG BEACH STREET*

Alice spotted Cordelia on the street corner near the library and hurried toward her, relief flooding through her chest.

"Cordelia! Oh, it's so good to see you're back from Rome. I've missed you terribly!" She reached for her friend's hand. "Why haven't you replied to any of my letters?"

"I'm sorry, Alice." Cordelia's voice was flat, distant. "I've been... unwell."

"For all those months?"

The hurt crept into Alice's voice. When the news had arrived in March—Thomas's ship was lost in a storm off the coast of Japan, all hands presumed dead—Alice had written immediately. Then again the next week. And the week after that.

Every letter had gone unanswered.

"I thought you cared about him," Alice said quietly, disappointment threading through her words.  
"About Thomas."

Cordelia looked away.

"Alice, please." Her voice broke. "Don't speak of him."

It was only then that Alice noticed how much Cordelia changed.

Cordelia had always been slender, now she seemed fragile like the wind could knock her off her feet. But it was her eyes that shocked Alice most—those large brown eyes that had always been so alive with dreams and poetry were hollow.

"Cordelia..." Alice whispered, an alarm replacing her hurt. "What happened to you?"

"I have to go." Cordelia was already backing away, her gloved hands trembling as she clutched her handbag. Tears shimmered at the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She turned and walked away quickly, almost fleeing.

Alice stood frozen on the sidewalk, confusion washing over her.

Everyone grieves differently, but the look in Cordelia's eyes—that wasn't just grief.



## CHAPTER 3

# The Alchemist

1920-03-15 • SEBASTIAN'S NOTEBOOK

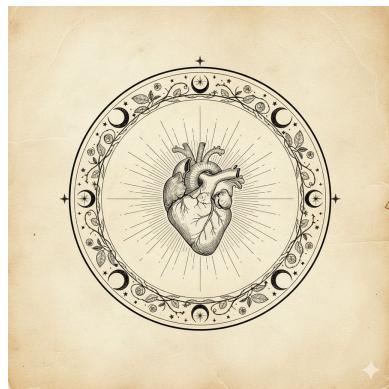
### *First Principles*

*What is love but chemistry? The ancients knew this—Venus governing desire, the quickening of pulse, the movement of blood toward heat. They poeticized what we may now quantify.*

*If attraction is chemistry, then chemistry may produce attraction.*

*The question is not whether it can be done, but how elegantly. The formula must work on two levels: the corporeal (the body's response) and the metaphysical (the soul's recognition).*

*I have begun my research.*



[Sketch: circular diagram with a heart at center, radiating outward in concentric rings. Botanical symbols scattered around the perimeter—rose, valerian, damiana. Chemical notations in the margins.]

1923-07-22 • SEBASTIAN'S NOTEBOOK

### *Component Mathematics*

*Months I have been at this. And I understand nothing!*

*Wait—no. I understand EVERYTHING. The mathematics are perfect:*

*Damiana: 3 parts (desire, heat, awakening) Valerian Root: 2 parts (calm, trust, grounding) Rose Otto: 1 drop only (Venus—transcendence) Potassium Bromide: 10 grains (medicine's knowledge) Calcium*

*Lactate: 5 grains (strength) Iron Citrate: 3 grains (vitality) Grain Alcohol: 8 oz base*

*Flavored with vanilla extract, cherry syrup, honey. Palatable. Even pleasant.*

*But it's MISSING something. The crucial element. The thing that transforms infatuation into devotion. Desire into permanence.*

*What binds? What speaks to commitment, to the eternal quality of true love?*

*I'll find it. I know I will.*

*And when I do—when I finally meet HER—when the woman worthy of my finest work crosses my path*

*I will be prepared.*

*The formula will be perfect.*

1924-09-20 • LONG BEACH SPEAKEASY



It was a warm September evening, the air thick with distant salt of the sea and promise. Fallen sycamore leaves scattered across Kennebec Avenue, and the tall Mexican Fan Palms lining the street swayed like a conspiracy of gossiping teenagers, their fronds whispering secrets against the darkening sky.

Cordelia had been back in Long Beach for weeks now, but she still couldn't bring herself to slip back into her old self. Her mother and father had resumed their routines as though nothing had happened—dinner parties, business calls, polite society. She almost wished they'd remained cold and distant.

She'd had enough of pretending.

Tonight, she told herself, she would start living the way Thomas had lived—boldly, freely, without fear of consequence.

Her young cousin Mary had told her about the speakeasies. Mary, who presented such a perfect image

of virtue to society while being the most delightfully mischievous creature alive. They'd arranged to meet by the bank building on Pine Avenue after dark.

Cordelia waited until the household had gone to bed, then slipped out of the mansion like a thief, her heart pounding with equal parts fear and exhilaration.

The speakeasies were forbidden. Illegal. Dangerous.

She felt alive for the first time in months.

---

Sebastian Crane stood in the corner of the speakeasy, dark eyes surveying the crowd with amusement. The air was thick with jazz music, cigarette smoke, and the sharp tang of bootleg gin.

He'd always been the black sheep of the Crane family. His brother Thaddeus was the golden child—the physician, beloved by Long Beach society. Sebastian, on the other hand, had spent his childhood setting small fires during chemistry experiments and mixing volatile compounds in his father's shed. His parents had been equal parts proud and exasperated.

Now he was a pharmacist by day, chemist by nature, and opportunist by necessity. Prohibition had been a gift to men like him. Through his connection with Frankie Romano at the port, Sebastian supplied half the speakeasies in Long Beach with grain alcohol—all perfectly legal, of course. Medical supplies. Medicinal tonics. The paperwork was impeccable. Among certain circles, he'd earned a reputation: they called him The Alchemist, a man who could transmute legality into fortune, who understood that the right chemistry could transform anything—prohibition into profit, powder into potion, law into opportunity.

He watched the crowd with detached interest. Respectable people pretending to be dangerous, their laughter a touch too loud, their movements a touch too reckless. Playing at rebellion.

Then he heard laughter to his right—bright and unrestrained.

He turned.

The woman had large brown eyes that caught the low lamplight, sparkling with mischief. High society, certainly—he could tell by the cut of her dress, the way she held herself. But there was something untamed about her, something that didn't quite fit the polished surface. When she laughed, she wasn't pretending.

Their eyes met across the hazy room.

She smiled at him—not coy, not calculated. Just smiled, as if she'd found something surprising and delightful.

Sebastian couldn't look away.

1924-12-15 • MONTROSE MANSION



"A pharmacist? Pursuing a Montrose?" - Clarence Montrose's usually immovable face twisted into a mask of anger.

"I've made inquiries about the Crane boy," said Margaret Montrose, settling into the chair across from his desk. She held a small sheaf of notes. "Sebastian Crane. He's the younger brother of Dr. Thaddeus Crane—quite well-regarded as a physician. Their father was also a doctor, respected in his time. The family has standing."

"He's a pharmacist." Clarence Montrose's face remained immobile, carved from stone. "Hardly a suitable match for a Montrose."

"You know very well, Clarence," Margaret said carefully, her thin face angled toward him, "why we cannot afford to be particular."

His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "She is still a Montrose."

With a look of annoyed patience, Margaret continued:

"The gossip about her prolonged 'European vacation' has already begun. People are counting months, making calculations. We need to act quickly, or no respectable man will have her at all."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken failure.

Finally, Clarence exhaled through his nose—the closest he came to expressing resignation.

"Very well. Invite him to dinner. Let us see what sort of man he is."

Margaret rose smoothly. "I'll send the invitation tomorrow."

She swept from the room, leaving her husband alone seething in his disappointment.

1925-01-07 • SEBASTIAN'S NOTEBOOK

*I saw her today. I REALLY saw her.*

*She was in the Montrose garden among the roses, her dress the pale blush of tea roses, flowing in the afternoon breeze. She moved through the rosebushes like she herself was a rose—inevitable, perfect, meant to be.*

*All these years of theoretical work—this MEANS something. This is what it was all for.*

*I spoke to Dr. Hartley at the university yesterday about the formula. Hartley knows his botanical work exceptionally well, though he has the peculiar quality of discussing ancient poisons with the same enthusiastic precision he brings to medicinal herbs. Frankie occasionally consults him about rare botanicals imported through Harbor Imports—if Hartley notices anything unusual about the nature of these consultations, he shows no signs of it. Odd fellow. Sometimes he gets that distant look in his eyes, as if his mind has wandered to some faraway place. Perhaps, the man simply loves his plants, whether they heal or harm.*

*He confirmed my base ingredients are sound—the damiana for desire and warmth, the valerian for calm and trust, the rose otto for transcendence. But I asked him specifically about Panax ginseng, the true Oriental variety.*

*Hartley, in his typical thorough manner, explained its three-thousand-year history in Chinese medicine. The root is prized not merely as a tonic for vitality, but as a symbol of lasting union in traditional wedding preparations. The Chinese believe it enhances what they call "qi"—the vital force—but more importantly, it represents permanence, endurance, and the binding of souls.*

*That's when I understood.*

*The ginseng root isn't just another botanical—it's the binding agent I've been searching for. Not to create passion, which is fleeting, but to suggest commitment at the deepest level. To transform attraction into devotion.*

*Just a small amount. Five grains of the aged Korean root, dissolved with the other botanicals. Enough to whisper "forever" into the formula.*

*The missing piece has been found.*

1925-02-20 • LONG BEACH DOCKS



Sebastian Crane approached the familiar docks at the port of Long Beach with a sense of dread coiling in his gut. His relationship with Cordelia was evolving into something deeper—something real—and soon he planned on proposing. But he couldn't allow his dirty dealings with Frankie "The Coast" Romano to interfere with those plans.

Sure, he and Frankie had made a killing providing bootleg booze to the speakeasies up and down the coast, but it was time to end it. He'd made a significant fortune, and his investments were performing well. He no longer needed to get his hands dirty. The pharmacy, the bootleg business—it was time to leave it all behind.

But Frankie wouldn't like that. Still, Sebastian was certain he'd accept it eventually. They were reasonable men, after all.

The salt air hung heavy as Sebastian reached the weathered planks of the dock. Frankie was waiting as expected, a dark silhouette against the fading light, cigarette glowing between his fingers. Sebastian glanced around—it was a quiet evening, no one in sight, but you never knew who might be listening in this business.

"Frankie, we gotta talk. I can't be doing this anymore."

Frankie's eyes narrowed. "Whaddya mean you can't? We just started rakin' it in!"

"I know, but these high society types—the Montrose family—they got their noses in everything. They're gonna find out about you and me, and then—"

"High society?" Frankie took a step closer, his voice rising. "I stuck my NECK out for you! Told the boys you was good for it!"

"And we made money, didn't we? Real good money. I'll square up whatever you want—"

"You SWORE this would be the biggest take we ever seen!" Frankie's voice carried across the water now, and a few dock workers turned to look. "Said we'd be set for life! And now that the dough's finally rollin' in, you wanna beat it and play Mr. Respectable?"

"Keep it down, will ya—"

"You think you're some kind of big shot now? Too good for the likes of me?" Frankie jabbed a finger into Sebastian's chest. "You gave your WORD, Sebastian!"

Sebastian held up his hands, trying to placate him. "I'll get you someone else, someone just as good who can—"

"So that's it?" Frankie was shouting now, his face flushed with rage. "You USE me to get started, and soon as you got what you need, you're gonna blow? That ain't how this game works, pal!"

"Frankie, please, just listen—"

"You don't just WALK AWAY from Frankie Romano. Not from this. Not from ME." He stepped closer, his voice dropping to something more dangerous than a shout. "We had a DEAL."

Frankie shoved Sebastian hard. Sebastian stumbled backward, his heel catching on an uneven plank. He caught himself against a piling, then turned and hurried off the docks, Frankie's furious stare burning into his back.

As he reached solid ground, Sebastian realized with a sinking feeling that this wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

*1925-03-14 • SEBASTIAN'S LABORATORY*

YES! She said YES!

Engaged to CORDELIA MONTROSE. It's real now. It MATTERS now.

Must perfect the formula before the wedding. The timing has to be exact. The dosage has to be—

[frantic calculations, crossed-out ratios, chemical formulas scrawled at angles]

*1925-03-15 • SEBASTIAN'S HOUSE ON OCEAN BOULEVARD*

Sebastian paced the neat drawing room of his recently purchased house on Ocean Boulevard, his thoughts settling pleasantly on his recent engagement to Cordelia Montrose.

The Montroses had been cold and disapproving at first—naturally, a pharmacist wasn't their ideal choice. But once they'd learned more about Sebastian's standing in the community, and more importantly, his not insignificant fortune (of somewhat dubious origins, perhaps, but quite substantial nonetheless), they'd stopped asking uncomfortable questions. Mr. Montrose had even consulted him recently about strategic investments in pharmaceutical companies. How quickly attitudes shifted when money entered the equation!

The postman's knock interrupted his pleasant reverie. Sebastian retrieved the letter from the hall

table—his brother's handwriting on the envelope, neat and precise as always.

Inside was a congratulatory card and something wrapped in velvet. He unfolded the letter and read:

My Dear Brother,

I present to you this timepiece on the occasion of your engagement to Miss Montrose. It marks not merely the hours and minutes of our earthly existence, but something far more significant.

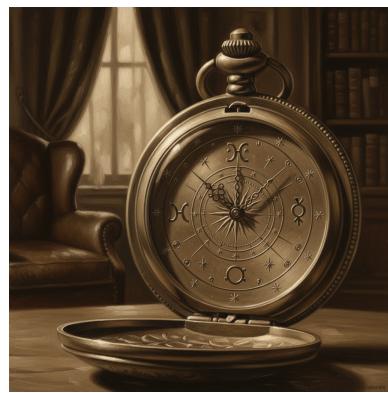
Inside, I have engraved the date of September's astronomical event you spoke of—the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, a celestial alignment that occurs but once in a generation. The timing of your engagement and upcoming wedding is very fortunate indeed. The ancients believed such moments carried profound significance, marking the intersection of love and fortune.

I thought it fitting that you should carry with you a record of this sacred timing. Let it remind you that some moments in life are written in the stars themselves.

May your union be as harmonious as the heavens above.

Your devoted brother, Thaddeus

Sebastian unwrapped the velvet carefully. Inside was a pocket watch—simple, without unnecessary ornamentation, yet elegant in its restraint. Bronze casing, substantial weight, the kind of timepiece a serious man would carry. He opened it.



The date was engraved inside with exquisite precision, surrounded by the symbols of the planets arranged around a central sun. The celestial diagram was beautifully rendered, almost mystical.

His brother truly understood him.

Sebastian closed the watch with a satisfying click and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, feeling its comforting weight against his chest. What a fortunate thing, to have a brother like Thaddeus. Since childhood, Thaddeus had always encouraged Sebastian's chemical experiments and pharmaceutical pursuits, even when their parents had been skeptical—even alarmed.

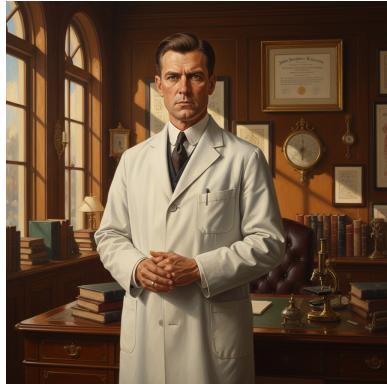
Everything was falling into place exactly as it should.



## CHAPTER 4

# Doctor's Orders

1924-03-11 • LONG BEACH MEDICAL OFFICE



Dr. Thaddeus Crane sat in his office on Ocean Avenue, savoring the satisfaction of a day well spent. Two difficult diagnoses—a case of pernicious anemia that lesser physicians might have missed, and a particularly troublesome case of quinsy—both handled with the precision and insight that had built his reputation.

He was a man who looked precisely as a physician should: mid-thirties, with a prominent jaw that suggested both competence and authority, small serious eyes that seemed always to be assessing, and a squarish head crowned with thick brown hair, perfectly groomed. His white coat was immaculate.

The afternoon light slanted through the window, illuminating the leather-bound medical journals stacked neatly on his desk, the framed diploma from Johns Hopkins on the wall. Everything in its place. Everything as it should be.

He opened his personal journal—a small weakness, he supposed, but then again preserving his thoughts for posterity was of utmost importance.

Sometimes, in a moment of sentimentality, Dr. Thaddeus imagined his own death (tragically premature, no doubt—perhaps saving a patient during an epidemic). The mourners gathered. And then—someone would discover these journals tucked away in his desk. They would open the leather cover with trembling hands. They would read his penetrating observations and they would whisper: "My God, we never truly appreciated the mind we had among us."

His thoughts wandered off and his pen met the paper:

## On Dr. Morrison and Lesser Minds

The Morrison clinic is insufferable. Dr. Morrison is competent enough, I suppose, but his method lacks refinement. He approaches medicine as if it were mere carpentry—measuring, testing, building without vision. Medicine is art. It requires imagination, intuition, the kind of intellectual superiority that separates the truly great physicians from the merely adequate.

## On Patients and Belief

I prescribed a new tonic for Mrs. Harrington today. She will attribute any improvement to my brilliance. Of course, the improvement comes from her own body's natural healing—but she will never understand this. People need to believe in their doctor. They need to feel their fate rests in superior hands. It is kinder this way.

1924-05-21 • THADDEUS CRANE'S PATIENT NOTES

### *Initial Assessment: Miss Alice Whitmore*

*Patient presented by family following what they describe as "episodes of hysteria" beginning March 18th, coinciding with news of her brother's death at sea.*

*Dr. Morrison (predictably) diagnosed acute hysteria and prescribed bed rest, bromides, and the usual tedious regiment of "calm activities." The family reports no improvement. Morrison suggested commitment to a sanitarium if symptoms persist. Typical.*

*Patient's Account: Miss Whitmore describes vivid dreams—visions, she insists—beginning the night she received news of her brother's loss. The dreams are disturbingly specific: a woman drowning in blood (she identifies the woman as her friend, Miss Cordelia Montrose), the sound of an infant crying, a sense of overwhelming dread.*

*She reports physical symptoms: rapid heartbeat, cold sweats, the sensation of "knowing" things she shouldn't know.*

### *My Assessment: This is not hysteria.*

*The medical establishment, in its typical narrow-mindedness, dismisses anything it cannot measure or classify as female neurosis. But I have studied the work of the Society for Psychical Research, the experiments at Duke University. There are documented cases of precognitive ability, of sensitivity to events beyond normal perception.*

*Miss Whitmore exhibits classic markers of genuine psychic sensitivity:*

- Visions triggered by emotional trauma (the death/loss of her brother)
- Specific, verifiable details (not vague premonitions)
- Physical manifestations consistent with heightened sensory perception
- Distress

*at being disbelieved*

*Treatment Plan: I will monitor her carefully. Most importantly, I will believe her—something no other physician in this provincial town is capable of doing.*

*If her visions prove accurate, I may be witnessing something quite extraordinary. And I intend to be the physician who finally brings scientific legitimacy to the study of psychic phenomena.*

*History will remember my name for this.*

*1924-05-22 • DR. CRANE'S PERSONAL JOURNAL*

#### The Whitmore Arrangement

The family has agreed to weekly private consultations under the framework of a psychoneurological research study. I've explained to them—in terms they could comprehend—that Miss Whitmore's symptoms suggest a phenomenon at the intersection of neurology and psychology.

Diseases of the mind and diseases of the body are merely different manifestations of the same fundamental truth about human existence. The body is the mind made flesh; the mind is the body made conscious. Descartes was wrong about his dualism, but it takes a mind of rare sophistication to understand why. The nervous system is not merely a biological structure—it is the very architecture of consciousness, the material expression of thought itself. A concept, I'm certain, that exists entirely beyond Morrison's pedestrian understanding. The man probably still believes the soul resides in the pineal gland.

Dr. James taught us at Hopkins that psychology and physiology are inextricably linked—though I suspect even he would not have pursued the full implications as I intend to.

The Whitmores are desperate enough to embrace my approach. Morrison's crude recommendation of institutionalization terrified them—the man treats medicine like carpentry.

If her abilities prove genuine—and I suspect they will—I will establish an entirely new field of medical inquiry.

*1924-06-15 • DR. CRANE'S OFFICE*



Alice Whitmore sat in the leather chair across from Dr. Thaddeus Crane's desk, her hands folded in her lap. Her posture was impeccable—back straight, ankles crossed, chin level—the product of years of finishing school training. Only the slight tremor in her fingers betrayed her.

"Tell me about last night's vision," Thaddeus said, his pen poised over his notebook.

Alice took a measured breath. When she spoke, her voice was steady, precise. "It was more vivid than the others. More... complete."

"Go on."

"Cordelia was standing at the edge of a cliff. I could feel the wind—sharp, cold, coming from the ocean. She was wearing a white dress." Alice's eyes remained open, focused on some middle distance. "There was a crowd of people behind her. I couldn't see their faces clearly, but I could hear them."

"What were they saying?"

"They were chanting. Not words exactly, but... pressure. Urging her forward. Jump, jump, jump." Alice's refined composure cracked slightly. "The voices got louder. Louder. Until they were deafening, unbearable. And then—"

She paused, and Thaddeus noticed how she gripped her gloved hands together more tightly.

"Then they stopped. Complete silence. And in that silence, I heard a baby crying. Not a normal cry—this was desperate. Piercing. The kind of sound that makes your heart stop."

Thaddeus leaned forward slightly, his pen moving across the page. "Describe the quality of the sound."

Only Alice would understand why he asked such a strange question. Only she would answer it seriously.

"Haunting," she said. "Like the baby knew something terrible was about to happen. The cry got louder, more frantic, and then—" Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. "Then the baby just... burst. Exploded into pieces. And there was blood everywhere. On the rocks, in the water, on Cordelia's white dress. So much blood. Even the skies looked red."

She closed her eyes finally, and Thaddeus saw her swallow hard.

"When I woke up, I could still smell it. Copper. Salt. Death."

The room was silent except for the scratch of Thaddeus's pen. He wrote quickly, capturing every detail while they were fresh.

"Miss Whitmore," he said finally, setting down his pen, "have you spoken to Miss Montrose recently?"

"Not in months. Not since..." Alice opened her eyes. "Not since Thomas died. I tried to write to her, but my letters went unanswered. When I inquired at the Montrose house, her mother was quite short with me. She said Cordelia was traveling abroad, that post might be irregular. She suggested I stop writing altogether and simply wait for her return."

"Yet you continue to see her in your visions."

"Yes." Alice's intelligence shone through her distress. "That's what troubles me most, Dr. Crane. These aren't memories or anxieties about our friendship. These feel like warnings. As if something terrible is going to happen to her, and I'm being shown it so I can... what? Stop it? I don't even know if that's possible."

Thaddeus regarded her carefully. Another woman might be hysterical after such a vision—weeping, incoherent. But Alice sat before him analyzing her own psychic experiences with remarkable clarity, trying to understand their meaning and purpose.

Extraordinary.

"The baby in your vision," he said. "Do you believe it's literal or symbolic?"

Alice met his eyes directly. "I'm terrified it's all real—but perhaps metaphorical. Amplified, like reflections in a carnival mirror. The truth, but distorted."

She added quietly: "Dr. Crane? Do you think I'm mad?"

Alice's questions and observations made him certain she was more than just another patient. But he couldn't tell her all of it just yet.

"I think," he said carefully, "that what you're experiencing is extraordinary. You are certainly not mad, Alice," he added softly.

Alice breathed a sigh of relief and even smiled a little. Something shifted in his chest at that small smile—professional detachment giving way to something more dangerous. Her eyes shone with an intelligence that recognized intelligence in himself, he was certain.

"Thank you, Dr. Crane! I will see you next week!"



## CHAPTER 5

# Cordelia's Concern

1924-09-21 • MONTROSE MANSION GARDEN

He came to the garden this afternoon. Sebastian Crane. I've heard of him—the apothecary with the reputation for eccentricity. But seeing him is different than hearing about him. There's something in his eyes. A kind of wonder, as if he's looking at the world and seeing poetry where others see only facts.

He asked me about the roses. Not their names or their botanical properties, but what I felt when I looked at them. No one has asked me that in years.

Thomas used to ask me questions like that.

\*\*\*

He spoke of chemistry and soul,

And how to make my spirit whole

Dark eyes that hold strange fire,

A smile that knows forbidden things,

He makes me feel something like desire,

But different—quieter—with careful wings.

1925-03-15 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*I saw Alice today. My dearest friend—or she used to be. We've barely spoken in months. I told myself it was easier that way, that the distance protected us both.*

*But today I wanted to share the news: Sebastian and I are engaged!*

*When I told her, she smiled and embraced me, said all the right things. But there was something hollow in it. Alice looked different—fragile, almost transparent if one could describe a person in such a way. Like she's fading, becoming less solid with each passing day.*

*I should have been there for her when the news about Thomas arrived. I should have run to her side,*

*held her while she grieved. But I couldn't. I wasn't even there for myself then. I was drowning, and I let her drown alone.*

*I'm so sorry, Alice. So terribly sorry.*

*But things will be different now. I'm stronger now. I have Sebastian now.*

*From now on, I'll be there for you, Alice. I promise. Whatever you need, whatever you're going through—I won't abandon you again.*

*You're my dearest friend. And I've failed you long enough.*

1925-06-05 • CORDELIA'S DIARY



*I could not believe what I saw today.*

*After visiting Alice, I passed by the Whitmore garden on my way home. And there they were: Alice and Dr. Thaddeus Crane. Together. Walking arm in arm among the hedges, his head bent close to hers as if sharing secrets.*

*Dr. Thaddeus Crane—Sebastian's brother, of all people! The respected physician, the pillar of Long Beach society.*

*What is he doing with Alice?*

*She's his patient. She's fragile, so terribly fragile since Thomas's death. Everyone says she's been having "episodes"—nightmares, fits of hysteria. She needs care, protection, not... whatever this is.*

*A doctor and his patient—it's completely, utterly inappropriate.*

*There was something in the way he looked at her. Something proprietary. As if she belonged to him.*

*Sebastian speaks so highly of his brother—the brilliant doctor, the accomplished physician. But I've seen the way Thaddeus looks at people, as if he's studying specimens rather than seeing souls.*

*I must find out what Dr. Crane's intentions are.*

*I won't fail Alice again.*

1925-06-15 • WHITMORE HOUSE

As Cordelia approached the Whitmore house on Pine Avenue, a flood of memories rushed over her: youthful afternoons with Alice, their laughter unburdened and free. Late evening conversations about poetry and dreams.

And then—there, on those very front steps—meeting Thomas for the first time. His sun-bronzed face, his impossible blue eyes, his easy smile.

Cordelia swallowed hard, forcing back tears. No. She was here for Alice. This wasn't about her own ghosts.

Alice opened the door, surprise flickering across her pale face. "Cordelia? I wasn't expecting you."

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." Alice's voice was warm, despite everything.

They settled in the familiar drawing room—the same room where they'd spent endless evenings laughing about Cordelia's suitors, where Thomas had regaled them with tales of typhoons and foreign ports, where Mrs. Whitmore had served her famous rose-water bread still warm from the oven.

The memory of those brighter, gentler days came flooding back—the scent of roses and the distant salt of the sea.

"Alice," Cordelia began, twisting her gloves in her lap, "I know it's been a long time since we've really talked, but..." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "I saw something recently that deeply disturbed me. As your friend—and I hope you know I never stopped being your friend—I must express my concern."

Alice tilted her head, waiting.

"I saw you with Dr. Thaddeus the other day. In your garden. Walking together, very... close." Cordelia met her friend's eyes. "Alice, I don't know what I saw exactly, but—"

A smile crossed Alice's face—soft, private, the kind of smile that spoke of deep happiness. "Thaddeus and I are friends," Alice said quietly. "More than friends. He makes me feel... seen. Understood. I think I'm falling in love with him."

The words sounded strange on her lips, as if she were testing their weight.

Cordelia's concern deepened.

"Alice," she said gently, "are you certain his intentions are... honorable?"

The hurt that flashed across Alice's face made Cordelia's heart ache.

"Of course they are!" Alice's voice sharpened. "What else would they be? Have you heard how people speak of him? He's one of the most respected physicians in Long Beach. He's Sebastian's brother—and frankly, the one with the better reputation."

The barb struck home. Cordelia felt her cheeks flush.

"Sebastian loves me," she said, hearing the defensiveness in her own voice. "We're engaged! But Alice, you must consider—does Dr. Thaddeus plan to marry you? To propose to a—" She stopped, but it was too late. The words hung in the air.

"To what, Cordelia?" Alice's voice was cold now. "A penniless girl? A broken girl whose family lost their fortune? Whose brother died at sea? The hysterical girl everyone whispers about?"

"Alice, no, I didn't mean—"

"I think you did." Alice stood, her composure intact but her eyes bright with hurt. "I love you as a friend, Cordelia. But I think you should leave now. My affairs are my own."

The silence between them was thunderous.

Cordelia rose slowly, gathering her things. "Alice, please. I'm only worried about—"

"Goodbye, Cordelia."



## CHAPTER 6

# Mortician's Discretion

1925-10-11 • BLACKWELL & SONS MORTUARY

Silas Blackwell stood in the preparation room of Blackwell & Sons Mortuary, his rubber gloves pristine, his dark hair carefully slicked back with pomade, when they brought her in.

Alice Whitmore. Female, twenty-four years of age. Deceased at the scene.

He'd been doing this work for fifteen years—since returning from the War with hands too steady and a mind too comfortable with death to do anything else.

But when he unwrapped the pristine white sheet covering Alice Whitmore, something in his chest tightened.

She looked young. Peaceful, almost. Her features were delicate, refined—the kind of face that belonged in a painting, not on his steel examination table. In death, she looked like an angel.

Except for the crushed wound at the back of her skull, the matted dark hair, the red that had seeped and dried.

"Too young," Silas muttered, and began his work.

He took meticulous notes, his pen moving across the paper with the precision of a man who understood that details mattered—even if no one else would read them.

Blunt force trauma to the occipital region. Skull fracture—depressed.

He examined her carefully, turning her head to measure the wound's dimensions, checking her arms, her legs, her torso.

No defensive wounds on hands or forearms. No bruising to extremities. No signs of struggle.

Silas paused, his pen hovering over the page.

A fall from the top of a staircase—which is what the police report claimed—would leave evidence. Bruises along the body from tumbling. Scraped palms from trying to catch oneself. Multiple points of trauma from hitting the steps.

Alice Whitmore had none of that.

Just one perfect, crushing blow to the back of her head.

He examined the fracture pattern more closely, angling the light to see the depression clearly. The shape was wrong for a fall—too concentrated, too deep. This was the kind of damage you saw when something heavy connected with force and intention.

Fracture pattern inconsistent with accidental fall. Trauma angle suggests horizontal strike from behind. Heavy object likely. Recommend further investigation.

"Shady business," he muttered to no one.

He covered her face gently with a clean cloth and began preparing the embalming solution.

*1925-10-11 • BLACKWELL & SONS MORTUARY*

That evening, just as Silas was cleaning his instruments, there was another knock at the mortuary door.

Sebastian Crane. Male, thirty years of age. Found deceased in his home. Suspected poisoning.

Silas had known the Crane family by reputation—the respectable physician's brother, a pharmacist, who was recently engaged.

Now here was Sebastian on his table, his skin an unnatural grayish-yellow, his lips faintly blue.

The examination revealed what Silas had suspected: acute poisoning. The damage was extensive and unmistakable.

Severe hepatic damage. Liver discoloration and necrosis. Cardiac tissue shows signs of acute failure. Kidneys display extensive necrotic damage. Gastric contents...

He paused, leaning closer. There was something in the stomach contents. Further chemical analysis recommended.

Silas made a note to flag this for the police investigators.

*1925-10-17 • BLACKWELL & SONS MORTUARY*

Another body arrived in the early hours of the morning, just as dawn was breaking over Long Beach.

Cordelia Montrose. Female, twenty-six years of age. Found deceased in her bed. Heart failure, the family had said.

Silas pulled on fresh gloves and began his examination, his movements methodical despite the

exhaustion pulling at him.

Another body, another young woman. Cordelia Montrose, everyone knew the Montrose name and Cordelia had a reputation of a local beauty. And here she was—the grayish pallor, the slightly bluish tinge to her lips, death took its toll.

He began taking notes:

Signs of systemic poisoning. Hepatic damage present. Cardiac tissue shows chronic deterioration. Kidney damage extensive but appears gradual. Gastric lining shows signs of prolonged exposure to toxic substance.

Assessment: Poisoning—chronic.

Silas set down his pen and stared at his three sets of notes laid out before him on his desk. Too many coincidences, too many similarities...

His thoughts were interrupted by a messenger appearing in the doorway—well-dressed, unfamiliar. "Letter for Mr. Blackwell."

"From?"

"No return address, sir." The man set the envelope on the desk and left quickly, his footsteps echoing down the stairs.

Silas stared at the envelope. Expensive cream-colored paper. Heavy stock. The kind wealthy families used.

He opened it slowly.

Inside was a single card with a brief note in elegant script:

For your discretion.

Beneath it, folded carefully, was a five-hundred-dollar bill.

Five hundred dollars.

Silas looked from the money to his detailed notes. To the three death certificates waiting to be filled out.

The Montroses. It had to be. People whispered about that family—how they protected their reputation at any cost.

Then Silas Blackwell picked up his pen and wrote:

Alice Whitmore - Cause of Death: Accidental fall

Sebastian Crane - Cause of Death: Accidental poisoning (suspected self-administered)

Cordelia Montrose - Cause of Death: Heart failure

He sealed each certificate carefully, his hands steady, his conscience quieter than perhaps it should have been.



## CHAPTER 7

# Investigation Begins

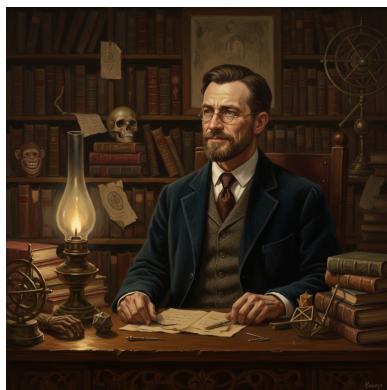
2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION

"I have gathered you all here today for a very special reason," Grandmother spoke, her voice carrying through the dusty drawing room of the Montrose mansion. "Three souls have been trapped in this house for a century. It is time they were set free."

Grandmother, as everyone called her, was a well-known, influential, and slightly feared figure in Long Beach—a woman who seemed to have connections everywhere. And it was no wonder she was the one leading the investigation at 266 Kennebec Avenue.

When the Heiress reached out to the psychic, Margo Laveau, from a renowned family of spiritualists going back to the world-famous Celestine Laveau, word spread quickly. An investigation at the Montrose mansion attracted a diverse set of seekers.

Grandmother looked around the assembled group—believers and skeptics, descendants of the victims and the accused, scientists and spiritualists. Each carried pieces of the puzzle. Each held secrets of their own.



The Botany Professor — a distracted genius obsessed with deadly plants, whose ancestor's secrets are tangled in the 1925 deaths.

Margo Laveau, The Psychic Medium — a spiritualist descended from a legendary family, waiting to commune with the restless spirits that have haunted the mansion for a century.

The Fiduciary — a pedantic record-keeper obsessed with documentation, holding all the financial secrets in their meticulous files.

The Explorer — a rugged adventurer hunting for treasure and history, sensing something strangely familiar about this place.

The Clockmaker — a time-obsessed craftsperson who sees patterns everywhere, drawn here by a mysterious pocket watch engraved with a fateful date.

The Art Collector — a pretentious aesthete obsessed with provenance and artistic merit, one foot in legitimacy and one in the shadows.

The Town Doctor — a brilliant physician haunted by their family's secrets, searching for answers about their own bloodline and an ancestor who may have been complicit in a cover-up.

The Mortician — unnervingly calm about death, speaking in hushed funeral tones, carrying knowledge of what bodies reveal and what they hide.

The Baker — genuinely cheerful and warm despite being perpetually covered in flour, an orphan whose own past holds unexpected connections to the mansion's history.

The Dressmaker — obsessed with the bride who never wore her dress, preserving a tragic love story from 1925.

The Influencer — a content creator documenting everything, drawn by the promise of viral content and determined to debunk the supernatural.

The Townperson Detective — a sleek and skeptical investigator with a trained eye for inconsistencies, immune to social pressure and pursuing only truth.

The Townperson Journalist — a sharp-minded reporter always chasing the next big story, skilled at getting people to talk and reveal their secrets.

The Townperson Animal Expert — eccentric and unconventional, viewing mysteries through an unexpected lens.

"And somewhere in this mansion, three ghosts waited to see if anyone would finally listen to the truth they'd been screaming for a hundred years.

"Let the investigation begin," she said quietly.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION LIBRARY*

"Dr. Sinclair," the Fiduciary said, approaching with their characteristic precision. "I have a packet for you."

Inside, Dr. Sinclair found Sebastian Crane's birth certificate and pharmacy records, along with a record of name change dated back to the 1950s.

Sinclair had been studying their ancestor, the well-known 1920s physician Dr. Thaddeus Crane, for years. They'd never known Thaddeus had a brother. The historical records about Sebastian's existence were suspiciously sparse—almost deliberately erased.

Sebastian Crane. Pharmacist. Engaged to Cordelia Montrose. And then... nothing. As if he'd been wiped from history.

What had Sebastian Crane been up to? And why had the Crane family worked so hard to erase him from existence?



## CHAPTER 8

# Thomas Whitmore

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION MAIN ROOM

The Influencer drifted over to the Heiress, phone ready, hoping for content gold.

"Who's that over there?" He gestured subtly toward a young man with dark hair wearing a red sweater.  
"Looks like he could be a Montrose. One of your cousins?"

"No one important," the Heiress replied, her tone clipped. "A baker from down the street. I'm not sure what he's doing here." She shot an annoyed glance toward Grandmother. "Ever since this investigation began, all kinds of people have been showing up at the mansion. There's no telling what secrets they're hiding."

Why is she in charge anyway? the Heiress thought bitterly. This is my house. I should be leading this investigation.

"But see that gentleman over there?" The Heiress lowered her voice, leaning closer. "The one with the easy smile and the traveler's fedora?"

The Influencer's eyes lit up. This was more like it.

"That's a Whitmore," the Heiress whispered. "Did you know that Thomas Whitmore—Cordelia's brief romance in 1923 and Alice's brother—didn't actually perish at sea like everyone said?"

The Influencer leaned in, practically salivating.

"He came back to Long Beach in 1926, only to find both his sister and his former lover dead. His parents died soon after—from grief, people said. Thomas signed a contract with a merchant ship and sailed away, never to return to Long Beach again." She paused for dramatic effect. "But it's said he had not one, but two wives overseas. And many offspring."

"And that's one of them?" The Influencer's eyes widened.

"In the flesh. Handsome, isn't he? No wonder Cordelia was in love with Thomas."

The Influencer's phone was already recording.

1926-10-15 • WHITMORE HOUSE

Thomas Whitmore stood before his childhood home, his sea bag slung over his shoulder, his heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and dread.

Something was wrong.

The curtains were drawn tight, the windows dark. The grass had grown wild and overgrown, reaching nearly to his knees. Ever since his father lost his fortune back in 1918, the house had been slowly deteriorating—the paint peeling, the fence sagging—but his mother had always maintained appearances. And Alice... Alice had always kept the curtains fresh and the windows bright.

It had always felt like home.

Now it looked abandoned.

Thomas knocked. No answer. He knocked again, harder. Finally, he heard shuffling footsteps inside.

The door opened a crack, revealing an old woman with gray hair and sunken eyes. She stared at him without recognition.

"Mother?" Thomas's voice cracked. "Mother, it's me. It's Thomas."

"Thomas?" She blinked slowly, her hollow eyes trying to focus. "Thomas?"

"Yes, Mother. Don't you know me?"

"Thomas?" Her voice was barely a whisper. Recognition began to dawn, followed by horror. "Thomas? How can that be? The telegram said... We thought you were dead."

"It's a long story, Mother. I survived the wreck. It took me two years to get home, but I'm here now. I'm alive." He reached for her hand. "Where is Alice? Where's Father?"

His mother's face crumpled. She began to sob—deep, broken sounds that seemed to come from somewhere beyond grief.

"Mother?" Thomas felt ice spreading through his chest. "What happened? Where is Alice?"

But his mother could only shake her head and weep.

*1926-03-01 • PACIFIC OCEAN*

#### Thomas's Account

When the Pacific Dawn went down in March 1924, Thomas was among a small group of survivors who clung to debris in the typhoon. They drifted for nearly thirty days with nothing to eat but raw fish and nothing to drink but rainwater caught in their cupped hands. Many died of exposure, dehydration, and

madness.

The five who survived finally washed up on a remote, uninhabited island in the Pacific—so isolated that no ships passed, no rescue came. For the next two years, they survived on tropical fruit, fish, and hope. They built shelters from palm fronds. They kept a signal fire burning. They waited.

In July 1926, a British survey vessel finally spotted their smoke.

Thomas had written home immediately—surely his family had been told he was dead. Surely they'd been grieving all this time. He needed them to know he was alive, that he was coming home.

He received no response. But mail in the Pacific was irregular, unreliable. Rather than wait, he'd booked passage on the first ship to San Francisco and made his way down the coast to Long Beach.

Home.

Except home was gone. And so, he would learn, was everyone he'd ever loved.



## CHAPTER 9

# Elixir of Eternal Love

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY

The Professor made his way through the overgrown grounds of the mansion, examining the botanical specimens with professional interest. A patch of colorful ornamental peppers. An ancient rose garden, still blooming despite decades of neglect. And then—tucked behind a tangle of jasmine vines—a small outbuilding.

The door opened with a rusty creak.

The Professor stepped inside and stopped, his pulse quickening with recognition.

A laboratory. Abandoned for a century, but unmistakably a laboratory.

Workbenches lined the walls, covered in dust and cobwebs. Glass bottles and amber jars stood in neat rows, their contents long dried or evaporated. A brass balance scale sat in the corner. Bunsen burners. Distillation equipment. This had been a serious workspace.

The Professor moved from jar to jar, reading faded labels, opening stoppers to smell the contents.

Rose otto. The Professor inhaled deeply. That characteristic floral intensity, even after all these years.

Damiana. Unmistakable. The dried leaves still held their distinctive scent.

He picked up another jar and examined the gnarled root inside. Ginseng. Korean, if he weren't mistaken. Incredibly rare and expensive in the 1920s.

Valerian root. The Professor recognized its sharp, almost unpleasant medicinal smell.

And over here—vanilla extract, honey, cherry syrup. Flavorings.

"Someone was making a tonic," the Professor murmured. "These were popular in the 1920s. Sold as cure-alls, tonics for vigor and vitality."

Then he spotted the large glass carboys in the corner, still half-full of clear liquid.

Grain alcohol.

The Professor's eyebrows rose. "During Prohibition. This much would have required serious

connections." He examined the setup more carefully. "Unless... yes. Under the medicinal tonic cover. These were legal for pharmaceutical use."

On the main workbench, the Professor found scattered papers—some torn, some water-stained, but remarkably preserved in the dry shed. Notes in cramped handwriting. Calculations. Crossed-out formulas.

He picked up a page at random and read:

First principles: What is love but chemistry? The ancients understood—Venus and desire, the movement of blood...

"A poet chemist?" the Professor muttered. "Curious."

More pages revealed obsessive refinements of a formula. Ratios adjusted. Ingredients added and crossed out. The handwriting grew more frantic in later entries.

Then the Professor found it—a final page, more elaborate than the others. At the top, carefully drawn symbols: planets, constellations, astrological signs arranged in a specific pattern. It looked ritualistic. Almost ominous.

Below the symbols, written in clear, confident script: ...

*2025-11-01 • SEBASTIAN'S NOTEBOOK*

*ELIXIR OF ETERNAL LOVE - Final Formula (September 1925)*

*Botanical Components:*

*Damiana (3 parts) - for desire, heat, and awakening*

*Valerian Root (2 parts) - for calm, trust, and grounding*

*Rose Otto (1 drop only) - pure essential oil for transcendence and romantic intention*

*Ginseng Root (smallest pinch) - binding agent for eternal love and longevity*

*Chemical Components:*

*Potassium Bromide (10 grains) - mild sedative, for peace of mind*

*Calcium Lactate (5 grains) - fortifying agent for strength*

*Iron Citrate (3 grains) - blood tonic for vitality*

*Base & Preservative:*

*Grain Alcohol (8 oz at 95% proof) - carrier and preservative*

*Flavorings & Sweeteners:*

*Vanilla Extract (2 tsp)*

*Cherry Syrup (1 oz)*

*Honey (to taste)*

*To be administered daily. The binding takes time. Patience is essential.*

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY*

The Professor stared at the formula, his mind racing.

"Dr. Sinclair!" he called. "You need to see this."

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY*

Dr. Sinclair entered the dusty laboratory, her medical bag in hand. She'd been examining the house's old medicine cabinet when the Professor summoned her.

"What do you make of this?" The Professor handed over the formula.

Dr. Sinclair read it carefully, her expression growing more serious with each line. "Someone was making a love potion. An 'Elixir of Eternal Love.'" She looked up. "Given that Sebastian Crane died of suspected poisoning, this is... troubling."

"But look at the ingredients," the Professor said. "I've examined every botanical component. They're all completely harmless. Common tonic ingredients, actually. What's your medical opinion on the chemical compounds?"

Dr. Sinclair studied the formula again. "Potassium bromide was used as a sedative—perfectly legal in the 1920s. Calcium lactate for fortification. Iron citrate as a blood tonic. All standard medicinal ingredients." She frowned. "Individually, none of these would be toxic. Even in combination, at these dosages... I don't see how this could kill anyone."

"So it's safe?"

"In theory." Dr. Sinclair's frown deepened. "But Professor, could any of these botanicals become toxic when combined? Some plants have strange interactions."

The Professor considered this carefully. He picked up the jar of ginseng, examining it in the dim light. "In my professional opinion? No. These botanicals don't interact dangerously. Valerian might enhance

the sedative effect of the bromide slightly, but not lethally."

"Then this formula is harmless?"

"This formula, yes." The Professor set down the jar and met Dr. Sinclair's eyes. "But perhaps this isn't the final formula. Perhaps there was another version. Something more... potent."

They both looked around the laboratory—at the rows of jars, the scattered papers, the evidence of obsessive experimentation.

Somewhere in this room might be the real answer. The formula that had killed Sebastian Crane. And possibly others.

Dr. Sinclair pulled out her phone. "We need to tell Grandmother about this. And we need to find out if there are more formulas hidden here."

The Professor nodded, already moving toward the other shelves, other papers.



## CHAPTER 10

# Dressmaker's Devotion

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, THE ABANDONED LABORATORY

The Professor and Dr. Sinclair had been methodically searching the laboratory for hours, documenting every jar, every scrap of paper, every clue to what Sebastian Crane had been creating in this dusty shed.

The Professor was examining botanical samples when Dr. Sinclair called out from the main workbench.

"Found something. More of Sebastian's notes."

They were scattered across the workbench—loose pages, some water-stained, others perfectly preserved. Dr. Sinclair picked up one that was dated late August and began to read aloud:

August 24, 1925 - Sebastian's Notebook

Elias Monroe has been spending considerable time with Cordelia on the dress alterations. Fittings, measurements, consultations—it all seems excessive for a wedding dress, even one as elaborate as ours will be.

I know he is a craftsman, meticulous about his work. His reputation is built on perfection. But something in his demeanor troubles me. The way he looks at her when he thinks no one is watching. The way he finds excuses to extend their appointments.

Cordelia insists the dress is not yet perfect, that he is merely being thorough. She sees no cause for concern.

And yet.

But I have faith in my elixir. I feel us becoming more bound with each passing day. The ritual draws us closer, intertwines our very essences. By the wedding day, she will be mine completely—in ways that no dressmaker's needle can accomplish.

Dr. Sinclair looked up. "Elias Monroe. The dressmaker. Sebastian was jealous of him."

"Elias Monroe?" The Professor frowned. "Does anyone know anything about him? Is he connected to the current Monroe Bespoke & Alterations?"

"Did someone say Elias Monroe?"

They both turned to find the Influencer standing in the doorway of the laboratory, phone in hand, eyes gleaming with interest.

"What do you know?" Dr. Sinclair asked.

The Influencer stepped inside, already recording. "Elias Monroe—as in Monroe Bespoke & Alterations, yes. That shop has been in Long Beach since 1920. And here's the tea: rumor has it Elias was desperately in love with Cordelia Montrose. Like, obsessively in love. There were whispers that they had a brief fling before she got engaged to Sebastian."

"A fling?" The Professor's eyebrows rose.

"Well, gossip anyway. You know how people talk. Apparently Cordelia was quite the flirt—just like her mother in her day. The Montrose women had that reputation." The Influencer scrolled through their phone. "I found some old society column mentions. Cordelia was seen with Elias at the theater, at gallery openings. Always explained away as 'consulting about her trousseau,' but people wondered."

Dr. Sinclair looked back at Sebastian's note, their expression thoughtful. "So Sebastian knew. Or at least suspected."

"Jealousy is a powerful motive," the Professor said slowly.

*2025-11-01 • MONROE TAILOR AND ALTERATIONS, LONG BEACH*

When the Dressmaker heard about the investigation at the Montrose mansion, their hands began to tremble.

That dress... the one that held ghosts in its folds.

The Dressmaker walked to the back of their shop, past the modern sewing machines and bolts of contemporary fabric, to the old mahogany armoire that had belonged to their great-grandfather, Elias Monroe.

They opened the carved wooden doors with reverent hands.

And there it was.

Even after a hundred years, even wrapped in yellowed muslin and tissue paper, it was breathtaking. A wedding dress, never worn. Ivory silk that still held its lustrous sheen. Delicate Chantilly lace at the collar and sleeves. Thirty-two pearl buttons down the back, each one sewn by hand with thread so fine it was barely visible.

Elias Monroe had been a master of his craft—sought after by the wealthiest families in 1920s Long Beach, known for his artistry and uncompromising precision. This dress had been his masterpiece.

But there was something else tucked inside the folds of muslin.

A small cedar box, no bigger than a book.

The Dressmaker lifted it carefully and opened the lid. Inside was a photograph—sepia-toned, edges worn soft with age. A young woman stood in a garden surrounded by roses, her large brown eyes full of dreams and poetry. She wore a dress the pale blush of tea roses, and her long hair was pinned loosely at the sides.

On the back, in Elias's careful copperplate handwriting: "My muse. C.M."

Beneath the photograph were folded papers—poems, written in the same precise hand.

The Dressmaker picked up the first one, dated and creased with age:

"For Cordelia" (Unsent) - August 20, 1925

She turns to roses in the garden light,

Not knowing I have fallen into night.

Each stitch I sew, each pin I place with care—

My heart caught in the dress she'll never wear.

The Dressmaker's throat tightened. They picked up the second poem. The handwriting was shakier here, less controlled, as if written in distress:

"Watching Her Fade" (Unsent) - October 8, 1925

She wears her beauty now like sorrow's crown,

I fit the silk and dare not let her down.

She's lost the light she carried like a flame—

Some poison's in her now. Who is to blame?

The Dressmaker stared at the date. October 8, 1925. Just 9 days before Cordelia Montrose died—supposedly of heart failure, supposedly from grief over her husband's sudden death.

But that line...

"Some poison's in her now. Who is to blame?"

Elias had known something. And he'd written it down in poetry because he had no other way to speak the truth.

The Dressmaker carefully refolded the poems and placed them back in the box with the photograph. Then they lifted the wedding dress from the armoire—still perfect, still waiting, still holding the ghost of a woman who'd never gotten to wear it.

This dress had a story to tell.

And the Dressmaker was going to make sure someone finally listened.

I must get to the Montrose mansion, they thought, already reaching for their coat.

*1925-09-15 • MONROE BESPOKE & ALTERATIONS*

Cordelia Montrose stood on the fitting platform in Elias Monroe's dressmaker shop, her arms extended as he took the final measurements for her wedding dress.

"Hold still, please, Miss Montrose," he murmured, his measuring tape stretched across her back.

Bust: 34 inches

Waist: 24 inches

Length: 62 inches from shoulder

She appeared smaller than when he'd first measured her in July. More delicate. Fragile, even. Elias made a careful note—she'd lost nearly two inches from her waist in just six weeks.

A sting of concern pierced his heart. All this stress that man is putting her through, he thought, carefully pinning the muslin mock-up at her shoulder. Sebastian Crane.

Elias had heard the rumors—the pharmacist's involvement with bootleggers at the port, his questionable business dealings, the whispers about his experiments with strange compounds. He was not impressed. He desperately wanted to tell Cordelia not to marry him, to warn her that something felt wrong about the whole arrangement.

But instead, he just took careful measurements and adjusted pins with steady hands.

"Oh!" Cordelia said suddenly, her face brightening. "Could you add a pocket? A hidden one in the seam, if you can manage it, Elias?"

That bright laughter returned to her eyes—the spark he'd fallen in love with the first time she'd walked into his shop.

"Of course," he said softly. "Every bride should have a secret or two."

Cordelia knew of Elias's feelings for her, though not the full extent of them. He reminded her of her

own youthful infatuations, the silly poems she'd written, the innocent laughter. But she was different now. A grown woman. She'd left those dreamy, innocent days behind.

A cloud passed over her beautiful face, darkening those large brown eyes.

A bride with secrets indeed.

Elias saw it—that shadow—and his hands stilled for a moment before continuing their work. He wanted to ask what troubled her. He wanted to tell her she didn't have to go through with this wedding.

But he was just the dressmaker.

So he pinned the ivory silk and said nothing at all.

*1925-10-15 • MONTROSE MANSION, CORDELIA'S BEDROOM*

Elias Monroe stood at the entrance of the Montrose mansion, a feeling of dread settling over him like a shroud. The house loomed above—grand, imposing, and somehow wrong.

Cordelia had sent for him. The note had been brief, urgent: Please come. I need to see you. There isn't much time.

A maid led him upstairs to Cordelia's bedroom. When he entered, his breath caught in his throat.

She sat propped against pillows, her face pale as the ivory silk of her unworn wedding dress. The vibrant woman he'd measured just weeks ago had become a ghost—white as a sheet, hollowed out.

"Elias," she said, her voice thin but warm. "Thank you for coming."

"Cordelia." He crossed the room quickly, taking the chair beside her bed. "Your note—you said you were unwell..."

She smiled sadly. "I think I'm dying, Elias."

"Don't speak like that." The words came out sharper than he intended. "What does the doctor say? Surely there's treatment—"

"Oh, Thaddeus?" A bitter laugh escaped her lips. "He says it's grief. That I'm dying of a broken heart over Sebastian's death." She looked at him directly, her large brown eyes still beautiful despite the shadow of death in them. "But I know better. Something is eating away at my insides. I can feel it—like a slow fire consuming me from within."

Elias felt ice in his veins. "Then you need another doctor. Someone who will actually help—"

"It's too late for that." Her hand reached out, thin and trembling, and grasped his. "Please, Elias. Let's

not speak of it now. I have something to ask you. Will you do something for me?"

"Anything." The word came without hesitation.

Cordelia took a shaking breath. "When I was younger, I was foolish and..." Her voice broke. Tears spilled down her pale cheeks. "And it doesn't matter now what happened. But Elias, I have a daughter. Her name is Eleanor."

Elias went very still. He remembered 1924—Cordelia's sudden "vacation" to Europe, nine months gone, the strange vagueness about her travels.

"All I can think about these last few days is her," Cordelia continued, her voice urgent now, desperate. "My little girl. I never got to hold her. Never got to tell her I loved her. They took her away immediately—said it was for the best, that she'd have a proper family, a proper life."

"Cordelia..."

"Please." She pressed a folded paper into his hand. "I want to leave something for her. Just a small thing—something that shows I thought of her, that I loved her even though I could never be her mother."

Elias unfolded the paper carefully. It was a recipe, written in Cordelia's careful hand:

Rose Bread - My favorite

"Mail this to her, Elias. To Eleanor. Wherever she is, whatever family has her."

Elias clutched the recipe, his own eyes burning. "I promise. I'll find her. I'll make sure she knows."

"Thank you." Cordelia closed her eyes, exhausted from the effort of speaking. "You've always been such a good friend to me, Elias..."

"Cordelia?"

She didn't answer.

Elias sat with her as the afternoon light faded, holding her hand, the recipe pressed against his heart.

Two days later, she was gone.



## CHAPTER 11

# Baker's Inheritance

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION MAIN ENTRANCE

The Baker stood before the Montrose mansion, holding a basket wrapped in linen cloth, still uncertain why he had driven here.

This morning, flour had been on his hands as always. He'd been measuring rose petals for the morning batch—a routine performed a thousand times. Rosebuds gathered at dawn, dried in glass jars, the precise measurements from the recipe he'd carried his whole life.

That recipe was his only inheritance.

When someone left him as an infant on the steps of St. Mary's Church, the recipe had been tucked beneath the blankets—pressed inside a worn leather journal belonging to someone named Eleanor. The journal also contained a faded black-and-white photograph of a striking young woman with large brown eyes and long dark hair, standing in a garden surrounded by roses.

No note. No explanation. Just the journal, the photograph, and a recipe for rose bread.

The Baker had been kneading dough this morning when Grandmother's invitation arrived. An investigation at the Montrose mansion. A century-old mystery to be solved. Your presence is requested.

He should have thrown it away. He had orders to fill, customers waiting, the rhythm of his daily work calling him.

But something had pulled at him. A knowing. The same intuition that told him when a customer needed honey instead of sugar in their tea, when someone was carrying grief too heavy for words, when a loaf needed five more minutes even though the timer said it was done. People called it empathy. His old therapist had called it hypervigilance—a survival mechanism from an uncertain childhood.

But the Baker knew what it really was: he sensed things. Saw connections others missed. The world spoke to him in whispers and gut feelings he'd learned long ago to trust.

So he wrapped the rose bread in cloth—the same recipe from Eleanor's journal, the one he'd perfected over years—got in his car, and drove to this mansion without quite understanding why.

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION MAIN HALL

The Influencer practically vibrated with energy when he saw the Baker, phone already raised, eyes alight with that particular hunger content creators get when they spot a story.

"Oh, you brought food!" he said, and the Baker could see him calculating angles, trying to figure out how to frame the basket for maximum appeal. "You're the baker, right? From that place downtown?"

"Sweet Rose Bakery," the Baker confirmed, offering the basket. "I brought rose bread. It's—"

"Oh my God, yes! Rose bread!" The Influencer took a piece, his expression shifting from performance to genuine appreciation. "This is incredible. You know, there's this whole crazy story about a bakery that burned down in the 1990s? It was supposed to be famous for rose bread. The fire was never really explained—some people think arson, others think it was insurance fraud, but the family died in it. Parents and grandparents, I think? Super tragic."

The Baker's hands went still. Rose bread. Bakery fire. He needed to know more.

"Oh, here," the Influencer said, already scrolling on his phone. "I have a link."

November 5, 1990, Long Beach Gazette

#### DEVASTATING BLAZE DESTROYS SULLIVAN BAKERY

##### Beloved Long Beach Institution Lost to Suspicious Fire

SULLIVAN'S BAKERY, a Long Beach institution for over sixty years, burned to the ground late last night in a fire that left two dead and raised troubling questions about the blaze's origin. The bodies have been identified as David Sullivan, 38, owner of the bakery, and Catherine Sullivan, 36, his wife. Reports state the Sullivans had an infant child, though no body has been recovered despite extensive searches of the ruins.

Fire Marshal David Chen stated: "The fire spread with unusual rapidity. The preliminary finding is electrical wiring failure."

Accelerant patterns were noted by responding firefighters, and one neighbor reported seeing an unidentified figure fleeing the building in the darkness.

Sullivan's Bakery had operated continuously since 1927, founded by Eleanor Sullivan and famous for the family's rose bread recipe passed down through generations. The timing is notable: this fire occurs just as new interest in the 1925 Montrose mystery has surfaced. The official investigation concludes electrical failure, yet questions linger about the accelerant evidence and the Sullivan family connection to those historical events.

The Baker looked up from his phone, his face drained of color.

Eleanor Sullivan. She'd founded the bakery. The original rose bread bakery.

It was her diary he'd been carrying his whole life. Her recipe he'd been baking every morning. Her photograph he kept tucked in his kitchen—the woman with the large brown eyes standing in a garden of roses. Was that her?

And the baby's body was never recovered from the fire.

His thoughts raced, connections forming like bread dough coming together—separate ingredients suddenly becoming something whole.

Who am I?

And more urgently: Who set that fire?

He thought he knew the diary's contents by heart by now—had read Eleanor's words so many times the pages were worn soft as fabric. He'd connected with her longing, her not knowing where she came from, who her real mother was. The ache of being given away.

He'd thought he understood those feelings because he shared them.

But now he needed to read it again. Be sure. See what he might have missed.

1939-07-05 • ELEANOR'S DIARY

*Mother gave me a small box today when I turned fifteen. She said I was old enough to understand. Inside were photographs—a woman with dark hair and sad eyes, beautiful in a way that made my chest ache.*

*'This is your birth mother,' Mother explained. 'She loved you very much. She wasn't able to raise you, but she wanted you to know what she looked like. To know she hadn't forgotten.'*

*Father looked uncomfortable. He left the room.*

*I stared at the photograph for hours. The woman looked lonely.*

*I also saw a letter addressed to me, in a handwriting I didn't recognize. I opened it. Inside was a recipe.*

*Rose bread.*

*The note read: 'From a friend of your mother's. She wanted you to have this. It was her favorite!' I will make this recipe. It's my only connection to her.*

1946-12-10 • ELEANOR'S DIARY

*Today I stood in the bakery kneading dough, and Mother complimented my technique. 'You have a gift for this,' she said. 'It's in your blood.'*

*And I thought: which blood? The Sullivan blood, from the people who raised me? Or the blood of my birth mother?*

*Mother taught me bread-making when I could barely reach the counter. This is the legacy I've been given.*

*But the rose bread is different. When I bake the rose bread, I feel connected to something. To someone. I taste love in every loaf.*

*I wonder if that was intentional. I wonder if my mother knew that someday her daughter would bake this bread and understand, somehow, what it meant.*

*I think of her every time my hands shape the dough.*



## CHAPTER 12

# Cordelia's Last Words

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, CORDELIA'S OLD ROOM

The Heiress pushed open the door to what had been Cordelia Montrose's bedroom. A century of dust motes danced in the afternoon light.

"It should be here somewhere," she muttered. "This was her room—I know that from family stories." She looked around at the ghostly furniture, still arranged as it had been in 1925. "Where would I hide it if I were her?"

Her eyes landed on an ornate writing desk by the window.

"Ah. Of course."

She crossed the room and tried the drawers. The first two were empty. The third was locked. The Heiress smiled and pulled a hairpin from her hair, working the simple lock until it clicked open.

Inside lay a small diary with a silver clasp, its leather cover worn but intact.



The Heiress opened it with eager fingers, looking around to make sure nobody was watching, as she felt a chill.

"Ahhhh!" she let out a scream as she saw a glowy vision in front of her, standing by the bed, next to the desk.

"Shoo! Go away!!!"

The vision stood motionless, dark hair wavy, eyes sad.

"Step aside, please, Ms. Montrose," said Margo Laveau as she approached the vision.

"Cordelia? Is that you? Is there something you wish to say?" The vision wasn't moving.

"Miss Montrose, please, leave now."

The Heiress scurried out of the bedroom clutching the diary to her chest.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, GRAND HALL*

A few moments later, Margo Laveau found the Heiress in the grand hall by the fireplace. Despite the warmth, she was shivering.

"Psychic encounters can be traumatising, but don't worry, she will not hurt you. I've spoken to her. I think I'm starting to piece together why she might be stuck in this realm."

"Oh, yes? Why? I want her gone!"

"She showed me everything. She's been waiting a long time to tell her story.

She was beautiful—not in the way society paintings show beauty, but in the way of someone who felt everything deeply. She loved a man named Thomas first, wildly, recklessly. But he was lost at sea, and her family... They took her daughter. Her baby. They gave the child to the Sullivan family and told Cordelia to forget.

But she never forgot.

She tried to build a new life. She met Sebastian Crane—a man she fell in love with for the way he saw the world, poetic too, in a way, but his poetry was of a different kind. He was making the perfect elixir to bind two souls together. She thought she was finally coming home.

But the elixir was poisoned. That's what she believed. I felt her getting sicker and sicker. In the end it killed them both. Not intentionally, I don't think it was intentional. What she wants you to know—what she's been screaming into the void for a hundred years—is that she didn't abandon her daughter. She was forced to. And even as she was dying, even as her body was failing, all she could think about was Eleanor. What she needs to move on is for justice for her daughter to be restored."

The Heiress pondered for a long time. Justice restored? Even if her daughter was still alive, she would be 100 years old now, how could justice be restored?

She looked down at the diary in her hands. Maybe the answers are in it somewhere.

Leafing through pages of romantic poetry about Thomas, the meeting with Sebastian Crane, their courtship through the summer of 1925...

"There should definitely be clues in here," she whispered.

She found the later entries and began to read.

1925-09-04 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*This morning, Sebastian gave me the elixir. He called it a sacred ceremony. A gift before our wedding.*

*The liquid is pale amber, almost glowing in the light. It tastes sweet—cherry and honey, with something herbal underneath. Something that tastes like promises.*

*He drank from the same cup I did. "We are binding our futures together," he said.*

*I felt something shift inside me. Not magic, not in the way the old stories speak of magic. But something real. A sense of rightness. Of belonging to someone completely, and having them belong to me.*

*Every morning now. This will be our ritual.*

1925-09-09 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*I saw Alice today. We haven't really spoken since our argument in March, but I had to see her.*

*She seemed so lost. Tired. Transparent, almost. And the rumors about Dr. Thaddeus and her are everywhere now. People are starting to talk openly. Oh, Alice! Why won't you listen to me?*

*I couldn't stay silent any longer. Not with Alice at risk. So I went to him. To Thaddeus. I confronted him in his office and told him to end it immediately, or I would expose his affair to the entire medical board, to all of Long Beach society. I told him I would destroy his reputation if he didn't leave her alone.*

*He just smiled at me. That cold, calculating smile. And said: "How very protective of you, Cordelia. How very noble."*

*I've never liked him. There's something wrong about him. Something is missing.*

1925-10-05 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*I've been feeling strange the past few days. A heaviness in my chest. My heart feels... wrong. Fluttering. Irregular. Sometimes it races, sometimes it seems to slow to almost nothing.*

*I told myself it was just excitement about the wedding. Nerves. But the feeling persists.*

*When I mentioned it to Sebastian, he looked worried. He said the elixir should make me feel strong, not weak. He asked if I wanted to stop drinking it.*

*I said no. Of course not. The problem is not the elixir. The problem is the weight of everything else. The weight of my past. The weight of decisions made long ago that I cannot unmake.*

*The elixir is the only thing that feels true anymore.*

1925-10-08 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*Sebastian came to see me this afternoon, pale as death. Trembling. He said he tested the elixir on himself. That something is wrong with it. That we are both becoming ill.*

*But how is that possible? The elixir was supposed to be perfect. He worked on it for years. Every ingredient was supposed to be harmless.*

*He looked at me with such guilt in his eyes. As if he believed he had poisoned me.*

*I told him it wasn't his fault. That whatever this is, we will face it together. But even as I said it, I felt the lie in my words. Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.*

1925-10-12 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*Sebastian is dead.*

*They said his heart simply stopped. That his body couldn't sustain the strain.*

*I cannot process this. I cannot form words around it. The man who loved me so completely, is gone. And I am still here. Still sick. Still confused.*

*I don't understand what happened. I don't understand any of it.*

*All I know is that I am alone again. And something inside me is breaking.*

1925-10-13 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*I learned today that Alice is dead too. They said she fell. An accident.*

*Alice. My oldest friend. The one I pushed away because I couldn't bear her presence.*

*I should have been there for her. I should have continued to protect her. Instead, I abandoned her when she needed me most.*

*And now Thaddeus's affair with her is public knowledge. The scandal is all anyone speaks of.*

*I threatened to expose him. But I didn't do it. I was too weak, too ill. And now Alice is dead and I will never get the chance to ask her forgiveness.*

1925-10-14 • CORDELIA'S DIARY

*I can barely leave my bed now. Every movement exhausts me. My heart races at irregular intervals, then slows to an unsettling crawl. I have difficulty breathing sometimes. The doctors are confused.*

*Dr. Thaddeus came to examine me. He was very thorough. Very clinical. He assured Mother it was likely grief—my body's response to losing Sebastian so suddenly.*

*Nothing to be concerned about, he said.*

*But I don't think that's what this is.*

*I am afraid.*

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, CORDELIA'S OLD ROOM

The Heiress raised her head from the diary, her mind racing.

She flipped through the remaining pages and her breath caught.

Several pages had been torn out—jagged edges where entries should have been.

"The missing pages," she breathed. "They must hold the key about the baby. Who tore them out? And where are they now?"

The Heiress clutched the diary and stood, her pulse racing.

Somewhere in this mansion, those missing pages were hidden. And they might reveal the truth about what really happened in October of 1925.



## CHAPTER 13

# Romano Treasure

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, MAIN HALL

The Art Collector and the Explorer locked eyes from across the room, each taking the other's measure.

What is he doing here?

The thought occurred to both of them simultaneously.

Does he know about the Romano treasure?

The Art Collector's family name carried weight in Long Beach—but not the kind he preferred to advertise. His great-great-grandfather was Frankie "the Coast" Romano, the notorious rum-runner who'd controlled bootlegging operations at the Port of Long Beach during Prohibition.

The Romano family had it all in the 1920s through the 1950s: money, power, connections, glamour. Nightclubs where Hollywood starlets danced. Politicians in their pocket. A mansion in the hills. They were untouchable.

Until they weren't.

The IRS investigations began in the 1960s and dragged on through the 1980s. The government seized everything—the nightclubs, the properties, the legitimate businesses Frankie had used to launder his empire. Bank accounts frozen. Assets auctioned. The Romano name became synonymous with scandal and downfall.

But there were rumors. Whispers passed down through the family like heirlooms. Hidden wealth that had escaped the IRS. Gold, cash, jewelry—secreted away before the feds came knocking. The legendary "Romano treasure."

The Art Collector learned the art world by necessity, selling off salvaged family pieces to survive—a Tiffany lamp here, a piece of art deco furniture there. Slowly liquidating what little remained of the Romano legacy.

But one piece he could never bring himself to sell.

An ornate glass bottle. Venetian glass from the 1920s, exquisite workmanship. The body was clear crystal with delicate white and golden accents swirling through it like frozen smoke. The stopper was

heart-shaped—an unusual choice—and when it caught the light at certain angles, golden sparkles danced inside the glass as if the bottle itself were alive.

It had belonged to Frankie Romano. Or so the Art Collector believed. Sat on his desk in his office at the port.

When the Art Collector heard about the investigation at the old Montrose mansion—where his ancestor Frankie had done business in the 1920s—he couldn't resist.

Maybe the treasure was real. Maybe it was here.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION ABANDONED LABORATORY*

The Art Collector found himself drawn to an old structure behind the main house—what must have been Sebastian Crane's private laboratory. The Doctor and the Botany Professor were already inside, carefully examining dusty shelves lined with amber bottles and rusted equipment.

That's when the temperature dropped.

The cold came suddenly, intensely—the kind of cold that has nothing to do with weather. The Art Collector's breath misted in the air. His skin prickled with instinctive fear.

And then he saw it.

A figure materializing in the dark garden by the laboratory. Translucent, shimmering... A man, tall and dark-haired, wearing what looked like a waistcoat from the 1920s. His form flickered like a candle flame—growing taller, then shrinking, then stretching again as if he couldn't quite remember what size he'd been when alive.

The ghost's arm extended toward the Art Collector. Toward his bag. Toward the Venetian bottle inside.

The Art Collector froze, his hand instinctively clutching the leather satchel.

"Don't move."

Margo Laveau appeared in the doorway as if she'd materialized from thin air—though the Art Collector suspected she'd simply moved very quietly.

"Back away slowly," she said softly.

The Art Collector obeyed, stepping backward through the trees, watching.

Margo moved forward, positioning herself directly in front of the ghost. She closed her eyes, her breathing slowing, becoming rhythmic. Her lips moved, whispering words the Art Collector didn't recognize.

Finally, Margo opened her eyes. The ghost faded slowly, like morning mist burning off in sunlight, until only the normal autumn chill remained.

Margo turned to the Art Collector, her expression grave.

"That was Sebastian Crane," she said. "He's been trapped here for a century, and he won't rest until something is resolved."

"What does he want?" the Art Collector asked, though part of him already knew.

"You have something that belonged to him. Something he calls 'the vessel.' He's been searching for it since his death." Margo's dark eyes fixed on the Art Collector's bag. "The glass bottle you carry. That's what he needs."

Reluctantly, the Art Collector pulled out the Venetian bottle—clear glass with white and golden accents, the heart-shaped stopper catching the dim laboratory light.

*1925-08-18 • SEBASTIAN'S NOTEBOOK*

*A potion as delicate and profound as the Elixir of Eternal Love deserves a container worthy of its contents. I cannot serve transcendence in common glass.*

*Found it today at Frankie's Harbor Import & Trading Company—a Venetian masterpiece. Clear crystal with white accents and flecks of gold suspended in the glass like stars. The stopper is heart-shaped, an exquisite touch. When it catches the light properly, golden sparkles dance inside as if the bottle itself contains magic.*

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION ABANDONED LABORATORY*

The Botany Professor stepped forward, adjusting his glasses. "May I?"

The Art Collector handed him the bottle carefully.

He removed the heart-shaped stopper and brought the opening to his nose, inhaling deeply. His eyes widened.

"Rose otto," he said immediately. "Faint, but unmistakable. There's also..." he sniffed again, "valerian, I think. And something else. Something I can't quite identify." He looked up. "This bottle definitely contained Sebastian's elixir once."

"But what was in it?" the Doctor asked, moving closer. "What killed them?"

The Professor shook his head. "We'd need to analyze the residue, if there is any."

At that moment, another voice emerged from the depths of the laboratory, holding a yellowed piece of paper with careful fingers.

"Found something of interest," he said, his voice tight with excitement. "A note. From Dr. Thaddeus Crane to his brother Sebastian, requesting him to order foxglove for his cardiac patients." He looked up at the assembled group. "I cross-checked this with the pharmacy purchase records the Fiduciary kindly provided, and it's right there in the ledger. September 1925. Ten ounces of dried foxglove leaves."

The Botany Professor straightened immediately. "Foxglove. *Digitalis purpurea*."

"That's poisonous, isn't it?" the Doctor asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"In the right concentrations, it was actually used as a treatment for cardiac conditions in the 1920s," the Professor explained, his voice taking on the cadence of a lecture. "*Digitalis* helps regulate heart rhythm, strengthens contractions. But you're correct—foxglove is highly toxic in even slightly elevated doses. The margin between therapeutic and lethal is razor-thin. Symptoms include nausea, visual disturbances, cardiac arrhythmia, and ultimately, complete cardiac and renal failure."

"That would definitely match the autopsy findings I found in Silas's records," the Mortician said, appearing in the laboratory doorway with her usual unsettling calm. She held a leather-bound notebook—Silas Blackwell's private notes. "Both Sebastian and Cordelia showed signs of hepatic damage, cardiac tissue deterioration, and extensive kidney necrosis. Consistent with digitalis poisoning. Cordelia's was chronic—accumulated over weeks. Sebastian's was acute, as if he'd received a much larger dose all at once."

"But how did foxglove get into the elixir?" the Doctor wondered aloud. "Sebastian was meticulous about his formulas. He documented everything. There's no mention of foxglove in any of his notebooks about the Elixir of Eternal Love."

"Maybe he didn't know it was in there," the Professor said slowly.

A heavy silence fell over the laboratory as the implications sank in.

At that moment, the Art Collector—who had been standing near the laboratory door, half-listening while examining the Venetian bottle in the fading light—noticed movement in the darkness beyond the trees.

A figure. Digging.

Taking great care that no one noticed his departure, the Art Collector hurried toward the dark figure.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, VARIOUS ROOMS*

The Explorer moved through the mansion methodically, noting in his notebook pieces that might have

belonged to the Romanos:

Three bears in birch forest - Russian school, late 19th/early 20th century - undoubtedly from the Romano collection.

He moved to the next piece.

Oil on canvas, 30x40" - flamenco dancer in red dress - Spanish, definitely Andalusian influence - I read about this piece before, highly likely that it once was purchased by Frankie Romano himself.

How had Romano pieces ended up here? The Explorer had a theory: When the IRS investigations began in the 1960s, someone in the family had hidden the most valuable items in this abandoned property. The Montrose mansion had been empty since the deaths in 1925, sitting in legal limbo. A perfect hiding place.

He continued along the wall, documenting each piece methodically.

And then he stopped.

Oil on canvas, 36x28" - woman at table with wine glass - unsigned -

The Explorer leaned closer, his pulse quickening.

The woman in the painting wore an elegant evening gown in deep jewel tones. She held a wine glass delicately in her hand, lifted to her face. But she wasn't drinking from it. She was gazing into it—looking deeply into the glass itself, as if trying to read something in its depths, as if the wine held secrets or visions.

And there, behind the painting, there was a glimpse of something white. A note!

Moved the collection to the M. house. Everything's secure. If the boys ever need to find it, I left them a map. Tell them to find the lady with the wine glass—watch how she looks inside. That's the trick. Purple dreams and golden promises—that's where the real treasure sleeps.

The lady with the wine glass—watch how she looks inside.

"It's a riddle," he whispered. "Look inside."

But inside what?

He moved through the room more carefully now, searching. Looking for something purple with golden highlights. Something that matched the cryptic description.

And there—in the corner, on a side table beneath a dust sheet—he found it.

A vase. Large, ornate, unmistakably Venetian. Deep purple glass with golden highlights swirling

through it like captured starlight.

The Explorer approached it slowly, his hands trembling.

Purple dreams and golden promises.

This was it.

And the riddle: look inside. Wedged deep inside the narrow neck, he caught a glimpse of something pale.

Paper.

"No way," he breathed.

He looked around quickly, making sure he was alone, then carefully worked his fingers into the vase's opening. The paper was old, brittle—had to be from the 1920s or earlier. He had to be gentle. Slowly, painstakingly, he coaxed it out.

A map.

Hand-drawn on yellowed paper, the ink faded but still legible. A rough sketch of the mansion grounds, focusing on the garden area. And there, marked with a bold red X circled multiple times: a spot near the rose bushes.

Below the map, instructions in Frankie's handwriting:

40 paces north from the iron gate

9 paces west

Under the lady's feet

The Explorer stared at the map, barely breathing.

This was it. The Romano treasure. Real. Here.

The Explorer headed for the door, trying to walk calmly, trying not to run.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION GROUNDS, NEAR THE ROSE GARDEN*

The Explorer approached the old laboratory building, his flashlight cutting through the darkness. The night had grown cold, fog rolling in from the ocean, turning everything ghostly and indistinct.

He consulted his map—a hand-drawn diagram he'd pieced together from old property records and bootlegging route documents. If Frankie Romano had hidden anything at the Montrose estate, it would

be somewhere unexpected. Somewhere that looked abandoned but was actually—

Movement. To his left.

The Explorer spun, flashlight raised. Nothing. Just the overgrown garden, rose bushes gone wild, shadows shifting in the wind.

Then a cold breeze passed over him—colder than natural, raising goosebumps on his arms. The air itself seemed to thicken, charged with something he couldn't name. A presence.

His flashlight flickered.

And then he saw her.

A woman stood in the garden path, no more than ten feet away. She wore a light blue dress in the style of the 1920s—dropped waist, delicate lace at the collar. Her blonde hair was styled in the fashion of the era, pinned in soft waves close to her head. Her features were delicate, almost ethereal. But she was translucent, glowing faintly in the darkness, as if lit from within by moonlight.

The Explorer's breath caught.

She stared at him with an expression of desperate hope, her eyes bright with tears.

"Thomas?" Her voice was a whisper, distant and close all at once. "Is that you?"

The Explorer couldn't move. Couldn't speak.

"You came back!" The ghost—because what else could she be—stepped closer, her movements fluid and strange, not quite touching the ground. "I thought you would! I was losing hope, but in my visions you were there—alive, lost at sea, but alive. And now you're here. You came back to me. Oh Thomas, how glad I am to see you!"

She reached out her hand toward him, her face radiant with joy and relief.

The Explorer stumbled backward, his rational mind screaming. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his palms against his temples.

Not real. Stress. Exhaustion. Power of suggestion. All these ghost stories are getting to me.

When he opened his eyes, she was gone.

Just the garden. Just the wind. Just the fog rolling through the overgrown roses.

"Jesus," he muttered, his heart still racing. He wiped his forehead with a shaking hand. "Ghosts. Right. I'm seeing things."

But something about her voice had felt... familiar. Like an echo of something he'd heard before. Something he should remember but couldn't quite grasp.

Thomas. She'd called him Thomas.

The Explorer shook his head sharply, forcing himself to focus. He pulled out his map again, consulting it by flashlight.

"Rose garden planters," he read aloud, his voice steadier now. "Should be just about... here."

He moved deeper into the garden, stepping over broken trellises and tangled vines, looking for the old stone planters that marked the corners of what had once been an elaborate formal rose garden.

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION GROUNDS, NEAR THE ROSE GARDEN*

The Art Collector moved quietly through the overgrown garden towards the Explorer.

The Explorer knelt in the dirt near the old stone planters, digging with a folding shovel, his flashlight propped against a rose bush. He was working methodically, carefully, the way someone searches when they know they're close but not exactly where.

The Art Collector's heart sank.

The Art Collector's mind raced through his options. Then he said quietly: "You're in the wrong spot."

The Explorer spun around, shovel raised defensively, his face a mixture of shock and anger. "What the hell? What are YOU doing here?"

"I thought," the Art Collector said carefully, "that if we both want what's buried here, and we're both descendants of people connected to this mansion, we might consider being strategic instead of stupid."

"Strategic how?"

"I know something you don't."

"And what's that?"

"Where to dig. I know Frankie and my family better than you and I know exactly where to dig unlike yourself. Now you can spend days toiling over the garden, or we split the treasure fifty-fifty."

The Explorer considered this offer. He knew who the Art Collector was, a descendant of the Romano family. He might know a marker or a special sign that only a Romano would know.

"Fine, agreed. Now where to dig?"

"Under the lady's feet," the Art Collector murmured, looking at the planter. The stone urn sat on a base carved with classical figures—nymphs and goddesses dancing in relief. One goddess stood slightly apart from the others, her bare feet clearly visible in the carved stone. "That was in Frankie's notes."

"That's it," the Explorer breathed.

They both knelt and began to dig, the Explorer with his folding shovel, the Art Collector using his hands to scoop away the loose dirt the Explorer had already displaced nearby.

Then—

Thunk.

Metal. Something solid buried just beneath the surface.



## CHAPTER 14

# Secrets Unravelled

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION GARDENS

Margo Laveau made her way back toward the main house, her mind heavy with the weight of three restless spirits.

Three souls, trapped for a century. All waiting. All calling to her.

She thought of her great-grandmother, Celestine Laveau—the legendary spiritualist whose name still commanded respect in some circles. Could Margo live up to that legacy?

She thought about the three souls, trapped for a century. All waiting. All calling to her. Her thoughts settled on Alice Whitmore.

Margo had read Celestine's journals before coming here. There had been an entry dated May 1924: "Met with the Whitmore family today. Their daughter Alice has the gift—genuine precognitive ability, not the hysteria that fool Morrison diagnosed. I've offered to train her personally. Such talent is rare. She could become extraordinary."

And then, just months later, Alice was dead. Skull crushed at the bottom of a staircase.

She was lost in thoughts as a familiar cold wind swept across the grounds, raising goosebumps on Margo's arms. The temperature dropped ten degrees in an instant.

She stopped walking.

The air shimmered in front of her, and she was face to face with Alice Whitmore.

Except her vision was different from others. Alice appeared almost solid—a young woman in a pale dress from the 1920s, her features delicate and clear, her eyes bright with intelligence. She looked aware. Conscious in a way ghosts rarely were. As if death hadn't quite managed to claim all of her.

"Ms. Laveau," Alice said, her voice surprisingly strong. "Thank you for coming. I'm so glad you're here today."

Margo's breath caught. She didn't have to close her eyes, didn't have to enter a trance or carefully attune her senses. Alice was simply there, speaking as clearly as any living person.

A sad smile crossed Alice's face. "I can see through the veil now from both sides. It's clearer than it ever was when I was alive. Though sometimes..." she faltered, "sometimes I get confused. Earlier today, I thought I saw Thomas. But that couldn't be, could it? Decades have passed. If Thomas were alive, he'd be an old man by now."

"Alice," Margo said gently, "tell me—what's keeping you here?"

"Justice." The word came out fierce, certain. "Only that justice is served. For everyone. For myself, for Sebastian, for my dear friend Cordelia. We've been waiting so long for someone to see the truth. To understand what really happened."

"Do you remember what happened to you, Alice?" Margo asked, surprised by the clarity of their communication. Most ghosts were just sensations—cold spots, emotional impressions, fragments of memory. But Alice was here.

Alice's expression grew troubled. Her form flickered slightly, as if the emotion was destabilizing her manifestation.

"I remember..." she began, her voice becoming uncertain. "I remember going to see Thaddeus. I remember asking him to confess what he had done - I don't think he meant to do it." Her vision flickered, raw with emotions. "Then, all I remember is something hitting me, on the back and everything going dark."

"It's all so fuzzy now!" Her voice rose with frustration and fear. "I can't remember the moment—the actual moment it happened. It's like a blank space in my mind. But you must uncover the truth!"

Then suddenly, Alice Whitmore dissolved into nothing, leaving only the scent of roses and the echo of desperate words hanging in the cold November air.

#### *2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY*

The Professor and Dr. Sinclair had been working through Sebastian Crane's scattered notes for hours when Dr. Sinclair called out from the corner of the laboratory.

"Professor, look at this. Sebastian's notes again."

October 6, 1925 - Sebastian's Notebook - Understanding

I am dying. And I deserve to be.

I spent years working on a formula I knew nothing about. Thought I could capture LOVE in liquid form. I, a man who once mixed the wrong ratio of potassium bromide and nearly went blind, could be trusted with Cordelia's wellbeing.

I did not verify storage conditions. Did not account for temperature fluctuations. I considered this only AFTER my fiancée began showing symptoms.

I tested on myself—me, the least qualified person to test anything. Should have consulted more with Hartley. Should have been more careful.

And now Cordelia is dying because I was careless. Because I was arrogant.

I gave her poison thinking it was poetry.

"He tested it on himself," the Professor said quietly, understanding the implications. "Because he loved her and wanted to make sure it was safe."

"And it wasn't," Dr. Sinclair replied.

"Look here, there is a note from Dr. Thaddeus, Sebastian's brother."

October 7, 1925 - Thaddeus's Antidote Research Notes

Sebastian has ingested foxglove derivative. Dosage unknown but acute symptoms present. The compound can be managed with proper intervention. Cardiac glycosides respond to electrolyte management and cardiac support.

First approach: Gastric lavage immediately to remove remaining toxin from the digestive tract. High-dose potassium supplementation. Strict bed rest with cardiac monitoring.

Second approach: Diuretics to increase urine output and flush toxins from the system.

This is manageable. I have handled toxin cases before. I am managing it.

#### *2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY*

Dr. Sinclair looked up at Professor Hartley, his expression grave. "Dr. Thaddeus knew about the foxglove. He diagnosed it immediately—look at his notes. He knew Sebastian had ingested it and was actively trying to treat him."

Professor Hartley adjusted his glasses, reading the medical notes more carefully: "These are standard 1920s protocols for cardiac glycoside poisoning. Textbook first response—gastric lavage, activated charcoal, electrolyte management." He tapped the page. "But this confidence here is concerning. Look at his prognosis: 'Good if electrolytes are maintained.' He's drastically underestimating the severity. Most cases of foxglove poisoning this acute don't respond to standard electrolyte management alone."

"Here are more notes. Dr. Thaddeus again," the Mortician chimed in with an unsettling gleam in her eyes.

October 7, 1925 - Thaddeus's Antidote Research Notes

Dear Professor Hartley,

I write regarding a confidential medical matter. A patient has been exposed to concentrated foxglove derivative. I am formulating a counter-treatment and require your expertise on botanical remedies.

Specifically: Are there known plants or compounds known to counteract cardiac distress from digitalis poisoning? Any botanical knowledge that might provide cardiac support would be invaluable.

October 9, 1925 - Thaddeus's Antidote Research Notes

[Handwriting deteriorating]

Hawthorn strengthens heart tissue. Willow bark reduces inflammation. Combined with additional potassium and strychnine for cardiac stimulation.

Dosed patient this morning. Monitoring continuously.

[Hours later, same page]: NOTHING. No improvement. The heart continues to fail. Why doesn't the body respond to treatment?

Unless the concentration of toxin is so extreme that my standard protocols cannot compete with it.

Unless I am fundamentally misunderstanding something.

October 11, 1925 - Thaddeus's Antidote Research Notes

[Barely legible]

Sebastian's heart stopped this morning at 3 AM. I performed manual resuscitation. His heart resumed after five minutes. By some miracle.

I have tried everything. Gastric lavage. Potassium supplementation. Strychnine. Nitroglycerin. Willow bark. Hawthorn. Diuretics. Venesection. Every treatment known to modern medicine.

None of it works.

I am a physician. I am supposed to SAVE LIVES. And I am watching my brother die, and I KNOW WHY but I cannot admit WHY and I cannot fix WHAT I HAVE DONE.

Cordelia is also sick. She is deteriorating rapidly.

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, ABANDONED LABORATORY

As Dr. Sinclair, Professor Hartley and the Mortician were processing what she had found, Grandmother

entered the room. Behind her was the Influencer, recording, listening.

"Find Dr. Thaddeus Crane's diary," Grandmother said. "It's hidden in this house somewhere. The answers are in those pages."

The Influencer had overheard Grandmother's instructions and felt his pulse quicken. A hidden diary from a physician at the center of a century-old mystery? This was exactly the kind of exclusive that would break the internet.

He moved through the mansion methodically, phone camera documenting everything. The main bedrooms held nothing but dust. The study was locked. The library had too many hiding places.

But the dining room—that felt right.

It took an hour of careful searching before he found it. The window seat had a loose cushion, and beneath it, a floorboard that gave slightly to pressure.

The Influencer's heart raced as he pried it up, revealing the oilcloth-wrapped bundle in the darkness.

Dr. Thaddeus Crane's leather journal, aged but preserved, with a brass lock that had long since corroded.

He found a quiet corner of the mansion and began to read, his phone camera documenting each page.

The early entries were clinical. Medical observations. Notes on psychology and the nature of the mind. Dismissive references to his patients' concerns.

But as the dates progressed to 1924, something shifted.

#### *1925-09-02 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY*

*I cannot sleep. My hands will not stop trembling. I tell myself it is exhaustion from the clinic. But I know it is something else. Some moment of decision I have not yet fully acknowledged, even to myself.*

*I lie awake considering possibilities. Hypothetically. Academically. What would be the most elegant approach?*

#### *1925-10-09 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY*

*Sebastian is ill. He arrived at my office this afternoon, pale and trembling. He described nausea, confusion, vision problems. He admits to drinking the elixir himself to test it before giving it to Cordelia. He poisoned himself!!! What is to be done?*

#### *1925-10-11 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY*

*Sebastian is dead.*

*His heart simply... stopped. I was present when it happened. His breathing had become labored. His vision was nearly gone. And then his heart, damaged beyond capacity to continue, simply ceased its function.*

*I stood there for a long moment, watching him. He is gone, the fool that he was.*

1925-10-17 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY

*Cordelia died this morning. The autopsy will show cardiac failure. Natural causes, it will be recorded. A young woman's heart failing after her fiancé's sudden death, considering what she suffered, it is not surprising. I sat with her through her final hours. She was delirious with pain, confused, asking for Sebastian. I gave her morphine. I held her hand with genuine compassion while my other hand made careful notes of her declining vital signs.*

1925-10-10 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY

*I cannot continue this deception. I cannot. The weight of it is suffocating me. When Sebastian walked into my office today, pale and trembling, describing the very symptoms I knew he would describe, I felt something splinter inside me. This is what I have done. This.*

*I have ruined him. Cordelia too. They will both suffer because of my arrogance, my resentment, my pathetic need to escape my brother's shadow. And for what? For Alice? For some imagined transformation of my circumstances? What have I become? Alice came to see me this evening. She knew something was wrong—she always knows. I could not lie to her. I told her everything. The formula. The foxglove. My intentions. My weakness.*

*She listened in silence, and then she took my hands and said: "Thaddeus, you must confess. You must go to the authorities and tell them what you have done. You must save yourself before this destroys you completely."*

*But I cannot confess. I cannot. If I do, everything ends. My reputation. My practice. My freedom. Perhaps my life itself. I tried to explain this to Alice, and she looked at me with such disappointment. Such contempt, even. I told her that I had no choice. That circumstances forced my hand. But we both knew I was lying. I am a coward. A murderer and a coward. This is what I am. This is what I have always been, beneath the veneer of superiority. Alice sees it now. She sees me clearly for the first time, and she is disgusted.*

*I cannot confess. But I cannot live with this either. I am trapped between two impossible truths, and I have no path forward that does not end in destruction.*

1925-10-11 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY

*Sebastian is dead.*

*His heart simply... stopped. I was present when it happened. His breathing had become labored. His vision was nearly gone. And then his heart, damaged beyond capacity to continue, simply ceased its function.*

*I stood there for a long moment, watching him. He is gone, the fool that he was.*

*And Alice. She is gone - it's all my fault! I keep thinking about her, her peaceful expression in her death. I wonder if she has forgiven me, I wonder if she understood. I was so scared, I could not let her expose me. She was innocent, you understand. Merely... unfortunate. A casualty of circumstances beyond her control. When her breathing stopped, I felt something crack inside me.*

1925-10-19 • DR. CRANE'S HIDDEN DIARY

*I closed her eyes and thought about the man I believed myself to be before all of this. That man seems like a stranger now.*

*That man no longer exists. I have become something else entirely. I have become someone who knows what he is capable of. And I cannot unknow it.*

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION, GARDEN SHED

The Mortician had spent decades learning to read what bodies revealed. So when she found herself drawn to the old garden shed—following instinct honed by years of careful observation—she moved with methodical precision.

It took her twenty minutes to notice the large shipment box tucked behind garden tools and rotted burlap. Harbor Trading Company. Dated October 1925.

Inside, wrapped carefully in burlap that had somehow survived the decades, was a silver candelabra. Heavy. Ornate. The kind of piece that would have graced the dining room of a grand house.

The Mortician's pulse quickened as she examined the base.

Microscopic specks. Dark. Old. Dried so completely that only someone trained to look for such things would notice them.

She pulled out the magnifying glass—a tool of her trade—and studied the pattern.

The angle told a story. The distribution spoke of a single, violent blow delivered from behind. Not multiple impacts. Not a fall. One strike, delivered with force and intention.

Beneath the box, a leather satchel. Inside, papers.

Silas Blackwell's original autopsy notes. The ones that contradicted the official death certificate.

Alice Whitmore - Original Assessment

Skull fracture, depressed, occipital region. Inconsistent with accidental fall from stairs. Trauma angle suggests horizontal strike from behind with heavy object. No defensive wounds. No bruising consistent with tumbling impact. Recommend further investigation.

Sebastian Crane - Original Assessment

Systemic poisoning. Severe hepatic damage. Cardiac tissue deterioration. Gastric contents show evidence of prolonged toxic exposure. Death likely from acute organ failure secondary to poison.

Cordelia Montrose - Original Assessment

Chronic poisoning. Evidence of deliberate, sustained administration over extended period. Gastric lining shows repeated exposure to toxic substance. Patterns consistent with medical knowledge and access to pharmacological compounds. Cause of death: organ failure secondary to chronic poisoning.

The Mortician carefully lifted something else from Silas's hidden documents—a small card on expensive cream-colored paper, and beside it, a yellowed bank deposit slip.

At that moment, the Influencer appeared in the laboratory doorway, phone in hand as always, but for once not filming. His expression was serious.

"What have you found here?" he asked, looking at the evidence spread across the workbench.

The Mortician pointed to the heavy silver candlestick sitting on the corner of the table. "This. Found it inside an old shipment box from Harbor Imports. It has microscopic traces of blood and hair still embedded in the base. This must be the murder weapon. What killed Alice Whitmore. And someone paid Silas Blackwell five hundred dollars to lie on the death certificates, to call Alice's death an accident, Sebastian's death accidental poisoning, and Cordelia's death heart failure."

The Influencer stepped closer, looking at the bribe note. His eyes widened.

"For your discretion," he read aloud. Then he looked up sharply. "Wait. I think I know who wrote this." He pulled out his phone, scrolling quickly through photos he'd taken earlier. "Look at the handwriting here—" he showed them a photo of Dr. Thaddeus Crane's diary entries. "And here—" he held the bribe note next to the screen.

The handwriting was identical. The same elegant, precise script. The same distinctive way of forming capital F's and D's.



## CHAPTER 15

# Silent Witness

2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION GROUNDS

Slowly, the members of the group gathered in the clearing near the rose bush planters at the Montrose mansion. Evening had turned to night, and fog was settling among the old sycamore trees, their branches creating skeletal shadows in the dim light.

The Art Collector and the Explorer sat perched on top of an old wooden crate that seemed to have appeared in the middle of the garden.

"Was that always here?" the Heiress thought, frowning. "I don't remember seeing a crate in the middle of the garden before."

Grandmother stood at the center of the clearing, waiting patiently for everyone to gather. When the murmured conversations finally died down, she began.

"Before we proceed with the matter of the murders," she said, her voice carrying clearly through the misty air, "there is one matter that must be settled once and for all. The matter of the true heir to the Montrose Estate."

She turned to the Fiduciary. "Can I ask you to fetch the document located in the drawer of the desk in the library?"

The Fiduciary disappeared into the house. When they returned moments later, they were holding a folder of yellowed legal documents.

The townspeople and investigators began whispering among themselves.

"Quiet, please," Grandmother said firmly. The whispers ceased.

The Fiduciary opened their folder and read aloud: "According to the trust records, the primary beneficiary of the Montrose Estate was Cordelia Rose Montrose until her death on September 24, 1925."

"And who was the estate supposed to pass to upon Cordelia's death?" Grandmother asked.

"Eleanor Sullivan," the Fiduciary read. "Illegitimate child of Cordelia Montrose. However—" they looked up, adjusting their glasses, "—the adoption by the Sullivan family was never properly finalized.

It appears the Montroses were so concerned with maintaining their reputation and keeping the adoption quiet that they failed to complete the legal paperwork correctly."

"And in your investigation today," Grandmother continued, "who did you discover is the heir of Eleanor Sullivan?"

"That's you," the Influencer said, phone recording, pointing directly at the Baker.

The Baker stood frozen, flour still dusted on his shirt from the morning's baking.

"That's correct," Grandmother confirmed. "The Baker is the true heir to the Montrose Estate. The rose bread recipe—Cordelia's favorite—was the legacy she left for her only child. A memory of warmth and roses woven through generations, passed from Cordelia to Eleanor to you. It can all be verified, of course." She glanced at the Fiduciary.

The Fiduciary nodded solemnly. "The documentation is clear. The Baker is unquestionably the rightful heir to the Montrose Estate."

"Wait, wait!" the Heiress sputtered. "What about me?"

"Ms. Montrose," the Fiduciary said with barely concealed satisfaction, "upon the Baker's death, the estate would pass according to his will. But as long as he lives, it belongs to him."

*2025-11-01 • MONTROSE MANSION GROUNDS*

"Speaking of death," one of the townspeople called out, "who actually killed everyone?"

Grandmother smiled—a small, knowing smile. "Of course. It's time to reveal the truth that ended three lives and trapped three souls in this house for a century."

She walked slowly around the clearing, her hands clasped behind her back.

"On October 11th, Sebastian Crane died. What a pity that one was! He had such potential, so many grand plans." She paused. "And personally, I can admire his potion-brewing skills, misguided though they were."

"Sebastian created his Elixir of Eternal Love with meticulous care—damiana, valerian, rose otto, and ginseng root as the binding agent. But someone added an ingredient Sebastian never intended: foxglove. Digitalis purpurea. Deadly in concentrated doses, and even more insidious when administered slowly over time."

The group leaned in, listening intently.

"Dr. Thaddeus Crane was having an affair with Alice Whitmore—his patient, a young woman he was supposed to be treating for trauma-induced visions. When Cordelia discovered their relationship and

threatened to expose it, Thaddeus knew his reputation would be destroyed. A respected physician carrying on with a vulnerable patient? The scandal would ruin him."

Grandmother's voice hardened. "So he decided Cordelia had to die. But it had to look natural. He knew his brother Sebastian was planning to give Cordelia the Elixir of Eternal Love as a wedding ritual—a romantic gesture, really. Four drops in her tea every morning, starting on September 4th, during the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus. Celestial timing for eternal love."

"Thaddeus poisoned the elixir with concentrated foxglove. Not enough to kill quickly—that would raise suspicions. Just enough to slowly destroy her over weeks. It would look like grief, like melancholia, like a broken heart. The perfect crime for a physician who understood exactly how much poison to use."

The Mortician nodded approvingly. "Chronic digitalis poisoning. Brilliant, in a horrifying way."

"But Thaddeus made one critical miscalculation," Grandmother continued. "He didn't anticipate that Sebastian, being as meticulous as he was about his formula, would test his own creation."

"When Cordelia started getting sick—losing weight, experiencing visual disturbances, growing weaker by the day—Sebastian became suspicious. Not of his brother, never that. But of his own formula. Had he made a mistake? Had one of his ingredients been contaminated?"

"So Sebastian did what anyone as arrogant as himself would do: he drank a concentrated dose of the elixir himself to test it."

Professor Hartley shook his head. "That would have been a massive dose of foxglove. Far more than the gradual amount Cordelia was receiving."

"Exactly," Grandmother said. "Sebastian died within days. Acute cardiac glycoside poisoning. His organs simply failed."

"When Thaddeus realized what had happened—that Sebastian had poisoned himself accidentally—he was devastated. He frantically tried to find an antidote, implementing every treatment protocol he knew. But it was too late. And in his grief and panic, he did something foolish."

She paused for dramatic effect. "He confessed everything to Alice Whitmore. The woman he loved. He told her he'd poisoned the elixir, that he'd only meant to kill Cordelia, that Sebastian's death was a terrible accident."

"And Alice," Margo Laveau said softly, "didn't react the way he expected."

"No," Grandmother agreed. "That woman had far more backbone than anyone had given her credit for. Cordelia thought she needed protecting. Thaddeus thought she would be passive and understanding, that she'd help him cover up his crime out of love."

"But Alice had a gift of seeing the truth and she urged Thaddeus to confess publicly. Told him that if he acted immediately, Cordelia might still be saved. That he could get her proper treatment, remove the poison from her system before it was too late."

The clearing was completely silent except for the whisper of wind through the sycamore trees.

"And that's when Thaddeus killed her," Grandmother said quietly. "The woman he claimed to love. He struck her from behind with a silver candlestick—" she gestured to the evidence bag the Mortician held—"crushing her skull. Then he staged it to look like she'd fallen down the stairs."

"Sebastian died that same day—October 11th, 1925. Just hours after Alice. 9 days later, Cordelia followed, her organs finally giving out after weeks of slow poisoning."

"Three deaths in less than a month. And Dr. Thaddeus Crane paid Silas Blackwell five hundred dollars—more than most morticians made in three months—to falsify the death certificates and bury the truth."

Grandmother stopped walking and faced the assembled group.

"Now you understand why three spirits have been trapped here for a century."

"Sebastian's spirit is tormented because he died believing he had killed Cordelia. He cursed himself for failing her, for failing his own craft. He's been searching for his vessel, trying to understand what went wrong, unable to rest while believing he's a murderer."

"Cordelia's spirit is restless because she never got to hold her only daughter. Never got to tell Eleanor she loved her. Never got to be a mother. She was robbed of that—first by her own family who took the baby away, and then by Thaddeus, who took her life before she could ever make it right."

Grandmother's expression softened slightly as she looked toward the house, as if seeing something the others couldn't.

"And Alice," she said gently. "Alice is here, but not for herself. She's not trapped by her own unfinished business. Her spirit is lonely, yes—but not because she lost her friend, as people assume. No, Alice's loneliness is simply the path of those who have work to do. She stayed to bear witness. To wait for someone who could finally see the truth and speak it aloud."

"Alice can find her own way now," Grandmother said. "She always could."

The Baker stepped forward, his voice shaking. "How come if you had known all of that, you didn't just say anything?"

Grandmother smiled cryptically, her expression enigmatic in the November darkness. And then, like the mist rolling through the gardens, she began to fade into the November air, becoming one with the fog, her form dissolving until nothing remained but the memory of her presence and the echo of her

knowing smile.



*Finis*

*Some mysteries are solved in an instant.*

*Others haunt us for a century.*

