

Murder Mystery: Last 4 Chapters

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Investigation Begins

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion - The Assembly

"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 craftsman 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 - A Physician's Discovery

"Dr. Sinclair," the Fiduciary said, approaching with their characteristic preciseness. "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?

Ghost of Thomas

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Main Room - A Descendant Emerges

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

"Who's that over there?" They 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 - A Homecoming in Tragedy

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 - Two Years of Survival

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.

Elixir of Eternal Love

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Abandoned Laboratory - A Discovery

The Professor made their 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, their 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.

They picked up another jar and examined the gnarled root inside. Ginseng. Korean, if they 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 they 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." They 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.

They 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:

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.

The Professor stared at the formula, their mind racing.

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

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Abandoned Laboratory - Analysis and Questions

A Few Minutes Later

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

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

Dr. Sinclair read it carefully, their expression growing more serious with each line. "Someone was making a love potion. An 'Elixir of Eternal Love.'" They 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." They 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. They 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 their 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.

The hunt was on.

Dressmaker's Devotion

2025-11-01 - Monroe Tailor and Alterations Shop - A Century of Secrets

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

They'd been avoiding thinking about it. About her. About the dress that had haunted their family for a century.

But now, with the investigation underway, they couldn't avoid it any longer.

The Dressmaker walked to the back of their shop, past the modern sewing machines and bolts of contemporary fabric, to the old armoire that had belonged to their great-grandfather. They'd inherited it along with the business—Monroe Tailor and Alterations, established 1920.

They opened the carved wooden doors with reverent hands.

And there it was.

The Dress.

Even after a hundred years, even wrapped in yellowed muslin, it was breathtaking. The Dressmaker carefully lifted it from its resting place and laid it across their worktable, unwrapping it slowly.

Ivory silk that still held its luster. Delicate lace at the collar and sleeves. Pearl buttons down the back, each one sewn by hand. The waistline was perfection—dropped in the fashionable 1920s style. The skirt fell in elegant panels that would have moved beautifully when she walked.

A wedding dress. Created with such extraordinary care and skill that even now, it took the Dressmaker's breath away.

Their great-grandfather, Elias Monroe, had been a famous dressmaker in 1920s Long Beach—sought after by wealthy families, known for his artistry and precision. He'd made this dress for Cordelia Montrose in the summer of 1925.

But the Dressmaker knew something no one else did: the dress carried a secret in its folds.

Elias Monroe had been in love with Cordelia.

The evidence was still there, tucked into a small wooden box at the bottom of the armoire. The Dressmaker pulled it out now, their heart aching for their ancestor's unspoken pain.

Letters. Poems. All hidden away.

And a photograph—Cordelia Montrose, standing in a garden, her long dark hair falling in loose waves over her shoulders, her eyes bright with life. On the back, in Elias's careful handwriting: "My muse. My heartbreak."

The Dressmaker picked up the first poem, dated and folded with care:

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

She turns to roses in the garden light,

Not knowing I have fallen into night.

Each word she speaks, I pin with trembling hands—

My heart trapped in her wedding dress's bands.

The Dressmaker's throat tightened. The pain in those lines was raw, immediate, even after a hundred years.

They picked up the second poem. The handwriting was shakier here, less controlled:

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

She wears the dress like sorrow wears a crown,

I pin the hem 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.

The Dressmaker frowned and checked the other documents in the box. There was a newspaper clipping—Sebastian Crane's obituary. October 11, 1925. And another—Cordelia Montrose's obituary. October 17, 1925.

The Dressmaker read the line again: "She wears the dress like sorrow wears a crown."

And this line: "Some poison's in her now. Who is to blame?"

The Dressmaker's hands were shaking now.

Elias had known something. That Cordelia was poisoned? The official story from the newspapers was heart failure, perhaps, expected with her fiancée and her best friend dying a week prior. But something was wrong about this.

If Elias knew something, did he warn anyone?

The Dressmaker carefully refolded the poems and placed them back in the box, along with the photograph.

They looked at the wedding dress again—the dress Cordelia Montrose had never worn, the dress created with love and skill and desperate, unspoken heartbreak.

"I have to go to the mansion," the Dressmaker whispered. "They need to see this. They need to know what Elias knew."

They carefully wrapped the dress and gathered the box of letters.

A hundred years later, Elias Monroe's secret would finally be told.

And maybe—just maybe—it would help free the souls trapped in that mansion.

Cordelia's Decline

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 eagerly, 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 - The Sacred Ritual

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 - Concerns About Alice

I saw Alice today. We haven't really spoken since our argument in June, 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 - Growing Illness

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 - A Terrible Realization

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 - After Sebastian's Death

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 - Alice's Death

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 - Final Days

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 Room - The Discovery

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

"So much to process," she whispered. "Sebastian gave Cordelia the elixir. He believed it was making her sick. He tested it on himself and realized something was wrong. But... he didn't intend to poison her. They're both dead now."

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. 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.

Search for Romano Treasure

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Main Hall - Two Hunters Meet

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 shifted his weight, his practiced eye assessing the Explorer's worn leather jacket, the weathered canvas bag slung over his shoulder, the way he studied the mansion's architecture like he was cataloging escape routes and hidden spaces.

A treasure hunter. Obviously. Professional, by the look of him.

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."

Was it real? Or just a desperate family myth, something to cling to when the money ran out and the creditors came calling?

The Art Collector intended to find out.

He'd 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. Cobalt blue with gold filigree. It had belonged to Frankie himself, sat on his desk in his office at the port. Family legend said it once held his finest bootleg gin.

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 Main Hall - Rival Intentions

He studied the Explorer again, noting how the man's gaze lingered on architectural details, on the paneling that might hide secret compartments, on the floorboards that might conceal a hidden vault.

The Art Collector knew the Whitmore name. It was famous in certain circles—always chasing legends, tracking down lost artifacts, recovering hidden wealth from forgotten places. Ships sunk in the Pacific. Temples in Southeast Asia. Lost fortunes in European vaults.

He must know about the Romano treasure, the Art Collector thought, his jaw tightening. That's why he's here. He knows Frankie did business with the Montroses. He knows the property's been abandoned for decades. If the treasure exists, this is where it would be hidden.

I need to find it first.

Across the room, the Explorer was having remarkably similar thoughts.

He'd recognized the Art Collector immediately—it was his job to know the players in the artifact recovery world. And a Romano, here, at this mansion? That wasn't coincidence.

He must be here for the treasure, the Explorer thought. His reputation speaks for itself. Selling off pieces of the family fortune, always looking for the next score. He knows something. I need to find it first.

But something about this mansion felt... strange to the Explorer. Not threatening, exactly. More like—Familiar.

Like he'd been here before, though he knew he hadn't. Like the walls themselves were whispering recognition. The floorboards creaked in rhythms he somehow anticipated. The shadows fell in patterns that felt right.

Ridiculous, he told himself firmly. My family name is Whitmore. It's common enough. What possible connection could there be?

He'd come here for the treasure. For the adventure. For the thrill of solving a century-old mystery and recovering lost wealth.

Nothing more.

And yet, as he stood in the dusty main hall of the Montrose mansion, surrounded by ghosts and secrets, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was meant to be here.

That somehow, this place was part of his story too.

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Grounds - A Vision in the 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 Interior - Art and Secrets

The Art Collector moved through the mansion methodically, his trained eye cataloging every piece of furniture, every painting, every decorative object that remained. His notebook filled with observations:

Oil on canvas, approx 24x30" - three bears in birch forest - Russian school, late 19th/early 20th century - Cyrillic signature lower right, illegible - primitive style, folk art tradition - canvas shows age but stable - gilt frame damaged - moderate value to right collector, \$2-4K estimate

Oil on canvas, 30x40" - flamenco dancer in red dress - Spanish, definitely Andalusian influence - bold impasto technique, dramatic use of shadow - unsigned but quality suggests trained artist - 1920s era by costume details - frame ornate gold leaf, some losses - good auction potential, \$5-8K if authenticated

The Art Collector made a note to research Spanish artists working in California in the 1920s. Several had come through Los Angeles during that period.

How had Romano collection pieces ended up here? The Art Collector 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 - Art Nouveau style, 1920s - South American, possibly Argentinian by the color palette and composition - unsigned visible but may be under grime

The Art Collector leaned closer, his pulse quickening.

The woman in the painting wore an elegant evening gown in deep jewel tones. She sat at a small table, and 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.

The Art Collector fumbled for his phone and scrolled through his photos until he found it—a scan of a page from Frankie Romano's personal journal.

There. The entry from August 1925:

"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.

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 Frankie's 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. Late 19th century craftsmanship, possibly Murano. The work was extraordinary—masterful glassblowing technique, the gold inclusions perfectly distributed.

The Art Collector approached it slowly, his hands trembling.

Purple dreams and golden promises.

This was it.

And the riddle: look inside.

He picked up the vase carefully, noting its substantial weight—at least fifteen pounds. Museum quality piece, easily worth \$10-15K on its own. He tilted it, peering into the opening. At first he saw nothing—just the dark interior of the glass. But then, 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

(Instructions that would lead the Explorer and Art Collector to discover the buried treasure beneath the garden.)

The Art Collector stared at the map, barely breathing.

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

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Grounds - Treasure Hunters United

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

Before someone else figured it out. Before the Explorer—who was probably already out there searching—found it first.

But when he reached the garden, he found the Explorer already there, on his knees, digging with a folding shovel, his flashlight propped against a rose bush.

The Explorer spun around, shovel raised defensively, his face a mixture of shock and anger. "What the hell—were you following me?"

"No. I found my own way here." The Art Collector held up his phone, showing the photograph of the map. "But you're digging three feet too far east."

The Explorer's eyes narrowed, studying the Art Collector, then the phone screen, calculating risks and possibilities. "And you just thought you'd share that information out of the goodness of your heart?"

"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?"

"We work together. We split whatever we find." The Art Collector stepped closer. "You've clearly got skills I don't—you found the general location without a map. I've got the exact coordinates. Separately, we're competitors. Together, we're efficient."

The Explorer was silent for a long moment, his jaw tight. Then: "Fifty-fifty split. Whatever's down there."

"Agreed."

The Art Collector pulled out his own phone's compass and paced off the distance from the iron gate. "Forty paces north from the gate..."

The Explorer followed, counting silently.

"Now nine paces west."

They stopped at a spot about three feet from where the Explorer had been digging. An unremarkable patch of ground beneath a large stone planter shaped like an urn—classical style, probably original to the 1910s mansion construction.

"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'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.

The soil was soft from decades of garden watering and rain. They worked quickly, quietly, glancing occasionally toward the mansion to make sure no one else was coming.

Two feet down. Three feet.

Then—

Thunk.

The Explorer's shovel hit something solid.

They both froze, eyes meeting in the darkness.

"That's not a rock," the Explorer whispered.

They dug more carefully now, using their hands to brush away the soil. The object revealed itself gradually—a corner, a flat surface, metal edges.

A box. Heavy gauge steel, about two feet square, with a lock that had long since rusted through.

Together, they heaved it out of the hole and set it on the grass. It was heavy—at least fifty pounds. Substantial.

The Art Collector's hands were shaking as he worked the corroded lock. The Explorer held the flashlight steady.

The lock broke with a grinding snap.

The Art Collector lifted the lid.

And there, packed carefully in oilcloth that had mostly disintegrated, was Frankie Romano's hidden fortune:

Stacks of cash—bills from the 1920s and '30s, probably worthless as currency but valuable to collectors. Gold coins—twenty-dollar Liberty pieces, worth their weight at minimum, possibly more. A leather pouch that clinked with what could only be jewelry. Several smaller wooden boxes, contents unknown. And wrapped in silk that had rotted to fragments—

"Is that what I think it is?" the Explorer breathed.

The Art Collector lifted out a painting, carefully rolled and protected in a metal tube. He opened the tube and partially unrolled the canvas.

Even in the dim flashlight beam, even covered in a century of dust, the quality was unmistakable.

"That's not a reproduction," the Art Collector said, his voice hushed with awe. "That's... that could be worth more than everything else combined."

They stared at the contents of the box—at Frankie Romano's insurance policy, his safety net, his hidden legacy that had waited a hundred years in the dark earth.

"We found it," the Explorer said, almost laughing. "We actually found it."

"The Romano treasure," the Art Collector agreed, a smile spreading across his face. "It's real."

"We should get this inside," the Explorer said. "Before someone else comes looking."

"Agreed. We'll inventory everything properly, figure out fair division—"

"Later. Right now, let's just get it secured."

Together, they lifted the heavy box and began carrying it back toward the mansion, partners now instead of rivals.

Neither of them noticed the translucent figure watching from the shadows of the mansion's upper window—a woman in a 1920s dress, her form glowing faintly in the darkness, her expression unreadable as she observed the two men carrying away what had been buried so long ago.

Neither of them realized that the treasure they'd found—while valuable—was not the only secret buried in the grounds of the Montrose estate.

And neither of them knew that by finding the Romano treasure, they'd just set in motion the final pieces of a mystery that had waited a century to be solved.

Secrets Unravelled

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Abandoned Laboratory - Antidote Research

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. These are different. Much more recent."

The handwriting was indeed different—no longer the careful, measured script of the elixir formula documentation. These notes were frantic, desperate, written by someone in acute distress.

Understanding (October 6, 1925)

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. "The formula was flawed from the start. Not deliberately poisoned—just fatally miscalculated."

They exchanged a glance. Sebastian Crane had killed the woman he loved through his own arrogance and blind faith in his chemistry.

Then Grandmother appeared in the laboratory doorway, as if she'd been waiting for them to reach this understanding.

"The elixir," she said quietly, "could have been Sebastian's mistake. But that doesn't explain Alice Whitmore's broken skull. And who paid off the mortician. Someone else was at work here."

She stepped forward, her shadow looming across the workbenches. For a moment, Dr. Sinclair noticed the shadow changing form though Grandmother didn't move. The doctor shook their head.

"Find Dr. Thaddeus Crane's diary," Grandmother said. "It's hidden in this house somewhere. The answers are in those pages—all the answers about who orchestrated what, and why."

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Dining Room - The Hidden Journal

The Influencer had overheard Grandmother's instructions and felt their 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.

They 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 they 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 they 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.

They found a quiet corner of the mansion and began to read, their 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

1925-08-06 - Dr. Crane's Hidden Diary - The Bottle

I visited Sebastian in the garage laboratory where he works on his formula. He showed me the refined elixir—a pale amber liquid in that ostentatious Venetian bottle he acquired in Milano.

"It's perfect," he said. "Eight months of work, and I've finally achieved the balance."

I examined it carefully. Harmless compounds, mostly. Sentimental choices. I made a note of every ingredient.

1925-09-02 - Dr. Crane's Hidden Diary - On Foxglove

I suggested mostly harmless compounds for his formula, though I did note that foxglove would be quite useful for cardiac applications. He took careful notes. "Why would I use foxglove?" he asked. "Love has nothing to do with the heart's physiology."

I smiled. "Precisely the thinking of a craftsman, not an artist, Sebastian."

1925-09-02 - Dr. Crane's Hidden Diary - Insomnia

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's Arrival

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 - The Heart Stops

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.

1925-10-18 - Dr. Crane's Hidden Diary - Cordelia's Final Hours

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.

1925-10-19 - Dr. Crane's Hidden Diary - The Man I Was

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 Weapon and the Missing Evidence

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

It took them 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 they examined the base.

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

They pulled out the magnifying glass—a tool of their 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.

This was how Alice Whitmore had died.

But there was more.

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

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

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.

And beneath Silas's notes, pages torn from another diary. Cordelia's handwriting, frantic and barely legible:

"October 14th - Dr. Thaddeus examined me today. He knew. I saw it in his eyes. He KNEW what Sebastian had done and he said nothing. He merely smiled and spoke about grief and stress as if I were simply a hysterical widow.

But this poison wasn't Sebastian's alone. Someone else has been giving me doses. Someone with access. Someone who visits this house.

Why? What does Thaddeus gain from my death? From Alice's death? From Sebastian's? There is a pattern here but I'm too weak to trace it before the poison finishes its work.

If anyone reads this: the weapon is hidden. Silver. Heavy. It has Alice's blood. He kept it.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't stop him."

The Mortician carefully gathered everything and headed toward the mansion. The pieces were coming together—but the most damning evidence, the pages that would fully explain Thaddeus's motives and methods, were still missing.

They were hidden somewhere in this house. And they had to be found.

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion Library - The Incomplete Truth

Grandmother stood at the center of the library as the Mortician carefully laid out the evidence on the grand oak table.

The silver candelabra gleamed in the lamplight. Silas Blackwell's original autopsy notes. Cordelia's final diary pages. The leather journal with its missing sections.

"What we have," Grandmother said, looking at each investigator in turn, "is proof of three deaths. But not yet proof of why. The candelabra tells us how Alice died. The autopsy notes tell us that poison was used systematically. Cordelia's final words tell us she suspected Thaddeus. But his diary—the one place where he might have explained his motives—is incomplete."

She turned to the Influencer. "Those missing pages. Thaddeus tore them out himself. He wanted certain confessions to remain hidden, even as he left other damning evidence behind."

"Why would he do that?" the Baker asked quietly. They had drifted into the library, drawn by the weight of revelation.

"Because even arrogance has limits," Grandmother said. "He could preserve evidence of his brilliance—the poisoning, the careful manipulation. But a full confession of his motives? That was too dangerous, even for him. So he tore those pages out."

She looked at the empty space in the journal's binding where pages had been forcibly removed.

"We have the weapon. We have the poison. We have the evidence of death. But we don't yet have his confession—the explanation of why he killed them. Those missing pages are somewhere in this house. They're the key to understanding not just what happened, but why."

Grandmother's eyes swept across the gathered investigators.

"The truth is almost within our grasp. But it's not complete. And until we find those missing pages, until we hear Thaddeus's own words explaining his motives, the story remains unfinished.

We've uncovered the how. Now we must find the why."

Baker's Inheritance

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion, Main Entrance - Why Am I Here?

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

This morning, flour had been on their hands—there was always flour on their hands. They had been measuring out the rose petals for the morning batch, a routine performed a thousand times. The rosebuds gathered at dawn, dried in glass jars, the precise measurements from the recipe they had carried their whole life. That's what Eleanor had written in the margins of the diary: Everything must be in perfect proportion.

They had been kneading the dough when Grandmother's invitation arrived. An investigation at the Montrose mansion. Something about uncovering a century-old mystery. The Baker should have thrown it away. They had bread to bake, customers waiting.

But something pulled at them. A knowing. The same intuition that told them when a customer needed honey instead of sugar in their tea, when someone was carrying grief too heavy for words, when a friend was about to make a terrible mistake. People called it empathy. Their therapist called it hypervigilance from childhood. But the Baker knew what it really was: they saw things. They sensed things. The world spoke to them in ways they couldn't fully explain.

So they had wrapped the rose bread in cloth, gotten in their car, and driven to this mansion.

Now the Baker stood at the gate, holding a basket of bread, wondering what they were actually doing here.

They took a breath. Trust it, they told themselves. You've always trusted it before.

The Baker pushed open the door and stepped inside.

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion, Main Hall - The Influencer's Story

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

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

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

"Oh my God, yes! Rose bread!" The Influencer took a piece, their expression shifting from performance to genuine appreciation. "This is incredible. You know, there's this whole crazy story about the original 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.

"Wait. What?"

"Yeah, like forty years ago or something? There was an orphan kid who survived—I read about it in some old newspaper archives. They had a diary from someone named Eleanor, apparently—the person who wrote it was adopted, kept wondering who their real family was." The Influencer scrolled through their phone. "Found it in one of the clue archives in this mystery game. Eleanor wrote about searching for her identity, and—oh! There was a recipe! A rose bread recipe!"

The world tilted slightly for the Baker.

"What was the diary about?" The Baker's voice sounded strange, distant. "What else did Eleanor write?"

"Just existential orphan stuff, I guess? Missing her roots, wondering where she came from. But the rose bread kept coming up—like it was the one thing connecting her to her past." The Influencer took another bite. "And then there was this whole family thing about the baby being given up for adoption. A lot of sad stuff, honestly."

The Baker looked down at their hands, covered in flour as always. Flour inherited from hands they had never known. A recipe inherited from a diary they had found but never understood.

A rose bread recipe passed down through generations.

To an orphan.

Who kept baking it.

Who had just driven to a mansion today because something inside them knew they needed to be here.

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion, The Dressmaker's Corner - The Dress and the Notes

The Dressmaker found the Baker in a quiet corner of the mansion, studying the old photographs on the walls. They were carrying a dress—an absolutely stunning ivory wedding gown from the 1920s—and when they saw the Baker holding the rose bread, something shifted in their expression.

"That's rose bread, isn't it?" the Dressmaker asked softly.

"Yes. How did you—"

"Cordelia Montrose's favorite," the Dressmaker said, and there was a catch in their voice. "She asked our great-grandfather Elias to make her wedding dress. He wrote about it in his diary—how she'd bring rose bread to the fittings, how it was the only thing that seemed to bring her joy toward the end."

The Dressmaker set down the dress carefully and reached for something in their bag. A wooden box, worn with age.

"There are notes in here. From Elias. He wrote about Cordelia asking him something strange—she asked him to send the rose bread recipe to 'her daughter.' To make sure it was preserved, no matter what." The Dressmaker looked at the Baker intently. "She said it was the only inheritance she had to

give."

The Baker could barely breathe.

"Her daughter?" the Baker whispered.

"Everyone knows about Cordelia's secret," the Dressmaker said quietly, and there was a mix of gossip and sadness in their tone. "She came back from a 'European vacation' in 1924, and nine months later she was thinner, sadder, like something had broken in her. The family sent her away again to have the baby—the Sullivans took it, I think. No one spoke about it. But Elias knew. He wrote about it here."

The Dressmaker pulled out a faded photograph from the box and handed it to the Baker. It was Cordelia, young and radiant, standing in a garden with roses blooming around her. Her hand rested on her belly—not visibly pregnant, but there was a protectiveness to the gesture.

"This was taken before everything," the Dressmaker said. "Before the baby. Before she died."

The Baker's hands were shaking as they pulled out their phone. They scrolled through the photos they had taken of Eleanor's diary entries, looking for the one they had found weeks ago without fully understanding why they had saved it.

There.

A passage from Eleanor's diary, dated 1950:

"Mother Sullivan says I should stop asking questions about where I came from. She says it's enough that I'm loved now. But there's this ache inside me, this longing for something—someone—I've never had. Sometimes I wonder if my real mother thought about me. If she ever wondered what happened to me. The rose bread recipe is all I have. It's all I'll ever have."

The Baker held Eleanor's words next to Cordelia's photograph.

The same brown eyes stared back across a hundred years.

"Oh my God," the Dressmaker breathed, seeing the connection on the Baker's face. "You found something."

"Eleanor's diary," the Baker said, their voice barely audible. "The orphan. The one who wrote about the rose bread recipe."

"Cordelia's daughter?" the Dressmaker's eyes went wide.

The Baker looked at the photograph again. At the young woman who had baked rose bread for the people she loved. Who had given away her baby but made sure the recipe survived. Who had left a piece of herself in every loaf, generation after generation.

"My great-great-grandmother," the Baker whispered. "The recipe wasn't just food. It was how she stayed alive in our family. In me."

The Baker had always been meant to be here. They had always been connected to this place.

The rose bread had brought them home.

1925-10-02 - Elias Monroe's Dressmaking Shop - Elias's Handwritten Notes - The Recipe

In the wooden box the Dressmaker had preserved, among the poems and photographs, lay a single page of Elias's handwriting. It was the rose bread recipe, copied carefully in his precise script. But what moved the Baker most was the note at the bottom, written in Cordelia's own hand:

Rose Bread Recipe (From Cordelia)

Ingredients: - Bread flour: 500g - Warm water: 350ml - Instant yeast: 7g - Sea salt: 10g - Honey: 15g - Olive oil: 30ml - Rose water: 1/4 teaspoon (USE SPARINGLY—this is precious) - Dried rose petals: 2 tablespoons, finely ground

Method: Mix flour, water, yeast, salt, honey, and oil. Knead for 8-10 minutes until smooth. After dough rises slightly (1-2 hours), fold in rose water and ground rose petals carefully. Let rise for 4-6 hours (or overnight in refrigerator). Shape into a round loaf. Final rise 2-3 hours. Bake at 450°F for 35-40 minutes. Brush with honey glaze before final bake.

Note from Cordelia: 'This bread carries memory. Every person who eats it becomes part of our family's story. I want Eleanor to have this—to know she is connected to something beautiful, even if she doesn't know all the reasons why.'

I copied this carefully. I will make sure Eleanor receives it. - Elias

The Baker's hands trembled as they read Elias's promise. He had kept it. Somehow, across a hundred years, the recipe had made its way through orphanages and adoptions and bakeries, arriving in the hands of someone who would bake it every single day for the rest of their life.

2025-11-01 - The Baker's Kitchen (Memory) - The Sullivan Bakery Rose Bread Recipe

The Baker pulled out their worn copy of the recipe—the one they had found in Eleanor's diary all those years ago, stained with flour and butter, marked with notes in the margins written by hands they'd never known but felt deeply connected to.

This was the perfected recipe. The one that had been refined over generations at Sullivan Bakery, the one Eleanor had adapted and improved and passed down. Every morning, the Baker followed these steps—the same steps their great-grandmother had followed, the same steps Cordelia herself had once followed.

■ Rose Bread Recipe - Sullivan Bakery Perfected Version

Ingredients: - Bread flour: 500g (3½ cups) - Whole wheat flour: 100g (¾ cup) - optional, for depth - Warm water: 350ml (1½ cups) - Sea salt: 10g (2 tsp) - Instant yeast: 7g (2¼ tsp) - Honey: 15g (1 tbsp) - Olive oil: 30ml (2 tbsp) - Food-grade rose water: ¼ teaspoon (use sparingly - this is precious) - Rose petals (dried, culinary grade): 2 tbsp, finely ground into powder - Honey (for glaze): 15ml (1 tbsp) - Water (for glaze): 30ml (2 tbsp)

Instructions: 1. Prepare the Dough (10 minutes): Mix warm water, honey, and yeast in a large bowl. Let sit 5 minutes until foamy. Add bread flour, whole wheat flour, salt, and olive oil. Mix until shaggy dough forms.

2. First Knead (8-10 minutes): Knead until smooth and elastic. The dough should be slightly sticky but workable. Place in oiled bowl, cover with damp cloth.

3. Prepare Rose Infusion (5 minutes): Combine rose water and ground rose petals in a small bowl. Let steep to release delicate fragrance. The rose should be subtle, not overwhelming.

4. Incorporate Rose (5 minutes): After 1-2 hours (when dough has risen slightly), gently fold the rose water mixture into the dough using a stretch-and-fold technique. Work carefully to distribute the rose evenly without deflating.

5. Bulk Fermentation (4-6 hours at room temperature, or overnight in refrigerator): Cover dough and let rise slowly. The long fermentation develops complex flavor. Dough should roughly double in size.

6. Shape (10 minutes): Turn dough onto lightly floured surface. Shape into a round boule or oval batard. Place seam-side up in a floured banneton basket, or seam-side down on a parchment-lined baking sheet.

7. Final Rise (2-3 hours, or overnight in refrigerator): Cover shaped dough. Let rise until puffy and soft to the touch.

8. Prepare for Baking (10 minutes): Preheat oven to 450°F (230°C). Prepare glaze: mix honey with 30ml water until smooth.

9. Score (2 minutes): Using a sharp knife, score the top of the dough with a decorative pattern.

10. Bake (35-40 minutes): Place bread in preheated oven. Bake covered for 20 minutes. Remove cover, brush with honey-water glaze, and bake 15-20 minutes more until deep golden brown.

11. Cool (1 hour minimum): Remove from oven and place on wire rack. Wait at least an hour before slicing.

Baker's Notes: The key to this recipe is restraint. Rose water is powerful—use only ¼ teaspoon. Too much overpowers the bread. The rose should whisper, not shout. It's meant to enhance the natural sweetness of the bread, not mask it. The honey glaze isn't just decorative. It caramelizes during the final bake, creating a subtle sweetness and beautiful sheen. This nod to love and devotion is what makes rose bread special.

As the Baker looked at the recipe card, worn smooth from decades of handling, they understood something profound: every loaf they baked was a conversation across generations. Cordelia speaking to Eleanor. Eleanor speaking to her own children. Those children speaking to them.

The rose bread was their family's unbroken chain.

2025-11-01 - Montrose Mansion, The Library - The Fiduciary's Discovery

Grandmother found the Fiduciary in the library, surrounded by old papers and ledgers. The Baker was still holding Eleanor's diary and Cordelia's photograph, moving through the moment like in a dream.

Grandmother noticed. Of course she did. She had eyes that saw everything.

"The baker," she said to the Fiduciary, and the Baker looked up, startled. "I want you to investigate something. The adoption records from the Sullivan family. Look for a child placed there in 1925. Cross-reference with the orphanages in Long Beach."

"What are we looking for?" the Fiduciary asked, adjusting their glasses.

"An heir," Grandmother said simply. "The true heir to this estate. I have a feeling we're going to find they were never very far away at all."

The Fiduciary's eyes landed on the Baker, then back to Grandmother, then to the diary and photograph in their hands.

The Baker saw the exact moment understanding dawned.

"The rose bread," the Fiduciary said slowly. "You said something about rose bread in the investigation notes. That Eleanor—the adopted child—kept baking a recipe from the 1940s."

"The same recipe her mother left with her," Grandmother confirmed, looking directly at the Baker now. "The only way Cordelia knew to keep her child connected to her family."

The Fiduciary moved quickly, pulling out old documents with practiced efficiency. "The Sullivan adoption records... yes, there's an Eleanor Rose Sullivan, placed as an infant in March 1925. The records say the mother was—"

They stopped, looking up at the Baker.

"Cordelia Montrose," they finished quietly.

The Baker sank into a chair, the weight of a hundred years settling onto their shoulders.

"The child grew up," Grandmother said softly. "Had children of her own. Those children had the baker. And the rose bread—Cordelia's rose bread—passed through all of them. A secret inheritance. A connection that never broke, even when the family was shattered."

The Baker looked at the diary in their hands. At Eleanor's words, crying out across the decades:

"I don't know where I came from. I don't know who I am."

But she had known. Through the recipe. Through the measurements and the proportions and the roses gathered at dawn.

She had known.

And the Baker had known, somehow, even without understanding. That's what had brought them here.

That's what always brings us home.