



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

The Obituary Cipher

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Death Notice
- **Chapter 2** The Name That Shouldn't Be
- **Chapter 3** Crossed Wires
- **Chapter 4** The Missing Woman
- **Chapter 5** A Pattern Emerges
- **Chapter 6** The Archivist's Key
- **Chapter 7** Late Night Visitor
- **Chapter 8** Old Enemies
- **Chapter 9** A Trail to D.C.
- **Chapter 10** The False Lead
- **Chapter 11** The Congressman's Envelope
- **Chapter 12** Borrowed Trust
- **Chapter 13** Under the House
- **Chapter 14** The List Revealed
- **Chapter 15** The First Kill
- **Chapter 16** Ties That Bind
- **Chapter 17** Safe Houses and Broken Alibis
- **Chapter 18** The Cipher Breaker
- **Chapter 19** The Betrayal
- **Chapter 20** The Price of Silence
- **Chapter 21** Heart of the Conspiracy
- **Chapter 22** The Siege
- **Chapter 23** The Turning Table
- **Chapter 24** Exposed
- **Chapter 25** Aftermath

Introduction

By the time the furnace in the Sanderson County Library kicked on—its old ducts sighing in the ceilings—Nora Hale had already unlocked the side door, counted the day's float for fines, and set a kettle on the staff microwave for tea she would forget to drink. The winter light came thin as onionskin through the front windows and the first patrons, the ones who treated opening hour as a ritual, waited in their cars with engines idling. In this part of the Midwest the library was church without sermons: heat, tables, familiar faces, the slow kindness of being allowed to sit where you belonged. Nora liked the work because it was quiet and exact. She could mark her day in pencil strokes: due-date stamps, barcodes straight, spines lined up like fence posts. She liked, too, the distance, the way people knew her name but not her history, as if she had always been the woman in the gray cardigan who remembered where the WWII section had migrated and who took pride in finding an out-of-print cookbook for a widower learning to make his own chili.

The obituary binders lived on a low shelf behind the reference desk, fat with clippings taped into place by a long chain of librarians with steady hands. They were the most-requested resource in the building. Genealogists came from counties away to trace the length of lives; children came to read the names of classmates' grandparents; the local paper's reporter called twice a month to double-check a birth year. Nora had cataloged a new wave of clippings in the fall, a project that should have been rote but wasn't, because newsprint never quite behaved. Paper swelled in humidity and shrank in heat, edges curled, tape puckered. It required a small faith to lay a life into a book and trust it would hold. That morning, a banana box of donated newspapers sat under the desk with a sticky note: From the Milners—garage clean-out. She ran a box cutter along the old packing tape. The papers inside were stacked by week, knotted with twine. She slid them out, the ink smudging her fingers, and began.

It was the phrasing that bothered her first. The Sanderson Ledger used a house style Nora could recite: born Jan. 3, 1941, graduated Sanderson High in 1959, preceded in death by. The week's batch held subtle departures. One notice placed a comma that shouldn't have been there—survived by her daughters, Laura and Eden; Karen Bryant—while another used an ampersand in a line that never used one: memorials may be made to the Sanderson Humane Society & the church of your choice. Could be a new editor, she told herself. Could be the winter intern who spelled "cemetery" with an a. But then she saw it again, in a different hand and column width: a middle initial that meant nothing and therefore meant something, a lone G. inserted where the style guide avoided middle initials altogether. Her palms went cool. In another life, she had learned to listen when something unimportant repeated.

The memory came like a slide dropped into light: a windowless room, a bank of monitors casting cold blue, Nora's eyes sore from hours of a feed that skipped by a fraction of a second every eight minutes. That skip had looked like a glitch until it wasn't. She'd flagged it, and men with authority moved, and a van in a foreign city changed course. Afterward she'd walked to the restroom and stared at herself so long the automatic lights timed out and the stall door clicked open on darkness. She had been good—not just competent, but needed. That, more than the commendations, was what had made it hard to leave. Still, she left. Not over a single moment, but over the kind that accretes: a courier who didn't belong on a manifest, a rumor signed as fact, an operation that succeeded in the record and failed in the bones. In the resignation letter she had written about seeking balance; in the kitchen, alone, she had said the plainer word: enough.

On her second pass through the obituaries, she opened the binder to yesterday's page and found a slip of paper in the plastic sleeve. Not a sticky note, not the pink flags she used to mark future corrections—a narrow strip of off-white with a machine's bite along the top edge. The words were typed in pica, the old kind that hit the page like a small hammer. Count the initials, it said. She held it between forefinger and thumb. Their labels now came from a laser printer in a clear, rounded font. No one on staff used a typewriter. They didn't have one. She looked at the reference desk—a low wall with a bell, a bowl of golf pencils, a flier about free tax-prep appointments—and then at the clock, which told her it would be another nine minutes before Connie would arrive, cheeks chapped from the walk and breathless with stories of her neighbor's chickens. The binder lived behind the desk, but anyone could lean over during a crowded afternoon. Or a volunteer could think a note would be helpful. Or someone could want Nora to look.

She set the strip on the counter and turned a page. The Ledger's masthead, tiny in the upper right corner, had a hairline scratch through the L, as if the plate had been nicked. She wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't been looking. Count the initials. She skimmed. The first three notices stacked their names in a neat column: one with a middle J. that the family swore existed in no official records, one with a G., one with a clean line of text drawn too tight along the margin so the period in Jr. kissed the border. A pattern wants to be found or it ceases to be a pattern. She took a pencil from the bowl, made small gray dots in the gutter of the page: J, G, Jr. Her mouth had gone dry. To her right, the phone rang twice and stopped. On the bulletin board above the copier, a printout bearing the state seal announced a congresswoman's listening session postponed: Rep. Maia Reece to reschedule district tour, date TBA. The text was polite to the point of bloodless. Nora had seen Maia Reece's name before, in circulated summaries, in committee transcripts that left whole paragraphs blacked out. She remembered the way the woman spoke, never wasting a syllable, flensing her questions until they scared people for the right reasons.

Connie came in with her cheeks blown by the cold and handed Nora a paper cup of coffee she didn't ask for. "Milners brought in more junk," Connie said cheerfully, toeing the banana box. "The man had every paper since 2004. His wife says she's keeping the birding magazines, though." They worked in companionable quiet. A boy with a red backpack asked where the dinosaur books were. A woman from the courthouse printed thirty pages and paid in nickels. Twice, Nora tucked the typed strip back into the sleeve and then pulled it out again. The note asked for something in particular—counting out a message letter by letter, maybe, or a simpler test to find out who would even notice. She glanced out the window. Across Main Street, a sedan idled at the curb with its defroster fogging the windshield from within, a vague shape behind the glass. She told herself it was a delivery driver trying to warm up. She slid the typed strip into the small inner pocket of her cardigan, where she kept the spare library key. When she moved, the paper rasped like a secret.

Just before lunch, she cut away the twine on the Milners' bundle marked APRIL and spread the papers across the desk blotter. The obituaries were on page seven, right of the editorials, where the Ledger preferred to hide its debts and its grief in equal measure. There, between a farm auction ad and a grainy photo of Little League, a funeral notice listed a survivor whose name struck the underside of Nora's memory like a plucked wire: Aide Caroline Jepsen, of Washington, D.C. She didn't know Jepsen. She knew the perfunctory name on staff lists that had sat daily in her inbox for years—C. Jepsen, LA to Reece. Could be another Caroline Jepsen. Could be a coincidence. The word itself, coincidence, had always annoyed her when it appeared too early in an investigation. It asked you to stop looking.

She took a photocopy of the page, just the obituaries, avoiding the farm sale dates and the black-and-white smiling faces. She circled the stray initial, drew a square around the odd ampersand, made a mark next to Jepsen's name. The act of marking helped. It always had. The library hummed around her—printers, low voices, a drift of laughter from the teen table. The smell of old paper rose when she turned the page, the same as it had in the rooms she left behind: age and ink and dust, lives flattened into data and waiting for someone to read them in the right order. Nora put the binder back on the shelf, ran her fingers along the worn cloth tape on its spine, and felt the weight of the little strip of typed instruction against her ribs. Someone had hidden a message in the one place no one would think to look because everyone looks at it. She used to do that for a living. She had promised herself she was done. She told herself she would finish her shift, check the call number on a mystery for the man with the bad knee, go home to her rented bungalow and a dinner of eggs and toast.

But as she reached to flip the sign on the door from Closed to Open, she caught her reflection in the glass—sharp eyes, a mouth she kept neutral on purpose—and she knew the promise wouldn't hold. The obituaries were speaking. Maia Reece's name had found its way into her day. And the note in her pocket had been typed by someone who knew how to ask her a question she couldn't ignore.

CHAPTER ONE: The Death Notice

The Sanderson County Library held the morning like a cupped hand. Nora Hale stepped through the side door just past six, the key giving a small, familiar resistance before turning. Inside, the air smelled faintly of vinegar cleaner and wool coats. She liked the silence at this hour, the way it carried the building's subtle noises—the tick of the clock above the returns desk, the soft thump of the furnace, the whisper of automatic lights waking up in stacks. She made the rounds in a practiced order: check the emergency exits, count the till, warm the microwave that the staff used to boil water for tea, and pull the shades to let in the thin winter light.

Her routine steadied her. It had been two years since she'd walked away from a government salary, two years since she'd traded SCIFs for stacks and silenced phones for the soft chime at the circulation desk. Here, her day was written in time stamps and penciled notes. She liked the honest arithmetic of overdue fines and the uncomplicated satisfaction of shelving returned books in their proper homes. The patrons came with their small stories and specific asks—someone looking for a birthday gift pattern for a granddaughter, a retired teacher asking for the best book on World War II medicine—and Nora could offer a path without opening a file marked Restricted.

The obituaries were kept in heavy three-ring binders behind the reference desk, each spine labeled by year in black marker. They were the library's unofficial genealogy, a collated history of who had lived and left and how the town chose to remember them. Donations arrived in shoe boxes and grocery bags, old newspapers clipped and taped with a reverence that made the archive uneven but heartfelt. That morning a banana box waited under the desk, its lid taped with a sticky note: From the Milners—garage clean-out. Nora sliced the packing tape with a box cutter. The papers inside were stacked by week, tied with twine that left dust on her fingers. She pulled the first bundle free and spread it on the desk.

She started with the week's obituaries, tracing the columns with a fingertip. The Sanderson Ledger had a house style Nora knew by heart: birth and death dates aligned right, names centered in bold, a list of survivors written in descending order of closeness. She could almost recite the rhythm of it. She noticed a comma that did not belong in the second line—survived by her daughters, Laura and Eden; Karen Bryant—then moved to another column where an ampersand stood where “and” should have been: memorials may be made to the Sanderson Humane Society & the church of your choice. She paused. It might be a new typesetter or a freelancer trying to save space. But the paper was consistent to a fault; this felt like a deliberate slip.

She flipped to a later page and found a middle initial inserted where none was customary—G.—followed by a period with too much space around it, as if a different key had pressed it. On the next notice, she saw another, smaller deviation: a period tucked tight against “Jr.” so that it kissed the margin. She did not believe in coincidences, not in patterns, not when they presented themselves with this much precision. Her training had taught her that the most elegant tells were the ones disguised as typos. She found a pencil, circled the deviations, and drew a faint line between them, connecting the invisible threads.

She moved back through the stack, pulling papers by date, setting them in a careful sequence on the desk. The physicality of it grounded her—the rustle of old newsprint, the smudge of ink on her thumb, the way pages came alive with heat from her hands. The notices clustered near the top of the seventh page, right of the editorial section. In April, just after Easter, a small notice caught her eye. She copied it onto a scrap sheet, her handwriting neat and small:

Aide Caroline Jepsen, of Washington, D.C., passed unexpectedly at home. A beloved aide and friend, survived by her parents, John and Anne Jepsen of Milwaukee; sister, Lorna; and countless colleagues in public service. Memorial contributions may be directed to the Sanderson Historical Society.

Nora stared at the name. She knew it the way you know a recurring voice on a news clip, a name that appears in the byproducts of work you no longer do. She had seen it on a staff list three years ago: C. Jepsen, LA to Reece. It did not prove anything, but it was the sort of coincidence that itched. She put the scrap in her pocket and returned to the binder. Behind her, the door opened and Connie bustled in with the wind at her back and a paper cup in each hand.

“I stopped at the Cup,” Connie said, setting one on the desk. “Barista says it’s going to snow by noon. Also, the Milners are officially empty of newspapers. Mr. Milner claims his wife’s bird magazines are an investment. I told him we only take paper, not priceless art.” Connie had been at the library longer than Nora, and she treated the collection like a large, unruly family. She wore bright scarves and kept a tin of peppermints in her desk, and she knew which patrons needed a gentle nudge back to the shelf and which ones were looking for someone to talk to.

Nora took a sip of the coffee. It was too hot and very good. “Did the Milners mention who else went through their garage?” she asked.

“Everyone who ever visited, apparently,” Connie said, laughing. “They had a yard sale last summer. Papers were supposed to go to the recycle bin, but Mr. Milner can’t throw away anything with a date on it. He’s got receipts from 1987 in a shoebox. The paperclip around that bundle is older than my niece.” She began sorting the new

donations into two piles—binding and recycle—and then paused. “You look like you found something.”

Nora hesitated. “Maybe nothing. An odd note in the binder.”

“Someone trying to pass along a recipe without looking like they’re passing along a recipe?” Connie’s humor had a way of cutting through tension. “Mrs. Timms tried to do that once, stuck a brownie recipe behind a funeral notice. She thought no one would look there.”

“This one says, ‘Count the initials.’”

Connie’s expression flickered. “That’s strange. Is it typed?”

“Like a telegram.” Nora handed her the strip of paper from the sleeve. Connie held it between her thumb and forefinger, frowned, and gave it back.

“Probably some teenager messing around,” Connie said, but she lowered her voice. “Still, I’d hold onto it. If it becomes a habit, we’ll have to talk to the board. People get ideas about leaving notes in books, and then it’s a slippery slope.”

The morning slid into its working rhythm. The first patrons came in with damp hats and soft greetings. A teenager asked if the library had noise-canceling headphones. An older man with a limp wanted help finding a military history that had migrated out of the 940s. A mother asked for picture books about starting kindergarten. Nora moved through these requests with the economy of someone who understood the library as a map. She delivered each book to its reader like a courier, then returned to the desk and the binder that waited with its small anomalies.

She turned to May and found another deviation: a period placed between initials, creating a space that made the line break differently than its neighbors. She flipped to June and saw a similar issue with a comma. On the seventh of July, the name “Catherine O’Malley” carried a mysterious second capital O, giving it the look of a typo that only appeared once in a lifetime. She photocopied three pages, one from each month, and laid them side by side. The irregularities were consistent in their placement. They never broke the line in the same spot, never changed the meaning, but they were there, like quiet pebbles placed in the middle of a smooth road.

The typed note felt heavy in her pocket. Count the initials. She took out a sheet of paper and began a tally, marking each initial in the obituaries for the past three months. She used abbreviations for the placement: top, bottom, left, right. She noted whether it was the first, second, or third line of the notice. Her handwriting made a neat ledger. By the time Connie announced she was taking her lunch, Nora had a list of thirteen initials spread across six weeks.

She looked at the coffee stain on the desk and decided to clean it, using the small ritual to organize her thoughts. There was a pattern in the initials. Some of them were original to the notice, others seemed inserted. One stood out because it was alone and lowercase: g. It did not belong to any of the names she had seen. Another appeared in a string—j. r. —which might simply be “Jr.” and yet the spacing was wrong, as if a machine had punched the letters separately. Nora counted: J, G, Jr. The note had asked her to count the initials. She wrote them out: J. G. Jr. Then she set them side by side in the order they appeared in the binder, not the order of the dates. The arrangement made the letters lean toward each other like a word.

She had seen steganography in her previous life, messages hidden in plain sight. A single anomaly could be an error; three could be a design. She looked up at the clock. She would have to open the library soon. She slid the photocopies into her bag and locked the drawer where she kept the checkbook. The note stayed in her pocket, its corners soft against her ribs. She told herself to leave it for the day, to go home and make tea and grade papers. Then she looked at the seventh page again and saw the masthead scratch.

The Sanderson Ledger’s masthead sat on the top left of the front page. A hairline crack in the L made it look like an elongated C. She had seen the scratch before and dismissed it as a printing error. Today it looked like a marker. She took the page with the May obituaries, held it to the light, and angled it so the scratch caught the glare. It was not in the same place as the April copy, but the scratch itself was consistent, a scar made by a damaged plate. Someone had altered the plate or the page or the alignment, and someone had left a note asking her to count the initials.

Nora’s mouth went dry the way it had the day she’d flagged a skip in a satellite feed—a quarter-second glitch in a loop that shouldn’t have been there. The men who moved after that had not been the kind who explained themselves. She had not regretted leaving. She had regretted how long it took her to choose it. She closed the binder and slid it back onto the shelf. She went to the front window and looked at the street. A gray sedan sat at the curb with its defroster fogging the windshield from the inside. She watched until the driver’s side window cleared enough to show a shape and then the driver’s side door opened, and a man in a dark coat stepped out. He looked at the library, briefly, then crossed Main Street toward the diner.

Nora told herself he was a delivery driver. Or someone late for breakfast. The library’s door opened with a soft chime. A patron came in and asked for the local history shelf. Nora walked him to the 977s and pointed to the spine that said Sanderson County Through Time. She felt the note move against her ribs as she breathed.

At three, the light outside began to lean toward evening, and the silence in the library deepened. Nora had been watching the door without seeming to watch it. The gray

sedan had not returned, but her pulse kept a quiet tempo that did not match her breathing. She took out the photocopies and made a second set, using the machine in the back that always jammed if you tried to print more than five pages. She held the paper down on the glass and listened to the hum, remembering another hum from a room where the air was always too cold. In that life, she had been told that her instincts were a liability only when they were inconvenient.

The door opened again. A woman in a suit stepped in, scanning the room with a look that suggested she was both early and impatient. She approached the desk and asked, without preamble, if this was where the congressional office kept its copies.

Nora blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Maia Reece," the woman said, as if the name itself were a credential. "Her staff was supposed to leave materials for a listening session. My name is Elena Park. I write for the state paper. I was told to pick up a packet here."

Nora had not seen any packet. She had seen a flyer in the staff room about a postponed listening session. She had seen Maia Reece's name in the paper and in a block of blacked-out text. She had seen Caroline Jepsen's obituary. "We don't keep congressional materials," she said carefully. "There's a bulletin board by the copier. You're welcome to look."

The woman—Elena—went to the copier and stared at the board with the intensity of someone who could will facts to appear. "It's not here," she said. "Are you sure no one dropped anything off?"

Nora thought of the banana box, the twine, the sticky note. She thought of the way the city's name had appeared in a death notice in a town two time zones away. She thought of the typed note in her pocket. "I can check the back," she said, and went into the workroom, where the donor boxes had been stacked. She found only the Milners' papers and a box of donated books. She returned to the desk. "I'm sorry. Nothing's come in today."

Elena stared at her, then shrugged with a precision that suggested she was disappointed but not surprised. "If you see anything, could you call the Ledger's office? Ask for Elena." She handed Nora a card that looked like it had spent the morning rattling around in a purse. "You're Nora?"

"I am."

"Do you like working here?" The question came out abruptly, as if it were part of a list she was ticking off in her head.

"It's a good library," Nora said. It was the safest answer. She did not owe a reporter she had just met the truth about why she liked the distance and the quiet.

Elena left with a nod. Nora watched her go. She slid the card into the pocket with the typed note and then took both out and set them on the desk. She put the photocopies next to them and stared at the evidence, at the suggestion that someone was using the obituaries as a code, at the name of a congresswoman who had postponed a listening session, at the name of an aide who had died in Washington, D.C., and appeared in a small-town paper like a signature.

She made a fresh pot of coffee in the staff room and poured a cup she didn't want. The library emptied as the afternoon slid toward closing. She checked in a stack of returns, ran her finger along the barcodes, and stamped the due slips with a satisfying thump. When the last patron left, she flipped the sign to Closed and pulled the door shut, setting the deadbolt. The gray sedan did not reappear. The streetlights came on with a delayed flicker. She stood in the entryway with her coat on and the strap of her bag on her shoulder, and she looked at the binder on the reference desk, at the scrap of paper she had not put back.

In her previous work, she had been trained to trust the small aberration, to treat it like the first click of a lock. The note in the binder asked her to count the initials. She had done that. She had found a pattern and a name. She had found a congresswoman's aide in an obituary that looked like a routine death but felt like a signal. Nora took the typed note out one last time and read it again, slowly, as if it might change. It did not. She folded her copy of the obituary page and tucked both into her bag. She did not know yet whether the answer would be in the ledger, in the masthead, or in something she had not seen, but she knew she would not sleep if she did not look.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY