



The Last Page

Libby Fischer Hellmann
David J Walker

“A funny, smart mystery that respects life in the library...a can't miss read...”
Amy Alessio, Librarian and Author

THE LAST PAGE

By

Libby Fischer Hellmann

and

David J. Walker

Electronic Edition

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PRAISE FOR THE LAST PAGE

“It is nice to see such a funny, smart mystery that respects and features what real life is like in the library. While we don't save quite as many records as Director Barbara, we do often have good memories. The staff, especially the maintenance man JJ (no periods), is right on target. The seamless combination of Hellmann and Walker's skillful writing makes this a can't miss read.”

—Amy Alessio, Librarian and Author of Alana O'Neill Mysteries with Vintage Recipes

THE AUTHORS

Libby Fischer Hellmann

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An award-winning Chicago crime thriller author, Libby has published seven novels. Her most recent, *SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE*, is a stand-alone thriller that goes back, in part, to the late Sixties in Chicago. She also writes two crime fiction series. The first features Chicago PI Georgia Davis and includes the hard-boiled *EASY INNOCENCE* (2008) and *DOUBLEBACK* (2009). In addition there are four novels in the Ellie Foreman series, which Libby describes as a cross between “Desperate Housewives” and “24.” Libby has also published over 15 short stories in *NICE GIRL DOES NOIR* and has edited the acclaimed crime fiction anthology, *CHICAGO BLUES*. She has been nominated twice for the Anthony Award, and once for the Agatha and has won the Readers’ Choice Award multiple times. Originally from Washington DC, she has lived in Chicago for 30 years and claims they’ll take her out of there feet first.

David J. Walker

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David is the author of eleven published crime novels, including *THE TOWMAN’S DAUGHTERS*, a 2011 release. This is the sixth book in his “Wild Onion, Ltd.” series, featuring a wife/husband private eye team. He is also the author of the Mal Foley PI series, and of the acclaimed stand-alone suspense novel, *SAVING PAULO*. His short story, “A Weekend in the Country,” appeared in the anthology, *CHICAGO BLUES*. David has been an Edgar □ nominee, has won several Lovey awards, and has been short-listed for the Society of Midland Authors best novel award. He is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Private Eye Writers of America, and has been a judge for both the Edgar □ and Shamus awards. A life-long Chicagoan, David has been a parish priest in Chicago, an investigator with the Chicago Police Department, and an attorney. At present, he is a full-time writer and lives with his wife just north of the city.

More about our work after the stories

A NOTE OF THANKS

The authors wish to thank first the members of the board of the Winnetka-Northfield Public Library who encouraged us to write this novella set in and around their library. We are also grateful to the entire library staff, who answered our questions about library procedures and practices, and especially staff members who volunteered the use of their names in our cast of characters, including Barbara Aron, Julie Janowicz, Karen Templeton, and Melissa Morgan.

But we owe the greatest debt of gratitude of all to the community of librarians everywhere, who have served us, and countless other seekers of truth and entertainment, for so many years and in so many ways.

FOREWORD

A few years ago the board of the public library in a village on Chicago's North Shore decided to publish a novella for use in fund-raising for the library. Specifically, the novella was to be a mystery set in and around the library. The two of us, both Chicago mystery writers, were commissioned to author the work. Or, more accurately, the board asked Libby and she, thinking it would be interesting and fun (and maybe a little less work) to make it a joint effort, asked David to co-author the novella. Neither of us had ever co-written a story with another author.

As it turned out, collaborating on this project was great fun for both of us (although the "less work" part is highly questionable). We wrote alternate chapters, editing and re-editing each other's work, and plotting and re-plotting as we went. The finished product, a work of about 20,000 words called *The Last Page*, was a great hit with both the library board and the then director of the library. (The director was just about to retire at the time and was a delightfully good sport who was, in fact, treated rather unkindly in our story).

The work was accepted and publication plans began, but circumstances—most notably a world-wide financial crisis—intervened. Along with that came a new library director and some new board members, and...well...they might get to it one day. Meanwhile, we hold the copyright, and you hold *The Last Page* in your hand, digitally speaking. Enjoy.

Libby Fischer Hellman
David J. Walker

THE LAST PAGE

ONE

Barbara Adams had just hung up the phone when she heard something. A squeak. Not very loud, and if Mavis Fairbanks had picked up, Barbara wouldn't have heard it at all. But Mavis didn't answer and Barbara had to leave a message. For the second time that day. She stood up, annoyed. Soft or not a squeak was a squeak. And she was alone in the library. Or was *supposed* to be.

It was after ten, and everyone should have gone home an hour ago, including JJ. Had he forgotten to lock the doors? Unlikely. JJ, the maintenance supervisor, was usually the last to leave. He wasn't young, but he wasn't the type to forget something important. Now that she thought about it, she did recall him coming in. "Everything's locked up tight, Ms. Adams," he'd said. "Good night."

Her office door was open, and she poked her head into the lobby. Everything was as still and hushed as...well...as a library. Maybe she'd imagined it. Or maybe it came from outside the building. Sometimes, when the library was closed and quiet, she picked up sounds from out on the street or from the houses south of the library. People didn't realize how far noise carried. Especially in colder weather. And it *was* October.

She turned back to her office. The last file box JJ brought up from storage sat in the middle of the floor. She navigated around it, got her briefcase from the chair, and returned to her desk. She was very tired. As the Director of the Windbrook library, she was overworked and underappreciated. There was always something that needed attending to. Correcting the mistakes of slipshod employees, who with rare exceptions could hardly be called professionals. Dealing with the Board of Trustees, who knew nothing about running a library. Squeezing a few precious dollars out of stingy legislators. No one realized the huge amount of work she did.

Tonight, though, there was something else on her mind. She pulled a manila folder from her briefcase and withdrew three pages from it. When you compared what she'd recently discovered with what these old pages showed, the evidence was conclusive. She'd circled the important items in red. She put the pages back in the folder and started to return it to her briefcase, then decided to put it back into the box where it had been all these years. It was time to act on what she'd learned. That was the right thing to do, regardless of the consequences.

She sat in her leather executive chair and rocked forward. As she did, her pen fell to the floor. She bent down to retrieve and, as her chair moved backwards, one of the casters squeaked. *Ah, that's what that sound had been.*

She opened the desk drawer and dropped in the pen. She stood, shrugged on her coat, and took her gloves and keys from her pocket.

That's when she heard it again. Another squeak. Louder this time. Not her chair. It sounded as if it came from the lobby, near the door to the basement. She couldn't see that door from her office, because it was behind a display labeled *NEW NON-FICTION*. She walked out to the checkout counter and laid down her briefcase, along with her gloves and keys. Then she headed for the basement door. After that incident with the Foxworth boy, it was supposed to be locked, although this was one of the few things JJ *was* careless about.

She shivered as she recalled that day three years ago, when little Taylor Foxworth's nanny brought him to the library, left him in the children's room for a moment, then couldn't find him. He'd simply disappeared. The boy's parents were called, as were the police. After a frantic search, he was found, curled up in the basement boiler room, sound asleep. It had put a scare into everyone, and since then Barbara had ordered the door to remain locked at all times.

Now, though, it was slightly ajar. She pulled it open and peered down the stairs. It was very dark. A street lamp used to cast a weak light through a window well, but the window had been bricked up when they remodeled the building. She wondered whether to turn on the light and check downstairs, or just close and lock the door and give JJ a stern talking to in the—

She *heard* something. No doubt this time. Before she could turn around, someone grabbed her from behind, squeezing her, forcing the air out of her lungs. She tried to scream but couldn't. She struggled, but it was no use.

Something sharp pricked the side of her neck. A stinging sensation spread through her shoulders, then moved downward. She was getting *so* cold. And dizzy. The person wasn't squeezing her any more; instead she felt a sudden powerful urge to lie down. Then, for some reason, she thought of her cats. It was past time for their supper.

She lost her balance and grabbed for the doorknob, but someone pushed her from behind. Again she tried to scream, but sound wouldn't come. Another shove, and she was flying down the stairs. An eagle, spreading her wings, poised in perpetual flight.

It was nearly eight-thirty in the morning when JJ called 911. When the operator asked his name he said, “JJ Jackson. And no periods, ma’am. Those aren’t initials. JJ’s my given name.” He was so used to saying it that it just slipped out. But he stopped before telling her how his parents couldn’t decide between *Jerome Joseph* and *Joseph Jerome*. It didn’t seem fitting to go into it just then.

“Is there an emergency, sir?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “I’m the maintenance supervisor here at the Windbrook Library, and I come in early, and the director... Barbara Adams?... I seen her at the foot of the stairs that go down to the basement. I was on my way down to check the boiler, you know? ’Cause it’s gonna be cold t’day for Octo—” He heard the woman talking back to him. “Pardon me, ma’am?”

“Do you need an ambulance, sir?”

“No, no need for that. I expect she’s been dead quite some time now.”

“Excuse me? Did you say...” There was a pause, and then, “The police are on their way, Mr. Jackson. You just—”

“I know,” JJ said. “I seen it on TV. I won’t go anywhere.”

“Thank you, sir.”

JJ hung up and went to a computer and made a sign. It said:

DUE TO UNEXPECTED EMERGENCY
LIBRARY CLOSED
SORRY FOR YOUR INCONVENIENCE

He printed out two copies, taped them to the front doors of the library, and waited for the police to get there.

His boss was dead. He couldn’t say as most folks would miss her much.

“One mustn’t talk that way about the dead, Julia dear.” Mavis Fairbanks tapped the brakes just in time, and the Lincoln Town Car roared off the Edens Expressway onto the exit ramp at a speed that put her daughter Julia’s heart in her throat. “Besides,” Mavis added, “nobody murders a librarian.”

The sleek, heavy car swung back above six lanes of north- and south-bound traffic, then glided onto the straightaway and delivered them into Edens Plaza. “Honestly, mother,” Julia said, once she got her breath back. “I didn’t say anybody *did* murder Barbara. I said lots of people would have *liked* to. Motive and opportunity, you know. That’s what a good homicide dick looks for in a murder case.”

“Just listen to yourself, Julia. ‘Homicide dick.’ It sounds so...vulgar. Such a shame you spent your summer clerking for that criminal defense lawyer. Your uncle Morris could have used a bright girl like you, and a judge’s chambers is such a better envi—”

“Mom?” Julia pointed through the windshield. “The light?”

“I see it, dear.” Mavis hit the brakes. Julia strained against the seat belt. “Anyway, sweetheart, people just didn’t understand Barbara. She didn’t have many friends, but she and I were close. I mean...as close as we could be, considering...”

“Right,” Julia said. Barbara Adams was a working woman, not the sort of free-for-golf-and-lunch any-day, well-off woman her mother generally socialized with.

“We’ve been Tuesday night bridge partners for...well...since you were a baby, anyway. Oh, she had her ways, I know. But she had a soft heart. A weak one, too. And it finally took her.”

“I know she talked a lot about a bad heart,” Julia said, “and made a big show of carrying those nitroglycerine tablets. But did you ever see her take one?”

“No, thank goodness. But—”

“She seemed healthy as a horse to me. Always talking about water aerobics, tennis, or biking. You even told me that if she could get the time off, she and her low-life boyfriend were thinking about climbing Mount Everest, for God’s sake.”

“That was just talk, dear. And why do you call Malcolm Templeton a ‘low-life?’ I don’t know that I’d really call him Barbara’s ‘boyfriend,’ either. Just a friend. A woman our age with no husband likes to have a man available to take her places. It doesn’t mean they’re...well...you know...having sex or anything. I mean, not necessarily.”

“He’s a married man, mother. At least he was when they started going together... until his wife found out. That makes him a low-life in my book. And as for ‘a man available to take her places?’ That’s what you used to say about William, too. And look where you’re at now.”

“Where William and I are ‘at,’ darling, is engaged to be married. I suppose it’s a difficult thing for a daughter to get her mind around, even a Wellesley cum laude like you. But please, try. As I know from experience, one never really gets over the death of a spouse. But I’m so lucky William finally feels ready to marry again...after all these years. I call him my ‘Sweet William.’ Do you know what Sweet Will—”

“I *know*, mother. It’s a flower.” Julia wanted to open her mouth and poke her forefinger into it.

“Honestly, dear, I don’t know why you don’t like him.”

“Did I say I didn’t like him?” Julia asked.

“And did I say you *did* say you didn’t like him?” Her mother laughed at the conversational gambit they both enjoyed. “Oh, finally, the light.” She drove forward.

Julia breathed more easily as her mother turned into the mall parking lot, thinking any accident here would at least be at low speed. Her mother was an excellent driver, actually, with an accident-fr

insurance discount, but her fearless, NASCAR approach to the road never failed to raise Julia's heart rate. Which reminded her... "Interesting, isn't it?" she asked, "how the M.E. could establish that Barbara had a heart attack first?"

"The 'M.E.?' Mavis slid expertly into a too-narrow parking space.

"Medical Examiner. The one who does the autopsy. He says Barbara had a heart attack first, then fell down the stairs." Julia opened the door as far as it would go without hitting the car beside her. She managed to squeeze out, and she and her mother headed for Borders.

"Julia, darling, could we talk about something more cheerful? Like...oh, I don't know...how are classes going?"

"Really, mother, that's what you call cheerful?"

* * *

They'd come to Border's to pick up William Bryant, who worked there, and drive to the wake. They were a little early, and decided to wait in the café.

Julia had only met William a few times, but Mavis had told her he didn't need to work, not for the money. He had more money than Mavis and most of her friends. In fact, he'd surprised everyone when he took the job. It was because he loved books, he said, and he liked the discipline of having to go somewhere every day.

Julia had been surprised to hear the part about his loving books, because he didn't strike her as the type. But Julia loved her mother, and her mother loved being in love, so Julia decided to be happy for her.

As they neared the Seattle's Best counter, Julia said, "I think I'll try something different today."

"Fine, dear," her mother said, obviously not really listening.

"Mocha, tall, decaf," Julia told the barista. "Skim, no whipped cream." She turned to her mother. "What about you? It's on me." But Mavis was facing the other way, scanning the huge store, searching for William. "Mother?"

"Yes, dear. Whatever you're having." She was waving her arm in the air now, trying to get the attention of William, who was about a football field away at the Information desk, deep into a computer search for a customer. "He deeply cares about books," Mavis said.

Julia took both mochas and steered her mother to a small round table. "So, dear," her mother said "how *are* classes going?" She sipped from her cup and made a face.

"Fine, I guess."

"I'll never understand why you didn't go to Harvard Law." Her mother took another sip, and then said, "What is this, anyway?"

"It's a decaf mocha, skim, no whipped cream, and I didn't go to Harvard because I wanted to go to Northwestern, and live near Chicago, and maybe practice law in Chicago...if I practice anywhere." She really didn't like law school and changed the subject. "Did Barbara like William?"

"You know, after her husband committed suicide, Barbara's ...well... she had her doubts about men. Her advice was always, 'Go slow.' Poor Barbara. Did I tell you she called me the night she died?"

"No, you didn't. What did she call about?"

"I was at the symphony and didn't get her messages until I got home. Two of them. She seemed anxious to speak to me. Said she'd just found some 'disturbing news.' So like Barbara; always dramatic." Mavis sighed. "They were her last words to me and I couldn't bring myself to erase them from... Oh, good!" Mavis looked past Julia's shoulder and broke into a huge smile. "Here he comes."

Julia and Mavis stood to greet William. He was over six feet tall, tanned, and silver-haired. He

wore a designer suit coat over a white shirt and tie. He was impressive-looking, though quite a bit overweight. He greeted Mavis with a kiss. Then he turned to Julia. "I'm so lucky," he said. "Spending the whole evening with two beautiful women."

Avoiding the vomit-inducing gesture for the second time in half an hour, Julia drew back her hand and checked her watch. "We've got a wake to go to," she said.

* * *

They passed the Mystery section as they left the store. Julia loved mysteries. Maybe that's why she'd enjoyed working for Aggie Sherwood that summer. Sherwood, a woman, was *the* top gun in the city when it came to defending murder cases. Not the simple bar fights where success was getting a good plea bargain, but the complicated cases. Sherwood was brilliant at finding every last piece of evidence. Nothing in a police report or a medical report got by her. She even used private detectives to ferret out the truth from the tangle of confusion and lies.

They went out the door and walked to the car. Julia got in the back this time, and William drove. She wasn't looking forward to Barbara Adams's wake. She was anxious to go home, and listen to those messages on her mother's answering machine.

Mark Wainwright frowned when he came across the email. As the IT director for the library, it was his job to connect—or in this case, disconnect—employees’ computers from the library system. It was a dandy system, he had to admit. He’d set it up himself. He’d been a geek since high school, but he liked the fact that, whatever the problem, he could fix it. He loved being the go-to guy.

He was working late that evening, scanning Barbara Adams’s files. He obviously had no authority to delete anything, so he was transferring the files to disks. Somebody else—the acting director, or someone on the Board of Trustees—would decide what was worth keeping and what wasn’t. Of course, he also wasn’t supposed to be snooping. He’d fire any of his subordinates—if he had any—if he found them reading a client’s private correspondence. But that’s what he was doing when he found that interesting email.

No one was using Ms. Adams’s office, and the door was closed. He had time to spare because, for one thing, he didn’t have to field any more calls from Ms. Adams, demanding this or that...all of it “ASAP.” She’d been a difficult boss, but he didn’t mind. He was a better IT guy because of it. One day he’d move on to bigger things. More sophisticated networks. Maybe a Fortune 500 Company. For now the library was fine, and a little snooping now and then was a perk of the job. He enjoyed seeing what other people worried about, what they said about each other. He knew it was wrong, but it gave him a sense of belonging. Maybe because his personal life, aside from *Second Life*, was so...well...boring.

He’d scanned Ms. Adams’s inbox. She was the type who deleted emails after she dealt with them. The mark of a good manager, or so he’d heard. He hadn’t come across anything interesting—a few messages about the next Board of Trustees meeting, something about complying, or not, with the Patriot Act. But then he’d clicked onto her outgoing mail. Nothing much there, either. He was about to copy everything to a disk when he checked her Draft folder. And there it was. Highlighted in bold, it was addressed to mavisfairbanks@comcast.net. He clicked on the message.

Mavis: I’ve been trying to reach you by phone. We MUST talk ASAP. It’s about something I found out. I may be causing trouble for myself, but I must act. NOW. I know I’m right.

Ms. Adams loved to capitalize words in her messages. The email equivalent of shouting, and not all polite. Mark had been on the receiving end of those annoying capitals more than once.

Now what? The message seemed important. But it hadn’t been sent. The fact that it was in her Draft folder could mean she might not have finished it. But it could also mean she didn’t know if she wanted to send it. Whoever Mavis Fairbanks was, she would probably know its significance. If he sent it on to her and she didn’t understand it, or it wasn’t important, she could just delete it. Still, it wasn’t up to him to send other people’s emails. Except this one seemed to have mattered a lot to Ms. Adams. Doing nothing was the safe thing, but also the cowardly thing. Mark went back and forth, then decided to send it. It wasn’t, like, illegal or anything. He composed a note to go with it.

Hello. I’m Mark Wainwright, IT Director of the Windbrook Village Library. I was going through Ms. Adams’s system and found this unsent email. I thought it might be important, so I’m forwarding it to you. And please accept my sympathies.

He hit “send,” and at once regretted it. *Damn, why did I do that?*

* * *

“Dear, come into my office and see this.” It was Julia’s mother calling. Her “office” was really a

enclosed sunroom, but her mother did volunteer work for several organizations, and having an office made her feel professional.

“Be there in a minute,” Julia called. They were home from Barbara Adams’ wake, and she should have been studying, but in reality she was pondering the two telephone messages Barbara had left on her mother’s answering machine. The first said:

Mavis, it’s Barbara. We have to get together and talk. I found something *very* disturbing. Call me ASAP.

The second was equally worrisome:

Mavis, you *must* call me right away. It’s *critical!*

Julia sighed and went to her mother.

She found her mother hunched over her computer. “Look at this email.”

Julia leaned over her mother’s shoulder. The email had been from Barbara, but had been sent by someone named Mark Wainwright. She frowned.

“Don’t grimace like that, dear,” her mother said. “We need to keep those frown lines at bay.”

Julia absently rubbed her palm across her forehead. “Do you have any idea what this is about?”

“Not a bit. But it appears to be important.”

“It sure does. And together with those phone messages...” Julia shook her head. “Something was obviously bothering Barbara.”

“Oh dear.” Worry lines popped out on her mother’s forehead.

Julia pointed to her mother’s brow. “Premature aging, Mom.” Mavis shot her a look. Julia ignored it. “Tell me,” she went on. “Did Barbara send this kind of email often?”

Mavis sighed. “You know how careless I am about checking my emails, dear. In fact, Barbara rarely sent me any. But she certainly has...I mean *had*...a dramatic streak. And she was impulsive. Still, her phone calls, and the few emails she did send, were usually full of chatter about Malcolm, her cats, or her step-daughter.”

“She ever talk about any... problems she was having?”

“She’d talk about her step-daughter. Otherwise, mostly the normal things: arthritis in her hip, property taxes, where she was going to come up with money for this or that.”

“What about her job?”

“She never talked about it.”

Julia was taken aback. “Never? Not even something...well, I don’t know...some silly piece of gossip?”

Mavis straightened up. “Barbara never discussed anything about her job with me. She wouldn’t, with William on the Board of Trustees.”

“William is on the board?”

“Oh yes. So Barbara couldn’t talk about library business with me. In case it got back to William and the board.”

“I suppose,” Julia said, although she couldn’t imagine what library matters would require such discretion.

Nothing in Barbara’s email or phone messages indicated her distress had anything to do with her job. The email did, however, talk about her finding something out, and that could have been about a library employee. On the other hand, it might have been something personal. A bill she thought was exorbitant? A shoddy home repair job? But ASAP? What was so time-sensitive about—

“Yoo-hoo! Darling...I asked you a question.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. What did you say?”

“I asked what you were thinking about.”

Julia shook her head. “Just that something was on Barbara’s mind. Something that made her call here twice, *and send you an email.*”

“She didn’t actually send it, dear. Maybe she changed her mind, or...well...I don’t know.”

“I wonder...” Julia paused. “I wonder whether we ought to tell the police about it.”

“The police? Why?”

“Well, whenever anyone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, there’s a death investigation. It’s routine.”

“But Barbara died of a heart attack.”

“True. But the information we have might help figure out why she had the heart attack.”

“What difference does ‘why’ make, Julia? Barbara’s gone. Whatever was on her mind...well, it doesn’t matter now. “ Her bottom lip started to quiver.

Julia bent down and gave her mother a hug. “You’re right, Mom. I’m sorry to upset you. Don’t worry. I’ll take the tape and the email to the police myself.”

Mavis’s eyes widened. “What in the world are they teaching you in law school? Maybe whatever was on her mind was so stressful it triggered her heart attack. But that’s nothing for the police.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Mom.”

Mavis frowned. “Don’t patronize me, darling.” When Julia didn’t answer, Mavis said, “You’re going to the police, aren’t you?”

Julia nodded.

* * *

Detective Shawn Nystrand’s office was on the second floor of the Windbrook police station, in a tidy building on Green Bay Road. Everything in the village was tidy, Julia thought. The architecture, the grounds, even the police.

Take Nystrand. His dark hair was neatly cropped close to his head. His mustache was carefully trimmed, and he was wearing a well-tailored suit that looked several cuts above what she saw on police detectives in Criminal Court at 26th and Cal. Even the man’s eyes—dark brown, with long lashes—looked tidy. Those eyes were appraising her now.

“Appreciate your coming in Ms. Fairbanks,” he said. “We’re always grateful when a citizen wants to help out.”

Sounded like something he learned in the village employee manual. *Be polite and courteous at all times. You never know whom you’re dealing with on the North Shore.*

Aloud she said, “I just think it’s odd that Barbara was so...determined...to talk to my mother. She was worried about something important. I thought it might have some bearing on her case.”

“Case?” Nystrand stroked his mustache with a well-manicured forefinger. He seemed to be trying not to smile. “This was a death investigation, miss. Not a *case*. “

“I understand that,” she replied.

Nystrand’s look turned guarded.

“I’m a student in law school—at Northwestern.” She bit her lip. Why had she said that? It made her look like the worst kind of amateur. Full of self-importance. He’d think she was a spoiled child.

But he surprised her. “Good for you. I’ve thought about going to law school myself. Maybe night classes. But I never seem to get around to it.”

Grateful for the crumb of respect he’d thrown her, Julia relaxed. “That’s why I wanted you to have this information, detective. I don’t know. There’s just something odd about it. My mother says Barbara tended to be dramatic, but this seems over the top. I keep thinking something unusual was going on.”

Nystrand nodded. “Look, I know what it’s like when someone dies unexpectedly. It’s a shock. You want to find a reason why. It’s understandable. Especially since she was a close friend of your—
mother’s. It’s natural to let your imagination run away with you.”

So much for respect, Julia thought. “I don’t think it’s my imagination. It’s the nature of these messages.” She leaned across his desk and pointed to the email. “You see this?” She read upside down. ““I may be causing trouble for myself.’ Don’t you agree that’s disturbing? At least unusual?”

Nystrand glanced at the email then back at Julia. “Look, I’ll put these notes and messages in her file. But everything adds up. She had a history of a heart problem. Maybe she got some disturbing news. You admit she was a little high strung. Maybe she’s on her way down to the basement for some reason, and...bam. The ticker just goes. It happens.”

“But something was going on. Maybe someone wanted to do her harm. Maybe something else. I’m just...uncomfortable...with the way it happened. Why would she go down to the basement at night anyway?”

“Look,” Nystrand said, his voice firm, “there’s nothing here, Ms. Fairbanks. If I were you, I’d concentrate on law school. Study criminal law. But don’t be thinking there’s a crime in every death.”

Northwestern University had a campus to dream of, nearly 250 acres sprawled along the shore of Lake Michigan in Evanston, just north of Chicago. The Law School, though, wasn't on that campus. It was about ten miles south, deep inside the city itself. An urban setting, but still close to the lake, and just steps from the shops of Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile.

The day after talking to the police detective Julia had two classes in the morning—Criminal Procedure and Constitutional Law—and none in the afternoon, so by twelve-thirty she was riding a north-bound Red Line train just starting its climb out of the subway tunnel up to the el tracks. The semester was heating up, but her mind wasn't on her studies.

She stared out the window of the train and wondered, as she so often did, what direction her life would take. She'd discovered during her first year at law school that she didn't care much for most of the courses. The professors seemed intent on making her "think like a lawyer," which seemed to mean thinking about making a ton of money sitting in an office somewhere. The only courses she enjoyed were related to criminal law. If she ever became a lawyer, it would be to work in the criminal justice system like her mentor, Aggie Sherwood.

Most of her classmates scoffed at this, reminding her that the real money was elsewhere. But Julia already had more money than she needed, most of it in a trust fund whose assets grew like mushrooms in a cave. The trust was already making quadrennial distributions to her, and when she was forty the cave would be opened up completely.

Still, she had to do something with her life, and a smart young woman who throws herself into the pursuit of justice, when so few people were willing to take on the—

"Howard Street!" The recorded announcement startled her. "*This is as far as this train goes. Transfer to Purple and Yellow Line trains.*"

She looked around. Howard? Already? She hoisted her backpack and hurried out onto the platform. A Purple Line train was waiting. She boarded and sat down. As the train pulled away she closed her eyes and mentally replayed the messages from Barbara Adams on her mother's answering machine: "I found something *very* disturbing." Her mind went from there to that unsent email: "I may be causing trouble for myself, but I must act." Barbara had sounded desperate to reach Julia's mother only minutes before her death. Was what Barbara wanted to say connected to that death?

* * *

She'd left her car—a blue Mazda Miata—in the CTA lot in Wilmette, a short drive from the Windbrook Library. It was a warm, sunny day, so she put the top down on the Miata and headed to the library.

It seemed to her that Barbara Adams had been Director of the Windbrook Public Library forever, but according to the local weekly newspaper, the *Windbrook Talk*, it had only been eight years since that she'd gotten the top position, after spending her entire working life at the library, starting as an intern—or what libraries called a "page"—. Entering the library that day, Julia wasn't sure what to expect, but she was a little surprised that there was no indication that someone important to the library had just died.

She was surprised at how busy the place was. There were lots of young mothers with toddlers, a sprinkling of teenagers who one would have thought would be in school, and a few white-haired retirees. Through a set of glass doors to her left was the *Adult Reader Services* counter. Straight ahead

was the *Circulation and Check-out* desk, where a slim, thirty-something brunette sat hunched over her computer, typing. As far as Julia could tell, it was business—hushed as it was—as usual.

She approached the desk. “Excuse me. My name is Julia Fairbanks and I have an appointment to see the Acting Director, Mr. Finstead.”

The woman’s eyes remained fixed on the screen, but she raised a forefinger in Julia’s general direction, so Julia waited. Finally she stopped typing and turned toward Julia with a smile that managed friendly helpfulness, assured competence, and deep fatigue all at once. “May I help you?”

“I said...I have an appointment with Mr. Fin—”

“Your name?” the woman asked, touching a button on her phone and lifting the receiver.

“I said...my name is Julia—”

“Mr. Finstead?” the woman said into her phone. “There’s a Julia something to see you.” She waited, listening, then hung up. “He’s quite busy just now. He asked that you wait a few minutes.”

“I understand,” Julia said. “These must be difficult days for all of you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, ‘These must be difficult days.’”

“Oh, yes,” the woman said. “What with school starting and—”

“No. I meant with Ms. Adams dying. After all these years...it must leave an awful void.”

“Oh. Well...you know...the public still needs to be served.”

“But such an awful thing to happen...and right here in the library. You must miss her terribly.”

“Not real—” The woman stopped, as though catching herself. “That is, Barbara had many excellent qualities, of course. But there are other people, quite competent, prepared to step in.”

Julia decided to take a chance. “Actually,” she said, lowering her voice to create a sense of intimacy, “I knew Barbara a little. She wasn’t exactly what I’d call a ‘people person.’”

“Tell me about it,” the woman said. “She never—” Her phone rang and she picked up. “Judy Wright here. Oh...yes...uh-huh. Okay, I’ll tell her.” She hung up. “Mr. Finstead will see you now. His office is right through that door.” She pointed across the lobby.

Although it was none of her business, Julia was happy to note that at least the Acting Director hadn’t already taken over Barbara’s former office.

* * *

Jeremy Finstead wore a crisply pressed white business shirt with the top button undone and the tie loosened. He was shorter than Julia, and a little overweight.

“Come in. Come in,” he said, stepping out of the way and then closing the door once she passed through. “Have a seat.” Speaking quite rapidly, and as though he were out of breath. “Oh, I know you,” he said, as though proud of his memory. “You’re Mavis Fairbanks’ daughter.” He scurried around behind his desk. Julia sat in a chair facing him. “How are your mother’s wedding plans going? William Bryant is a fine man, a fine man. He’s on our Board of Trustees, did you know?” Peering wide-eyed at her over the top of his glasses, he folded his hands. “So, what brings you here, Ms. Fairbanks?”

Deciding Finstead’s first three questions were rhetorical, Julia went right to the last. “I’m just starting my second year of law school, sir, but I do a bit of free-lance writing as well.” She did write an article once, about her experiences as a lifeguard for the Windbrook Park District. “I’m working on an article now about Barbara Adams and...well... the impact of libraries on their communities. On spec, you know. No contract yet. Which brings me to you. I’m sure you have some insight into your predecessor’s thinking about—”

“Please, please, my dear. I wouldn’t want to be quoted that I consider Ms. Adams my predecessor

She was Director. I'm Acting Director. As to the next permanent Director, that's up to the Trustees."

~~"Right. I understand. In addition to getting your own input as to Ms. Adams, I'd like to talk to a few other members of your staff. Just briefly, you know, not interfering with their duties, of course."~~

"Well, I...uh...I suppose that would be all—"

"Thanks, Mr. Finstead. Thanks a lot. Let me ask you something first. The director of a library has to supervise so many different employees, and I was wondering: Was Ms. Adams well-liked by library staff?"

"Well-liked?" He paused. "Barbara was a very competent, conscientious administrator."

* * *

Ten minutes later it was clear that Finstead intended to skirt around every question that touched on whether Barbara Adams was popular with her staff, or whether anyone—inside or outside the library—had a problem with her.

Julia had the same luck with the next three library employees she spoke with, all of them women. They praised their deceased boss's business acumen and competence, and avoided—some with obvious discomfort—whether anyone liked or disliked Barbara. Two others refused to talk to her at all, saying they were too busy.

She decided to go home and study. As she was leaving, her way was blocked by a rather elderly man sweeping the sidewalk just outside the entrance. She expected him to step aside, but he didn't. Instead, he looked up at her and nodded solemnly. Then he said, "I bet ya didn't learn a whole lot, right?"

Julia was startled. She had seen this thin, wiry man working around the library dozens of times throughout the years, but—and she suddenly felt a little guilty about it—she'd never spoken to him. "My...my name is Julia Fairbanks," she said. "And you are...?"

"JJ Jackson," he said, "And no periods, dearie. Those aren't initials. JJ's my given name."

"Well, Mr. Jackson, what did—"

"Call me JJ. I had one grandfather named Joseph, and the other named Jerome, and my parents couldn't decide which name should go first. So it's JJ. You're writing an article about Ms. Adams, right?"

"You know that already?"

"Not much goes on around this library I don't know." He smiled. "Not that I go poking around in anyone's business. But a man works at a library over thirty years...well...if he's not a complete fool, he reads so many books he can't help but learn stuff. And, if he keeps his eyes and ears open...well...he learns other stuff, y'know?"

"I see. Sooo...you have a few minutes to chat?"

JJ checked his watch. "I got a break coming. Let's go to my office." She followed him around the corner of the building. "My office," he said, gesturing with his broom hand.

It was a picnic table under a shade tree. It couldn't be seen from the parking area or the street. Julia thought it was probably where library staff ate lunch or took breaks when the weather allowed.

"It's a little nippy here in the shade," he said, "so probably won't be anyone bothering us." He leaned his broom against the tree and sat at the table. She sat across from him.

He pulled a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, took one out and stuck it between his lips, and slid the pack back in his pocket. "Oh," he said, talking around the cigarette. "Want one?" Reaching toward his pocket again.

"No, thanks. But what—"

"Good on you. With young folks these days, you never know. A lot of 'em are dumb as me." He flipped open a bulky stainless steel lighter, lit the cigarette, and blew out a stream of smoke. With his tan, leathery skin, gray mustache, and flannel shirt, he looked like an older version of the Marlboro man in a baseball cap—tough as nails, and strong. He leaned toward her. "Was I right?"

"Excuse me?" Her mind was on the Marlboro man, and his dying of lung cancer.

"Talking to the staff, you probably didn't learn—"

"Oh, yes, you're right. I mean, I learned that Ms. Adams was hard-working and efficient. But for the sort of article I'm doing, I need something...well...more personal. What her ideas were, or her philosophy; why she became a librarian; what the staff thought of her; what she hoped to accomplish. That sort of thing."

"Uh-huh."

He didn't say anything else, so she said, "It must have been terrible, finding her dead like that."

"Well, I planned to go in late that morning 'cause she'd been running me ragged for two days. Dragging old boxes up out of storage to her office so's she could look through 'em. She was like a lady on a *mission*, and... Uh, where was I? Oh, yeah. I woulda gone in late but it was cold and I thought I better go and make sure the boiler's working. And, you know, there she was. What a surprise."

"I bet." She noticed he was careful to blow his smoke off to the side, away from her. "I guess what surprises me," she said, "is that everything seems so...so normal in the library, like there hadn't just

been a tragic death.”

“Well...” JJ turned his head and blew out another long, thin stream of smoke. “It’s not like they were right there when she died. And it was just a heart attack. Happens every day.” He tapped ashes onto the ground. “Besides, most of them don’t really care that much. And the ones that *do* care? They’re happy as hell.”

“What?” Julia’s breath caught in her throat.

“Ms. Adams wasn’t, let’s say, the likable kind. Especially as a boss. I got along great with her, but I think that’s because I was already here when she started working here.” He obviously enjoyed having an audience. “She was still in college and I was maybe fifteen years older. I helped her out with stuff. You know, showed her where things were around the building. Even back then, most people didn’t like her.”

“Really?”

“She was sorta standoffish. Independent, too. To my mind she used to break rules just to break ’em, at least when no one was looking. Like she used to sneak into the boiler room for a smoke, when there was supposed to be no smoking inside. I caught her lotsa times. But I never said nothing, and she never forgot that.” He took a last drag, and stamped out the butt on the sole of his heavy work shoe. “Course, I’ve always done my job. So I gave her nothing to complain about when she got to be in charge. Most folks found it hard to work for her. She could be...you wanna know the truth... mean. No other way to put it. Not just to the staff, either.”

“Who besides the staff?” JJ looked surprised by her question and she remembered she was supposed to be writing an article. “I mean,” she said, “I don’t want to offend anyone by anything I say in my article, and...”

“And you’re a curious person, right?” He winked, good-naturedly. She thought he probably didn’t get much conversation as a janitor...or a Maintenance Supervisor, as his ID badge put it. “Like me,” he added.

“I guess so.” She grinned. “So...since we’re each a bit of a gossip...who didn’t like her...and why?”

“Well...did you know her husband committed suicide?”

“Everyone knows that. A little over a year ago. Depression, they say. So you’re saying he didn’t like—”

“He’s not the one I’m thinking of.” JJ looked around, as though to be sure no one was listening, then said. “Ms. Adams’s step-daughter, her husband’s child from his first marriage—she’s grown now, older than you—she blames Ms. Adams for driving her father to blow his brains out. He left a note, said something like, ‘I can’t take it any more.’ The daughter says it was Ms. Adams he couldn’t take, and her constant criticism. I can believe that. Anyway, that girl...woman, I mean...hates her mother. Or hated her.”

“How would you know something like that?”

“Because like I told ya, I’m here all the time. And I can’t keep my ears plugged up, can I? The stepdaughter used to come and pick Ms. Adams up lotsa times at the end of the day. Sometimes no one else was here but me. I’d hear the two of ’em go at it. Tell you the truth, the daughter’s as mean as Ms. Adams. They deserved each other.”

“Wow,” Julia said. “Anybody else?”

“Well, Ms. Adams had a boyfriend. Crazy about her, though I don’t know why anyone—”

“No, I was asking who else hated her?”

“I’m getting to that.” He lit another cigarette. “The boyfriend’s wife, that’s who. She blames Ms. Adams for breaking up her marriage. She came here twice at night, hollering, threatening to choke Ms. Adams to death. You’d think she was trash, living in some rundown trailer the way she cussed, but she

lives right here in the village. Ms. Adams just walked away from her, didn't even call the police, 'cause she knew the woman, drunk as a skunk like she was, was a big shot with the Friends of the Library and raised tons of money." JJ tapped his cigarette lighter on the table, first the top, then the bottom. "So...that makes two."

"Anyone else? I mean, who really didn't like her, hated her?"

"Funny," he narrowed his eyes. "This doesn't seem like the stuff you'd put in the kinda article you're talking about."

"Well," Julia said, "who knows? Maybe I can write two different articles. Anyway, who else? C'mon, you'd know, if anyone would."

She could see he couldn't resist telling what he knew, or thought he knew. "People who really hated her, huh? I guess the only other one I can think of is Mr. Finstead."

"Mr. Finstead? The Acting Director?"

"Yep." JJ took a long drag on his latest Marlboro, looking pleased that he'd shocked her. "You probably know the Windbrook library and the one in Glenfield are joined in some kind of a partnership. The same Board of Trustees runs 'em both."

"Uh-huh. So?"

"So the directorship of the Glenfield branch came open last spring. Mr. Finstead was in line for the job. Everyone said it was a sure thing. But Ms. Adams torpedoed it. Went to the board and bad-mouthed him. He was furious, but what could he do? I know he's glad she's—"

"Mr. Jackson! I need you!" It was Judy Wright from the Readers Services desk, standing at the corner of the building, obviously frantic.

"I'm on break," he called back.

"I know," Judy said, "but it's that homeless man. The one with the wires on his cap?"

"You mean Radar Ralph? He smells a little, but he's harmless. I'll get rid of him when I finish m___"

"You have to come now, Mr. Jackson. The man must have been drinking beer, and eating...I don't know...I think a hot dog. Anyway, he threw up all over my desk...and my keyboard."

* * *

Julia drove home, knowing she had to hit the books. Crim Pro and Con Law, those were the two biggies. Then again, she didn't have either of those two classes again until the day after tomorrow, so she didn't have to start tonight. Besides...she'd have a hard time concentrating.

If you could believe JJ Jackson—and she did—at least three people had serious grudges against Barbara Adams. She knew better, though, than to run back to the police. In fact, maybe they were right. Her mother, too. Maybe her imagination was running away with her. Maybe she was riding off into a fantasy world of crime solving, in an effort to escape the rigor and drudgery of student life.

On the other hand, she couldn't help wondering what Barbara Adams had been looking for in those boxes she had JJ haul up to her office. Had the "lady on a mission" found what she was looking for? Did it have anything to do with her phone calls to Julia's mother? Or that email she never sent?

So Julia would go forward. She wouldn't let a little nay-saying from her mother or the police persuade her to give up. She too was a "lady on a mission."

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