The Christmas Post Murder

A 24-Day Countdown Mystery

H. J. LINNEL

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This is a work of fiction. The people, the village of Trevennick and every event in this book are invented. The General Post Office, its night mails and its registered post are drawn from the period, but the offices, staff and records here are imaginary.

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How to Play

On Saturday 30 November 1957, a retired Inspector of the night mail opened a parcel at his tea table in Cornwall and ate the first slice of the cake inside it. He was dead in minutes. The cake had come from his sister in Edinburgh by registered post, and on its way it had passed through twenty-four pairs of hands.

You are Miss Ruth Calloway of the Post Office Investigation Branch. You follow the parcel one pair of hands a day, from Edinburgh to the tea table. On Day 1 you meet the first hands. On Day 24 you meet the last.

One question a day. Each day's puzzle settles one thing: did this pair of hands have the chance to open the parcel? Write the answer at that station on the Chain Board (pages 6 and 7). A pair of hands is anyone who held the parcel, or the bag it was in, on its road. Someone who only unlocks a door or cuts a cord, and never holds it, is not a pair of hands.

The one rule for YES. A pair of hands **had the chance** if they held the parcel unseen, outside a sealed bag, for 20 minutes or more. If they did, write **YES SO FAR**. Day 0 shows where the 20 minutes come from.

What a NO needs. A NO is never about a short time. It needs one of two things: a witness who watched the parcel the whole time, with no gap at all; or a sealed bag whose seal was checked when the parcel went in and again when it came out. A locked bag counts as sealed for anyone who holds no key to it. The hands just before and just after a handover cannot be that witness, because the two people at a handover could be working together. Watched means the witness had the parcel in plain view, near enough to see what the hands were doing.

No in-between. Every pair of hands in this book either held the parcel unseen for 20 minutes or more, or was watched or sealed the whole time. You will never meet a short gap and have to guess.

Only the road. This book asks one thing of each pair of hands: could they have opened the parcel on its road? What was done to the cake before it was wrapped is a matter for the laboratory, and its report comes in its own time.

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YES SO FAR can change. A later record may show that someone was watching after all. Then the YES becomes NO, and the day that changed it is yours to find. A NO never becomes YES.

Liars. Two days carry a box that says one statement on the page is false. On every other day, people may be wrong about what they did not see, but nobody lies.

Stuck? Every day has a First Hint, a Second Hint and a Worked Answer at the back of the book. Each says only as much as it must.

Day 25. The ending is sealed. Read it only after you have named the poisoner on Day 24.

> Keep a pencil. Each day ends with two blank lines headed Facts to Keep, and a note of what is worth writing there: a time, a name or a mark. You will want some of them again.

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The Chain Board

One station for each pair of hands, in the order they held the parcel. Fill in each station on its own day: who held it, and the answer to that day's question.

EDINBURGH

1 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

2 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

3 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

4 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

5 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

6 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

THE NIGHT MAIL

7 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

8 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

9 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

10 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

11 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

12 Hands:

_____

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

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THE CORNISH POST OFFICES

13 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

14 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

15 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

16 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

17 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

18 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

THE HOUSE

19 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

20 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

21 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

22 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

23 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

24 Hands:

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR
Changed on Day: _____
Note: _____

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The Fastest Way In

The telephone rang in the Branch office at a quarter to seven on Saturday evening. A man was dead in Cornwall, at a village called Trevennick, and the thing that had killed him had come through the post.

Mr Duncan Moffat, sixty-eight, had been an Inspector of the night mail until his retirement. Every year, to arrive on St Andrew's Day, his sister sent him a Dundee cake from Edinburgh, by registered post, and every year he cut it at tea in front of his household. This year he ate the first slice from the almond top and was dead within minutes. The police surgeon smelled bitter almonds and said cyanide.

The Cornish police have the murder. The Postmaster General has given me the parcel. If a registered parcel can be opened and poisoned in the post, nobody will trust the Christmas mail, and he wants my report on his desk by Christmas Eve. One pair of hands a day.

Before I left I made up a dummy parcel like his: a cake tin in brown paper, string, three wax seals. Then I opened it, did what a poisoner would need to do inside, and closed it so that it looked untouched. I did it three times against the office clock. My fastest was fifteen minutes.

MY FASTEST ATTEMPT, STEP BY STEP

1	cut or untie the string	2 min
2	lift the wax seals whole	3 min
3	open the paper and the tin	1 min
4	do the work inside	3 min
5	close the tin, refold the paper	2 min
6	retie the string	2 min
7	melt wax and reseal	2 min

Total: 15 minutes. Anyone would need longer, working in a hurry, in a strange place, afraid of a footstep. So the Branch counts 20.

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DAY 0

Practice: The Test Room

Before you start, try the rules on three practice clerks from the Branch test room. Each held a dummy parcel once. Which of them had the chance?

> **The rules in short.** YES SO FAR: held unseen, outside a sealed bag, for 20 minutes or more. NO: watched the whole time by someone who is not the hands just before or after, or kept in a sealed bag checked at both ends.

TEST-ROOM LOG, SATURDAY

Clerk A	Held the dummy parcel 10.00 to 10.35. The room's watcher was called out 10.05 to 10.30. Nobody else was in the room.
Clerk B	Held the dummy parcel 11.00 to 11.40, inside a canvas bag. Bag seal No. 381 checked and signed for at 11.00; the same seal checked, unbroken, at 11.40.
Clerk C	Held the dummy parcel 12.00 to 12.25, alone except for Clerk D, who took it from him at 12.25. Clerk D says he watched C the whole time.

Which clerks had the chance? Write YES SO FAR or NO for each. The answers are upside down at the foot of the next page.

Clerk	Chance
A	
B	
C	

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DAY 0

Mr Moffat's Black Book

A small black notebook from his desk. The police copied out the last page for me. In it he wrote the people he had reported, crossed or quarrelled with, each on one line, with the year. His housekeeper says he read it over every Christmas.

1946	**Joseph Brannigan**	had him dismissed from the sorting office
1949	**Frank Ollerton**	reported his brother; the brother was sacked
1950	**Leslie Hume**	had him taken off the night mail for drink
1952	**Ronald Dewar**	reported him for a late bag; lost promotion
1953	**Ivy Treloar**	took her son to court over the boundary fence
1954	**Wilfred Hocking**	wrote him up over a missing registered bag
1955	**Gerald Penrose**	spoke against his move to London; it was refused
1956	**Tom Rescorla**	accused him of taking tools from the shed
1957	**Elsie Jory**	petitioned to close her sub-office
1957	**Martha Kitto**	stopped her wages for the broken clock
1957	**Robert Moffat**	would not pay his debts; struck out of the will
1957	**Cyril Vosper**	gave him notice to quit by Christmas

Twelve names. Some of them will turn up on the parcel's road and some will not. A name in this book is a reason, not a chance: only the parcel's road can give a chance.

Practice answers (Day 0). Clerk A: YES SO FAR. Twenty-five minutes alone, outside a bag. It is 20 or more. **Clerk B: NO.** The parcel was in a bag, and the same seal was checked at both ends. **Clerk C: YES SO FAR.** Twenty-five minutes, and the only person watching was D, the very next hands. The two people at a handover cannot clear each other. If a later record shows someone else in the room, C's YES will become NO. Notice what made B a NO: proof, not a short time. Every NO in this book rests on a witness who watched without a gap, or on a seal checked at both ends.

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DAY 0

Before Day 1

Each day ends with a box that asks one question. Write your answer there, then copy it to that station on the Chain Board (pages 6 and 7): the name on the Hands line, and NO or YES SO FAR.

Changed on Day stays empty unless a later day turns a YES SO FAR into NO. Then write that day's number there, so you can see at a glance which stations are still open.

Note is for one fact you may want again: a time, a witness, a seal.

Two kinds of date. The heading of each day is the day I am working on, in December. The records I am shown are from the days the parcel travelled, 28 to 30 November.

Miss Moffat is waiting in Edinburgh, and the parcel has not left her hands yet.

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DAY 1 · SUNDAY 1 DECEMBER

The Long Table

Hands 1: Miss Isobel Moffat, the sender

Edinburgh in the rain. Miss Isobel Moffat is seventy-one, small and straight-backed, and she answered every question before I had finished asking it.

“I bake it a week before,” she said. “A Dundee cake wants to rest. The almonds go on the top before it goes in the oven, the way our mother did it. On the Thursday I take it to the Guild Hall, because the guild keeps the good brown paper and the sealing wax for our Christmas parcels, and I wrap it at the long table in the kitchen. Then my daily woman takes it to the post.”

Thursday was 28 November, the guild’s baking day for the Christmas sale. The kitchen was full.

“I started folding the paper as the guild clock over the kitchen door said ten past nine,” she said. “Paper, string, three seals, the label. Mrs Cairns came to the table for it at twenty-five to ten. I had it in front of me the whole time, and so did half the guild.”

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Could she have done something to the cake at home, in the week it rested? The laboratory has the cake, and it will tell me in its own time. My question is the parcel.

The guild secretary keeps a baking-day list: who came in, who went out, and where each woman worked. She lent it to me with a sketch of the kitchen that she drew for the new helpers, with the big dresser running the width of the room in front of the sink and the pantry door.

Miss Moffat had the parcel from the first fold of paper at 9.10 until she handed it over at 9.35. That is twenty-five minutes. If nobody watched her the whole time, she had the chance.

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Which helpers watched the long table the whole time Miss Moffat was wrapping the parcel, from 9.10 to 9.35?

> **How this works.** A helper counts only if she was in the kitchen for all of 9.10 to 9.35 and her place lets her see the long table. Arriving after 9.10 or leaving before 9.35 is a gap.

GUILD BAKING-DAY LIST, THURSDAY 28 NOVEMBER

Helper	Worked at	Came in	Went out
Mrs Laing	oven bench	9.00	9.40
Miss Orr	hatch (kitchen side)	9.05	9.36
Mrs Baxter	tea urn	9.20	9.50
Mrs Kerr	pantry door	9.00	9.45
Mrs Inglis	long table	9.15	9.40
Miss Petrie	sink	8.55	9.50

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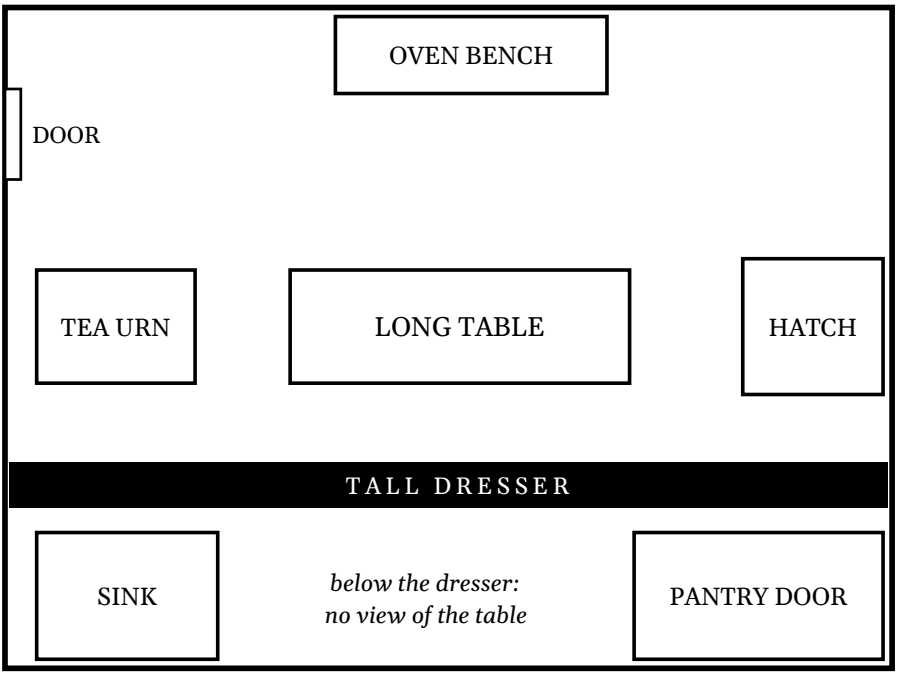
THE GUILD KITCHEN (SKETCH BY THE SECRETARY)



WORKING

Hands 1, Miss Isobel Moffat: had she the chance? Write NO or YES SO FAR at station 1 of the Chain Board (page 6).

Chance: NO / YES SO FAR

FACTS TO KEEP

Worth keeping: the time Mrs Cairns took the parcel from the long table.

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