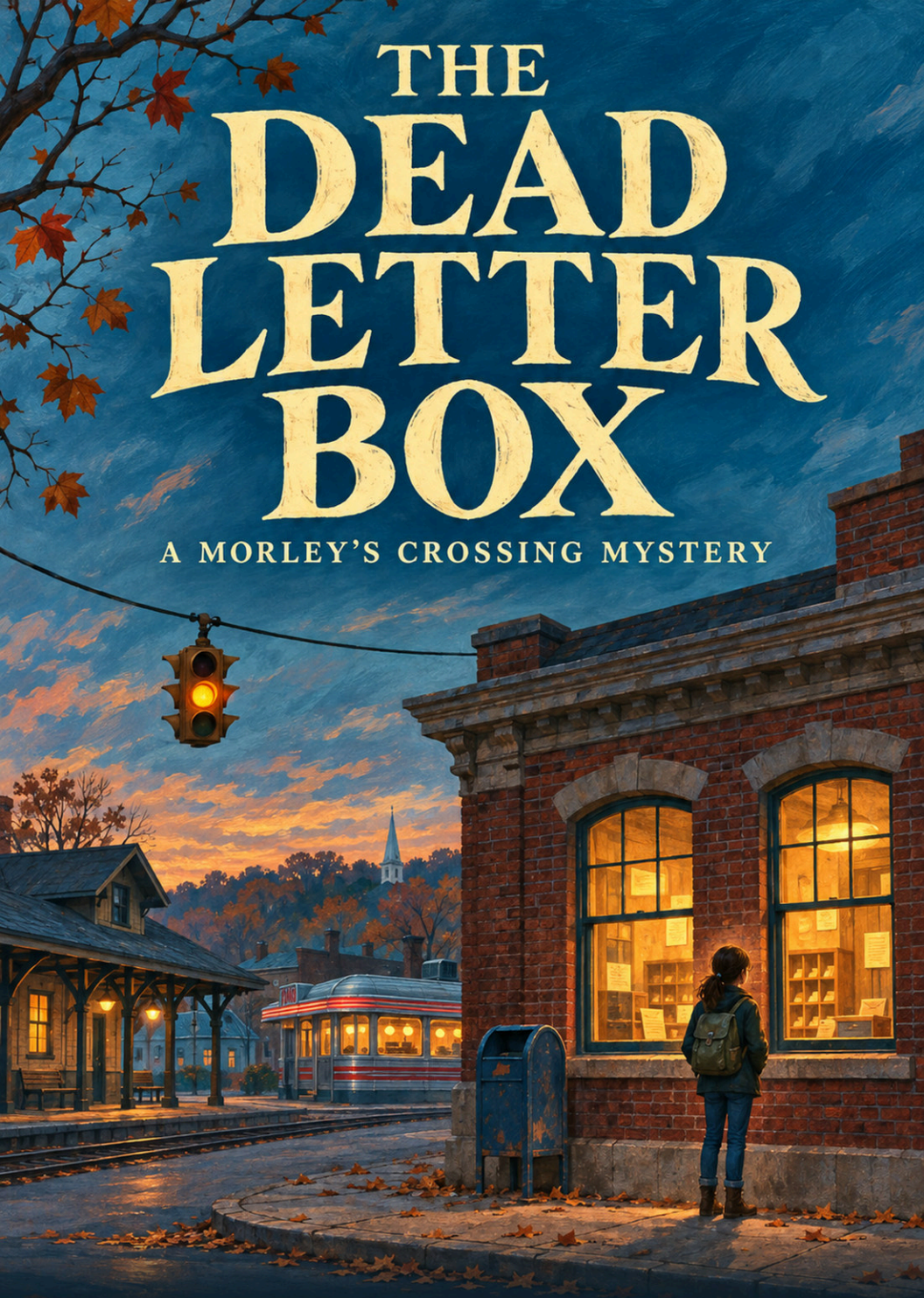
THE DEAD LETTER BOX

A MORLEY'S CROSSING MYSTERY



J.J. Calder

CHAPTER ONE

Everybody Knows

In Morley's Crossing, news doesn't travel. It's just already there when you arrive.

The thing about a town of eleven hundred people is that nobody needs a newspaper. We have Hartley's Diner, the bench outside the feed store, and Mrs. Pruitt's front window. Between the three of them, news gets around faster than the mail truck. And the mail truck is my mother, so I would know.

By 7:40 that Tuesday, with smashed pumpkins still on every porch from Halloween, three people had told me things I hadn't said out loud. I'd skipped my toast (Mrs. Pruitt, over the back fence). My sneaker was untied (Mr. Dell, crossing Main for coffee). My mother had something waiting for me at the post office (the blinking stoplight, probably, since everyone else was busy).

I started keeping a list in fifth grade. It's a small green notebook with a rubber band around it, and on the cover, in marker, it says TOWN GOSSIP. FOR SCIENCE. It's not gossip if you write it down. It's data. The first thing

I ever wrote in it was that nobody in this town admits to gossiping. The second thing was that nobody has to.

By that Tuesday I was up to the forties.

Number forty-one: Mr. Dell says he's "not mad" about the parking spot. He has said this four times since last Tuesday.

Number forty-two: The Hendersons bought a turkey big enough for twelve people. There are three Hendersons.

I don't make up theories. I just wait. Things usually explain themselves if you're patient and sit near the coffee pot at church.

Morley's Crossing has one stoplight, and it hangs over the corner of Main and Depot Street, and it has blinked yellow for as long as I've been alive. My dad says the town council voted to make it a real light once, red and green and everything, but nobody could agree on how long the red should last, and the meeting went until eleven at night, and Dot Hartley from the diner said if she wanted to sit and wait for something she'd go to the dentist. So it blinks. Everybody slows down, looks both ways, waves at whoever's coming, and goes. It works fine. Most things here work fine as long as you know everybody.

That morning the air smelled like wet leaves and old jack-o'-lanterns. The Hendersons' pumpkin had rolled off their steps and split open on the sidewalk, and a squirrel was sitting in the middle of it like it had won a prize. Mr. Bell was walking his dog, Pickles, past Mrs. Pike's bakery. Pickles had a dryer sheet in his mouth. Pickles always has a dryer sheet in his mouth.

Nobody knows where he gets them. Mrs. Pike was on her knees inside the bakery door, scrubbing a spot on her floor that I couldn't see from the sidewalk and I'm not sure she could either.

I tied my sneaker. I did not go back for toast.

The post office is a brick box on the corner of Main and Depot, right across the street from Hartley's Diner and across Depot Street from the old train depot. It has a flag out front, two big windows, and a brass mail slot that says LETTERS in letters so worn down you have to already know what they say. Inside there's a wall of little brass boxes with tiny windows and dials, a long wooden counter, a scale, a rack of mailing envelopes nobody ever buys, and a bulletin board covered in lost dogs, found dogs, piano lessons, and a quilt raffle that ended in September.

And there is one squeaky floorboard by the sorting counter.

Mrs. Tully has been saying she'll fix it since before I could walk. She has called Gus Fuller about it so many times that Gus says "next week" before she even says hello. Everybody in town knows that squeak. Mr. Dell says he can tell who's at the counter just from how they step on it.

My mother is the rural carrier. Route 7, out past the orchards, for fifteen years. She's at the post office by six, sorting her route into the case. At ten she drives off in the little white mail truck with the steering wheel on the wrong side, and she's back by two-thirty to finish

up. She knows the return address on every envelope on her route, and most of the ones in town. She knows who gets letters from the bank with red stripes on them and who gets birthday cards from Florida and who gets seed catalogs in January. She knows who gets no mail at all.

And not one word of it ever leaves her mouth.

It's the great tragedy of her life, and the reason I'm the only person who ever gets to hear her sigh.

The counter belongs to Mrs. Arlene Tully. She's the postmaster. Not post*mistress*. She'll correct you. She has run the Morley's Crossing Post Office for nine years, and she wears her reading glasses on a beaded chain, and she counts everything twice.

* * *

"Morning," Mom says when I come in. She's at her sorting case behind the counter in her blue uniform shirt, flicking letters into the slots for Route 7. Flick, flick, flick. She doesn't read the names. She just knows. Up front, Mrs. Tully is at the counter window, counting stamps.

"Mrs. Pruitt says I skipped toast," I say.

"Did you?"

"That's not the point."

"It's a little bit the point." She reaches under the counter without looking and holds out a granola bar. My mother would have a granola bar ready at the end of the world. "And your library book is overdue. Mr. Greer called."

"Mr. Greer called *here*?"

"Mr. Greer called the house. Your father told him you'd be by the post office. Mr. Greer told Dot. Dot told me when I got coffee." Flick. Box 214. "So technically, the diner told me."

The school bus stops in front of the post office at 7:55. It's the only school bus that comes through Morley's Crossing. That's why I'm here every morning. Mom likes it because she can see me get on. I like it because the post office is warm and I like watching her work. I've never told her that. Some things sound weird out loud.

I walk around the end of the counter to throw away the wrapper. I step on the board.

It squeaks.

Not the usual way.

The usual squeak is long and creaky, like a rocking chair complaining. This is short. A hollow knock. Like the floor is clearing its throat.

I stop. I step off. I step back on.

Tock.

I put my heel on the very end, the end by the counter, and press.

Tock.

"Josie, honey," Mom says without looking up, "don't wear a hole in Arlene's floor."

"It sounds different."

"It sounds the same as it's sounded for thirty years."

"No, listen." *Tock.* "It used to go *creeeeak*. Now it goes *tock*."

Mom finally looks. At the board. At me. At the clock. "It's November," she says. "Wood shrinks when it gets cold. Everything in this building shrinks when it gets cold. Including my patience. Bus in fourteen minutes."

That's a real explanation. Wood shrinks. It's science. But I've listened to that board my whole life. It has never knocked before. I take out the notebook. I flip to the back, where I keep case notes, upside down so they never mix with the Town list. I've only opened a case twice before. One was about the Sutters' missing goat. It was in their basement. The front of the notebook is for the town. The back is for cases. Cases get their own numbers, starting at one. At the top of a fresh page I write THE KNOCKING BOARD.

Case notes: THE KNOCKING BOARD. Item 1. The board by the counter knocks. It used to squeak. 7:41 a.m.

I underline *knocks*.

The bell over the door jingles.

Mrs. Edna Pruitt comes in with her mail slip, same as every Tuesday. Mrs. Pruitt is about a hundred years old, or maybe sixty-five. It's hard to tell with some grown-ups. She has white hair she gets set in Bramwell every other Friday, and a long gray wool coat she wears from October first to April thirtieth no matter what the weather does. She runs the coffee hour at church like a general runs a war. She lives in the yellow house on Elm with about fifteen birdhouses in the yard. She knew I skipped toast because she can see straight into our

kitchen from her back window. Our back yards meet. She is always at her front window.

"Good morning, Arlene," she says to Mrs. Tully. "Good morning, Laurel. Good morning, Josephine."

Mrs. Pruitt is the only person alive who calls me Josephine.

"Morning, Mrs. Pruitt."

She doesn't look at the board. She doesn't look at me. She takes the long way to the counter. A wide curve by the window, past the rack of envelopes nobody buys. The way you'd walk around a sleeping dog.

And I realize I have seen her do it a hundred times.

I've just never counted.

Door. Window. Rack. Counter. Never straight. Never across the middle. Never anywhere near the board. Lots of people step around it because of the squeak. But they do it by accident. They step on it, it squeaks, they laugh, they step off. Mrs. Pruitt goes around it like it isn't a board. Like it's a hole.

Item 2. Mrs. Pruitt has never once stepped on that board.

"Your parcel came, Edna," Mrs. Tully says, and sets a box on the counter. BIRD HAVEN SUPPLY, with a picture of a happy cardinal.

"Oh, good." Mrs. Pruitt's face does a thing it almost never does. It softens. "The new houses. Wrens like them a certain size, you know, or the sparrows push them out."

"I didn't know that," Mrs. Tully says, in her customer voice. Very kind. Very patient. Only very slightly tired.

"Most people don't." Mrs. Pruitt takes the pen on the little chain and signs the slip. Slow, loopy, old-lady cursive. Her address goes on the next line. *117 Elm.* She draws a tiny line through the middle of each seven, like a math teacher. I notice it. I don't write it down. It doesn't look like data. It just looks like sevens.

She tucks the box under her arm and goes back out the way she came. Counter, rack, window, door. Not one step on the board.

The bell jingles. Mrs. Tully lets out the breath she always lets out after a customer leaves. The one that means *okay, now I can be a person again*. She goes into the back for more stamp stock.

"Mom. Why does Mrs. Pruitt never step on the board?"

"Hmm?"

"She walks all the way around it. Every time."

"Maybe she doesn't like the squeak."

"Nobody likes the squeak. Everybody still steps on it."

"Josie." She stops sorting. She almost never stops sorting. She gives me the look. It isn't mad. It's more like she's carrying something heavy and asking me not to add anything to the pile. "Mrs. Pruitt is a good customer. She buys stamps every week, which almost nobody does anymore. She's the kind of person who writes a very nice letter about this post office when somebody asks. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I don't. Not totally. Then she nods at the counter, where Mrs. Tully has left an envelope face down. Like nobody's supposed to see it. It's from the district office in Columbus. I can see the eagle through the paper. It's already open.

"Is that bad?"

"It's a review," she says. "It's normal. Every few years they look at the small offices to see if they should cut the hours. A man named Mr. Kettering is coming to look at how Arlene runs things. The Monday of Thanksgiving week. If they cut the hours enough, they move the routes to Bramwell." She flicks a letter. "Mine included."

"Cut the hours how much?"

She squares the envelope back where Mrs. Tully left it. "Bus," she says, and points. The yellow nose of school bus 14 is coming around the corner by the diner. Mrs. Vogel is behind the wheel with her travel mug.

I go.

I look back at the board on my way out.

* * *

The middle school is in Bramwell, fifteen minutes away, because Morley's Crossing hasn't had its own school since my dad was in third grade. School was school. Mr. Okafor gave us a pop quiz on fractions. At lunch Brynn Kessler told everyone the Thornbury Orchard was having an auction, which I already knew, because the poster had been on the post office bulletin board since Friday.

THORNBURY ORCHARD
AUCTION: EQUIPMENT, HOUSEHOLD, ANTIQUES
Cider press, sorting table, Farmall tractor, furniture, glassware
Owner relocating

Brynn said Old Miss Thornbury was moving to Arizona because she'd finally run out of trick-or-treaters to scare. Some boys laughed. I didn't. I'd never actually seen Miss Thornbury scare anybody. I'd only heard about it, which in Morley's Crossing is supposed to be the same thing.

Number forty-three: The Thornbury auction poster went up Friday. Brynn found out Tuesday. That's slow, for Brynn.

After school I walked from the bus to the post office, like always. Most afternoons I help close. I sweep, I empty the trash, I put the pens back on their chains. Mrs. Tully pays me two dollars a day, which she calls a stipend, which my dad says is a fancy word for not very much.

* * *

At 4:45 Mrs. Tully turns the sign to CLOSED and goes into the back room to count the drawer. That takes twenty minutes. She counts everything twice, and the back room has a radio on the oldies station. Mom is out back, loading tomorrow's parcels into the truck.

I sweep.

I sweep under the rack of envelopes. I sweep the corner where a spider has lived since summer. I let him

stay. Mrs. Tully says spiders are good luck in a post office. His name is Herbert. Then I sweep over to the board and stand there holding the broom. In the back, Mrs. Tully is singing along to a song about a lonely teardrop. Very badly.

I tap the board with the broom handle.

Tock.

I kneel.

From standing up, the board looks like every other board. Old oak, dark in the middle where thirty years of shoes have rubbed it smooth. But down here, with the low sun coming flat through the window, I can see that one end sits a tiny bit higher than its neighbors. Maybe a penny thick. The nails on that end are old square ones, gone black. One is missing. There's just a little hole.

And along the edge, there's a gap. Smaller than a pencil.

I put my cheek on the cold floor and look in.

Dark. Dust. A sliver of the space underneath.

Not only dark.

Something pale. Flat. Straight-edged. Something that is not dirt and not wood and not, I am almost positive, part of any floor.

It looks like the corner of a piece of paper.

"Josie?" Mom calls. "You about done out there?"

I sit up so fast I bang my head on the counter.

"Almost!"

I rub my head. I look at the board. I look at the door Mrs. Pruitt walked out of this morning. Around and around and around.

Item 3. Something under the board. Pale. Flat. Paper? 4:52 p.m.

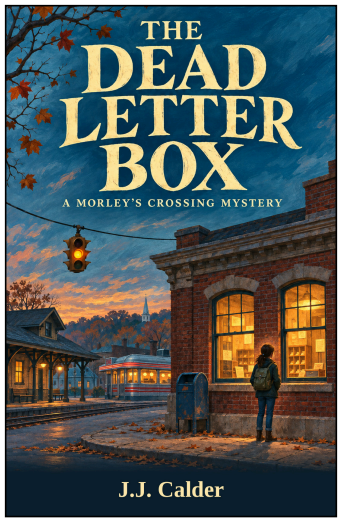
I look at it for a long time. Then I add one more line, smaller.

Item 4. Mrs. Pruitt knows. Possibly.

I underline *possibly*. That word does a lot of work in this notebook.

What was under the floorboard?

Josie's case is just getting started. Find out what she, Tess and Mari discover in The Dead Letter Box, on Amazon now.



Ask a grown-up to search Amazon for The Dead Letter Box, J.J. Calder

More free extras at MorleysCrossing.com: Josie's case notebook pages to print, and a map of the whole town.

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