

## The Missing Poston Papers

The vicarage was enjoying a rare moment of quiet. The Christmas tree had been decorated with a mixture of gold and red baubles and sprigs of holly bedecked the kitchen. With Christmas fast approaching, Charity's parish chores had increased, and her father and mother were in a constant state of exhaustion, running from here to there. Charity though, sat with her friend, Constable Tipping, sipping a cup of tea while her parents attended to yet another task. Jane, Charity's mother was busy wrestling with some flowers for the church displays, while Cecil, her father and the local vicar, was visiting a sick parishioner. Behind her, on the stove, a gigantic pot of vegetable stew slowly gurgled away.

'Got anywhere with the thefts from the allotment, Tipps?' Charity asked, before enjoying a sip of the hot fragrant tea. Tipps shook his head.

'Not really. No one seems to have seen anything and yet, everyone's had something stolen. This person managed to steal some parsnips from Rosie Stanford, Brussel sprouts from Mr Hardacre – though why anyone would want to steal those is beyond me – and some cabbages from Mrs Sims.'

'Will Inspector Lawrence be getting involved?' she asked tentatively, trying to keep her voice nonchalant. After meeting him in the summer, he had been occupying her thoughts more and more. Her attempts at nonchalance had clearly failed as Tipps gave her the side-eye.

'Doubt it,' he said before swigging his tea in an ungentlemanly manner. 'This is a bit below his pay grade. He's on a big job in Seeton, anyway. Very hush-hush.'

‘Oh,’ Charity tried to hide her disappointment at not seeing him again. ‘Right.’

A sharp knock at the door caught her attention and she went to answer it. The hallway lights were on even though it wasn’t yet four o’clock, but the hall of the vicarage had been designed without windows, and without any natural light it was always dull and dark. Charity lifted the latch on the heavy oak front door and opened it.

‘Oh, hello, Miss Poston. Is everything all right?’

Miss Poston, an extraordinarily beautiful young lady of about twenty-four, stood before her in an expensive fur coat, with a pillbox hat perched jauntily on her head as she pressed her bright red lips together. She dabbed a handkerchief to her nose before speaking. ‘Miss Nicholls, I wonder if you can help me?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes.’ She dabbed again. ‘I know about your reputation. I know you solved that terrible business in the summer and I really need your help.’

‘Right.’ For a moment, Charity was unable to move. She hadn’t realised that she had a reputation. Well, she knew she had one for bucking convention – not showing any inclination to marry and to have a career – but not for solving crimes. She had thought it had faded from village memory like so much unpleasantness did. ‘You’d better come in.’ Miss Poston took a step forward and hesitated. ‘Don’t worry, my parents aren’t home.’

With a relieved smile, Miss Poston stepped inside, and Charity led her through to the kitchen. Tipps sat upright and his cheeks began to colour. He always did when he was faced with a pretty girl, and also, when he was lying. It really was a sight to behold. He stood.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Poston.’

‘Good afternoon, Constable.’

‘Right, Tipps,’ said Charity, ‘You’d best skedaddle so I can speak with Miss Poston alone—’

‘Oh, no,’ Miss Poston held out her hand to stop him. ‘I know you were involved with Charity solving those awful poison pen letters so could you stay too? As long as you promise not to tell the police.’

‘He won’t,’ Charity said quickly, taking a seat at the table and motioning for Miss Poston to do the same. Conscious of the time, and that her parents might be back any minute, she was keen to find out what Miss Poston had come for. Eyeing the teapot, Charity felt the pressure of etiquette pressing upon her, even though it would slow things down. ‘Would you like some tea, Miss Poston?’

‘No. No, thank you. I’m afraid I must get back to the house before my father come home.’

Mr Poston was known in the village for being a rude, rather taciturn man. A successful businessman, he often used the same cutthroat attitude when negotiating prices at the Christmas fair. He’d done so only a few weeks before, haggling so voraciously with Mrs Morton on the bric-a-brac stall she had to go home early in hysterics.

‘So, what can I help you with?’ Charity asked, feeling both excited and intrigued. Life had become so much duller since the summer and that this woman was now seeking her out to ask for her help made her feel alive once more.

‘I need you to investigate something for me,’ Miss Poston said boldly, dabbing again at her eyes and raising her head a little. ‘This afternoon, a letter was stolen from my study and I need it back. Quickly.’

‘Right,’ said Charity. ‘Just a second.’ She went to the window seat, her favourite spot in the house and picked up her satchel, retrieving a notebook and pen. She dashed back to the table and found a clean page. ‘Carry on, please, Miss Poston. What type of letter was it and why is it so important?’

A slight blush came to Miss Poston’s cheeks and she dipped her eyes. ‘It was a ... a personal letter from a ... friend—’

‘A male friend?’ Charity asked. The colour in Tipps’ cheeks rose to the very tips of his ears and Charity had to stifle a laugh.

‘Yes. If my father were to find the letter, or if someone were to make him aware of it, there’s no way he’d let me marry him. My father is rather conservative and old-fashioned, and he’d disapprove of my friend. He wants me to marry someone more of my station.’

‘Who is this friend, Miss Poston? It is important that you tell me everything. You never know what could be of importance.’

‘My friend is—’ She looked around as if checking no one else would hear. ‘My friend is Daniel Rogers, our gardener.’

‘Right.’

That explained a lot. There’s no way Mr Poston would want his daughter marrying a lowly gardener. Especially with her extraordinary good looks. There was also the matter of the money she would inherit on her father’s death. He’d definitely think Daniel was after the money, but Charity knew Daniel of old and there was no way he’d even think of something like that. If he liked Miss Poston, it was because of who she was and that was that.

‘So let me get this straight,’ Charity said, ‘You’re sure the letter was stolen this afternoon from your study?’ Miss Poston nodded. ‘Do you know what time?’

‘Sometime between two and two-thirty. I was only away from the study for half an hour and when I came back it was gone.’

That was helpful, thought Charity. She made a note in her book. ‘I think we’d better take a look at the study, don’t you, Tipps?’ Tipps nodded, still red and unable to speak in front of such a pretty young lady. Luckily, Tipps wasn’t in his policeman’s uniform so they could go without drawing any attention. ‘When will your father be back, Miss Poston?’

‘He returns at half past six in the evening, but our cook might be there. She normally comes and starts dinner about now.’

Charity glanced at the large grandfather clock just visible in the hall, through the kitchen doorway. It was now four-thirty. Plenty of time. ‘Shall we go now then? We should be able to go and have a look before he comes back and if he does turn up, I’ll say that I’m asking for donations for something.’ As the vicar’s daughter it was a useful excuse for being places she shouldn’t.

With that, they all stood and, grabbing her notebook and pen and stuffing them into her satchel, they made their way to Miss Poston’s house.

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The Poston house sat in the middle of the village, a few streets back from the village green and duck pond. Next to the smaller, thatched-roof cottages it was quite a grand affair sitting

at the end of a row, facing the rest of the lane. The heavy thatch, cut neatly around the top windows looked more like thick eyebrows and the house seemed as if it was scowling. As they walked up, they saw Mr Appleton, who lived in the last house in the row next to the Poston's, picking up a piece of litter that had flown on the wind. He tutted as he took it to a bin further down the lane.

'Good afternoon, Mr Appleton,' Miss Poston said sweetly as they passed. He nodded a quick and efficient greeting, turned on his heel and walked into his house.

'Gosh,' said Charity. 'Is he always like that?' Whenever she'd spoken to Mr Appleton, he was always very nice.

'Yes,' Tipps interjected, just as Miss Poston began to say the same thing. 'He's got a bee in his bonnet at the moment. He owns an allotment too and had some leeks stolen.'

'Gosh. Whoever's taking all these things is having a veritable feast. Lucky devil.'

As Miss Poston opened the front door and led them inside, Charity was surprised by the cold. It was almost as chilly in the house as it was outside. No fires had been lit and the house had a glum repressive atmosphere. Everywhere she turned, Charity saw expensive furniture of dark wood that only served to make the house seem even more gloomy. It absorbed all the light as if sucking the life out of the place.

'This way,' Miss Poston said, leading them along the corridor and opening a door to one of the rooms that faced the front of the house.

'Is the window always open?' asked Charity, shivering a little in the cold air as a gust of wind ruffled the papers on the desk.

‘Yes, quite a lot.’ A small black cat jumped up onto the windowsill. ‘Mr Tiddles often comes in and sees me. I’m not allowed a cat of my own, my father won’t allow it, so I keep the window open and he stops by sometimes.’

‘Can you show me where the letter was, please, Miss Poston?’

‘Yes, of course. It was here.’ She went to the desk that sat just under the window and pointed to an area of the desk.

‘Did you leave it on top of the desk?’ asked Charity, who had assumed that such a sensitive letter would have been placed in a locked drawer.

Miss Poston dropped her eyes again. ‘I’m afraid I did. You see, I heard a terrible bang and got up to go and have a look. I thought at first it might have been a door banging and checked the entire house, but the study was the only window open and all the doors were closed when I checked them. Now I’m wondering if someone made the noise to get me away from the window and reached in and took the letter.’

‘But who would do that?’ asked Charity. ‘If no one knows about you and Daniel, why would anyone have cause to even think about stealing one of your letters? Or that a letter would be incriminating in the first place?’

‘There is someone,’ Miss Poston said in a low voice.

‘And who’s that?’ asked Tipps. Charity glowered at him for stealing her question.

‘Connie Shaw.’

‘The barmaid from the Fox and Owl?’ Tipps said again and Miss Poston nodded.

Charity new who Connie was but as she didn't go to the pub very much at all. In fact, she had never been. As such she hadn't really come across Connie all that much. Only the odd time shopping at the butchers or bakers. 'But why would she do that?'

'Daniel told me that she's always making eyes at him and hinting they should go out. To get her off his back he said he was seeing someone else. Perhaps she figured out it was me and now wants to cause trouble.'

'She is a bit like that,' said Tipps, turning to Charity. 'She should be at the pub soon. She normally starts at six.'

'Does she now?' asked Charity, unable to keep the teasing tone from her voice. Tipps' eyes shot to Miss Poston and then back to Charity before he started blushing again. She took another look around the desk and window, gave Mr Tiddles a fuss and then said, 'Well, I think that's all for now, Miss Poston. Let me have a think about things and a look around and I'll see what I can do.'

'Oh, I do hope you'll be able to help me.' Miss Poston's eyes her eyes filling with tears. 'If father were to find out I'd lose Daniel forever.'

Taking a leaf out of her mother's book, Charity patted Miss Poston's arm in a comforting fashion. 'Let's just take things one step at a time, shall we?'

'Don't worry, Miss Poston,' Tipps added. 'We're on the case now and we'll get it all sorted for you soon.'

Charity rolled her eyes. Tipps always had a soft spot for a damsel in distress.



At the front door, she bade Miss Poston goodnight and told her she'd contact her again the next day. If they were lucky, and very, very quick, they might just be able to catch Connie on her way to the pub.

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Connie Shaw was what Charity's mother called no better than she ought to be. Her hair was dyed a rather abrasive ash-blonde and her lips were stained red from the continual application of bright lipstick. Unlike Miss Poston, who wore the colour well and with a sophistication Connie Shaw could only aspire to, it didn't suit the barmaid and made her small, thin mouth look even smaller.

The green was decorated with lanterns, ready for a night of carol singing in a few day's time. Charity could already imagine how pretty it would be with them all lit up. As Charity and Tipps walked back through the village and across the green towards the pub, they decided on an interrogation technique.

'The thing is, Tipps,' said Charity. 'We need to find a way of asking where Connie was this afternoon without mentioning Miss Poston and the letter.'

'People often volunteer information when you ask them about something completely different,' said Tipps. 'I've learned that since asking about these darned vegetables. I've found out that Mr Hardacre has a haemorrhoid issue and Mrs Sims has had a row with her son-in-law about capital punishment.'

‘Goodness,’ said Charity, veering her mind away from Mr Hardacre. ‘That’s a good idea, though. Tipps.’

Just as they passed the waddling ducks, they caught sight of Connie and waylaid her.

‘Hello, Connie,’ said Tipps. ‘Can I have a word?’

‘Of course, Tim. You know how I love talking to handsome young men.’

They stopped walking and Connie turned to face them, her ample bosom uncovered by her coat, and barely enclosed in a lowcut top that Charity was sure, would give the regulars in the Fox and Owl more than they bargained for. Her blonde hair was curled so tightly it made her look like she was wearing a helmet. There was something rather intimidating about this young woman. Charity could imagine her having a temper when someone crossed her. Had Daniel done just that? She could easily see her plotting some sort of revenge on the woman she felt had wronged her.

‘Miss Shaw,’ Charity said, ‘Are you just about to start work?’ Though she knew full well that she was, she needed a congenial way to start the conversation and Tipps’s advice had been quite useful for a change.

‘I am, Miss Nicholls, but I doubt it’ll be busy as it’s only a Tuesday.’

‘Have you had a nice day? Hasn’t the weather been better. There’s been so much rain lately hasn’t there?’

‘Yes,’ Connie replied a little uncertainly. This was the longest conversation they’d ever had and she clearly felt unnerved by it too. ‘But I’ve been working so much, trying to get some extra cash for Christmas, I’ve barely seen the outside world.’

‘Yes, it is a very expensive time.’ She waited for a moment, her impatience rising.

‘Were you working today?’

‘Why?’ Connie asked suspiciously.

‘Just wondering,’ Charity replied, thrusting her hands into her coat pockets. Her fingers were freezing and she had no idea how Connie wasn’t turning to ice walking about with her coat open, baring everything she had.

‘Look, what’s this all about?’ Connie demanded, her gaze falling between Charity and Tipps. There was a flash of the intimidating woman Charity had imagined. Tipps came to the rescue.

‘I don’t suppose anyone’s been talking about these allotment thefts, have they?’ He glanced at Charity and a knowing look passed between them.

‘Have they! It’s all anyone’s talking about right now.’

‘Anything to pass on?’

‘Just the usual. Everyone thinks they know who’s doing it, but they’ve got no proof.’

‘Any names to share?’

‘All of them,’ she said with a laugh. ‘Mr Hardacre’s blaming Mr Bradbury. Mr MacDonald’s blaming Mr Finch and Mr Sims is blaming Mrs Stanford on his wife’s behalf. Take your pick.’

‘Anything said this afternoon?’ Charity asked.

‘Connie shook her head. ‘No. I was here at just before lunch and left at four to nip home for my tea, but I didn’t hear anything.’

Charity could have clapped. At least that was one suspect down as far as the letter was concerned. If it was taken between two and two-thirty that put Connie out of the picture. So who did that leave? And how was she going to find out any useful information from Connie without giving the game away? Suddenly, an idea struck her. Daniel was a gardener and often worked on his brother's allotment. Maybe mentioning him would lead to something useful.

'Don't Daniel and John Rogers have an allotment?' Charity said to Tipps. She hoped that by directing the question to him rather than Connie it would seem even more innocuous. 'Has John had anything stolen?'

Tipps shook his head. 'I don't think so, actually. At least not yet but then he's not having much luck despite his brother's help. Daniel's the green-fingered one.'

'Doesn't he do the Poston's garden?' Charity asked, keeping her voice light but she didn't fail to notice how Connie's lip curled. It was time to stir the pot and get a reaction. 'Miss Poston's ever so pretty, isn't she?'

His eyes widened a fraction but then he understood her method. 'Oh, yes, very beautiful. I'm not surprised half the village are in love with her.'

Ruffled, Connie couldn't help herself. 'Only if you like that sort of thing.'

'What sort of thing?' asked Charity.

'Cold. Snooty,' she answered with unconcealed disdain.

'And do many people like that sort of thing?'

'Some.'

'Like Daniel Rogers?'

Connie nodded. ‘And his brother most of all.’

Charity had to stop her mouth from falling open. She had no idea the brother was also in love with Miss Poston. Miss Poston hadn’t mentioned it, but then with her being so self-effacing, it was entirely possible Miss Poston didn’t know.

‘John Rogers is in love with Miss Poston?’ asked Tipps incredulously.

Connie nodded vigorously. ‘He’s always mooning over her. Though I can tell you that Miss Poston’s got her eye on Daniel.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Charity.

‘Everyone knows.’ Connie looked at Charity like she was stupid. ‘And you can’t sit in a pub talking about private stuff. Someone always overhears—’ Charity wondered how often that person was Connie but didn’t say so. ‘—and in a place like this, it spreads like wildfire. Look, I better get going or I’ll be late.’ With a wink at Tipps, Connie headed off towards the pub.

‘Well, that’s a lot to think about,’ Charity said.

‘It is,’ Tipps agreed. ‘But we best get going ourselves. It’s the Sleuthing Club meeting in an hour and your mother promised me some vegetable stew and dumplings.’

‘Tipps,’ said Charity sternly, ‘you only ever think about your stomach.’

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The lights of the village hall shone out in the darkness, punctuating the deep winter black.

With full bellies, Charity and Tipps pulled their coats tighter around them and hurried to the

large front door. The wind whistled around them, and the heavy cloud cover blocked out the stars. Though they were the first to arrive, it wasn't long before the remaining members of the club joined them.

Stanley, the librarian, arrived with a bright smile and hideous jumper, followed swiftly by Lizzy and Ernie Hislop. The damp weather was playing havoc with his leg, an old wound from the Great War, but even though his limp was visible, he didn't complain. Ernie and Lizzy set about making tea and slicing the lemon drizzle cake Lizzy had made while Tipps, Stanley and Charity set out the chairs and tables.

'All ready for Christmas?' asked Lizzy, leaning over the serving hatch at the back of the hall.

'I think so,' Charity replied. 'I've got all the presents I need and thanks to some lovely donations, we've been delivering some things to the poorer families too.'

'How lovely,' Lizzy replied, bringing a tray of teacups and placing it on the table between them all. 'What about you, Stanley?'

'Oh yes, I'm spoiling Annie rotten. She deserves it.'

'She certainly does,' Ernie replied, taking his book and opening it to a marked page.

They had been reading *Murder of a Lady* by Anthony Wynne and as a classic 'locked room' mystery Charity had rather enjoyed it. The setting had felt quite a lot like Harrington Without even though it was set in Scotland.

Charity presumed Ernie was going to ask the first question, so was rather surprised when he said, 'So, Tipps, tell us who your main suspect is for these allotment thefts. Me and

Lizzy saw Mrs Sims in the village shop the other day and she near on chewed our ears off moaning on about it.'

Tipps sighed. It was virtually impossible for the poor man to keep his police work confidential, despite his best efforts. 'It's a bit difficult to say really.' He scratched his head. 'No one's been selling the stolen veg nearby so my theory is whoever's grabbing them has hidden them for their own use—'

Lizzy tutted. 'Greedy tykes.'

'I might have to stake out the allotment because everyone has ideas as to who it is but no one's been seen at the scene of the crime or has any idea of what time of night things have been taken.'

Charity decided that this was a good opportunity to ask about John Rogers who also owned an allotment. With Lizzy's knowledge of everyone in the village, she was bound to have heard something about him. Clearing her throat, she said, 'What does everyone know about John Rogers?'

'Is he your main suspect?' asked Stanley, turning to Tipps. Tipps gave her the evil eye.

'Not exactly, but he's someone we're interested in.'

Lizzy was the first to reply. 'He's a bit of a funny one if you ask me.'

Ernie nodded his agreement. 'Entitled—'

'And rude,' added Stanley.

'And selfish,' Lizzy said.

‘Always mooning after that Miss Poston in the pub he is,’ said Ernie.

‘Even though his brother Daniel’s sweet on her.’

‘He seems to think as the old brother he has first dibs or something. Jealousy is a nasty trait.’

Indeed it is, thought Charity. Did that mean he’d taken the letter to stop his brother from marrying Miss Poston? If he was the jealous type who thought he should be the object of her affections then it seemed entirely possible. Maybe he wanted to drive a wedge between the two so he could take Daniel’s place. He was certainly the next person Charity needed to speak to.

They enjoyed the tea and delicious cake discussing the book and other village gossip that came their way, and before long the meeting was over. Charity wished she could go straight to John Rogers but she couldn’t very well go round to his house at nine ‘clock at night. Frustratingly, it would have to wait until morning.

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Charity met Tipps outside the local shop, ready to continue their investigations. Today, he was resplendent in his policeman’s uniform complete with snazzy helmet and shiny buttons.

‘Ready?’ asked Charity, wrapping the knitted scarf twice around her neck.

‘I am,’ he replied, shoving his hands into the pockets of his long coat. ‘Lucky for you, I know just where John Rogers is too.’



‘Do you?’

‘Yes. He just walked past on his way to the allotments.’

‘How can you be sure he was on his way to the allotments?’ Charity asked incredulously.

‘He had a shovel slung over his shoulder.’

‘Oh, right. Well let’s go then.’

The allotments sat on the edge of the village, and was often home to her friend, Rosie. Doctor Stanford’s wife. As they approached, and a light drizzle began to fall, Charity hoped Rosie was either still at home, or hiding in her potting shed. The cold rain began to sit on the top of Charity’s head and in her hair, causing it to frizz.

From the allotment gate, they spied John digging over his patch.

‘Morning, John,’ said Tipps, striding forward in full police constable mode.

The man looked up from under a long floppy fringe. His dark eyes were narrowed and piercing, and his cheek was smeared with mud. ‘What do you want?’

Considering the fact that everyone liked Tipps, Charity found John’s rudeness more than a little irritating, but Tipps, ever the professional, ignored him.

‘I just wondered if you knew anything about these thefts we’ve been having recently.’

John rammed the spade into the ground with such force, Charity could see his muscles tense in the sleeves of his shirt. ‘What would I know?’

‘Have you seen anything or anyone suspicious? Anyone hanging around the place? Anyone acting oddly?’

‘Nope.’ He answered a little too quickly and looked around as if checking for people. He didn’t have a shed like Rosie did, but he kept glancing at his stack of plant pots in a rather suspicious way. Then he started digging again.

Tipps looked to Charity. ‘Right then.’ He clearly hadn’t noticed, and Charity tried to make him aware of it by wriggling her eyebrows and nodding her head towards the items in question. He still failed to respond.

Though Charity was desperate to ask him about Miss Poston, she couldn’t see how to do it without giving the game away with regards to the letter. ‘What about your brother?’ Charity asked. ‘Doesn’t he come and help you sometimes? Would he perhaps have seen something?’

‘Doubt it. He doesn’t come up here much. He’s always working.’

‘He does the Poston house, doesn’t he?’

The mention of the name Poston was enough to finally make him stop digging. He took a second to appraise Charity who had assembled her features into an expression of naive innocence. Tipps quickly caught on.

‘Very nice people, Mr and Miss Poston.’

‘Oh yes, and a lovely garden. Your brother does a fine job.’

‘My brother,’ John spat, ‘spends far too much time up there.’

‘Does he?’ Charity asked, her voice full of surprise. ‘Was he up there yesterday?’

‘Yes. And the day before that and the day before that.’

As he seemed in full spiteful flow and not really listening to what she said, Charity chanced her luck. 'Was he there yesterday afternoon?'

'Yep.'

'How do you know?'

'I saw him didn't I.'

Charity could have clapped. John had unwittingly confirmed that he was there, or at least in the general vicinity too. Full of confidence that she had now solved the case, she said, 'Is that why you took the letter?'

'What letter?' A look of profound confusion flooded his face widening his piggy eyes. 'I ain't took no letter and anyone who says I have is a liar! Are you saying I been stealing?' He stepped closer to Charity and a shiver shot down her spine. Charity's gaze shot to Tipps for support.

'Not at all,' he said, 'Charity's got her wires crossed. Never mind. Cheerio.' He took Charity's arm and dragged her away. They walked at a rather brisk pace back towards the village and when they were far enough away not to be over-heard, he said, 'What the devil did you do that for?'

'I thought I had him on the back foot after he admitted he was near the Poston house yesterday afternoon.'

Tipps' pace slowed a little. 'I suppose he did, didn't he? But still, you can't go accusing people without more than one little bit of circumstantial evidence.'

He was right, and Charity's face began to burn against the cold winter wind. Then an idea occurred to her that filled her with excitement. 'Did you see the way he was looking at that stack of plant pots behind him?'

'Yes, I did.'

Charity could tell straight away Tipps was lying. As good a policeman as he was, he really needed to work on his observation skills. 'I think that's where the letter is.'

'Why on earth would he put it under a plant pot?'

'Because he still lives at home with his brother and their parents. If Miss Poston has mentioned the missing letter to Daniel and Daniel should suspect his brother, which I'm pretty sure will have happened by now, you can bet a pound to a penny that Daniel will have searched the house and John's room for it. John would have to stash it somewhere else. Somewhere safe. You know what we should do, don't you?'

'What's that?' asked Tipps, clearly suspecting trouble.

'We should sneak out tonight and have a look.'

'Oh, you and your sneaking! Honestly, Charity you are the limit.'

'Utter tosh. I am most certainly not the limit. I think it's a good idea.' Tipps gave a resigned shrug. 'Ten o'clock then? I'll meet you by the gate.'

Seeing the stern set of her jaw, Tipps conceded knowing full well the battle was lost. 'All right then. I suppose I might find out something about these vegetable thefts if I'm really lucky.'

'That's the spirit. And don't forget your balaclava!'

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Under the cover of darkness, they approached the allotment gate. A light took their attention and they immediately hid behind a bush, peering into the night.

‘Who is it?’ asked Charity. ‘I can’t make them out.’

Tipps craned his neck and peered between the bare branches of the bush. He gasped. ‘It’s John Rogers!’

‘What?’ Shuffling forwards Charity too stared into the dark, trying to make things out. Tipps was right, it was John and he was marching all over everyone’s allotments, pulling up vegetables. ‘He’s the allotment thief!’ As she watched him, he took the handful of crops he’d just pilfered from a neighbouring patch and hid them under the plant pot he’d glanced at that morning. So that was why he kept glancing at it. It was where he was stashing his goods. Charity tutted. Disappointingly though, there was no letter.

The wind suddenly whipped around them sending a bolt of cold through to Charity’s bones. Something about it stirred a thought in her brain. A feeling that she’d felt this before. Not the cold as such, but the sudden gust seemed significant somehow. A sequence of events formed in her brain and Charity suddenly knew exactly where the letter was.

‘Quickly, Tipps, I know what’s happened. And what’s more, I know where the letter is.’

‘What? How?’ he murmured, then quickly lowered his voice.

‘I’ll tell you on the way, we have to get out of here before John finds us though. Or at least me. You could arrest him now, couldn’t you?’

‘I’ll do it in the morning once I’ve popped up here and got some evidence from under that plant pot. Rotten sneak.’

‘Come on then, we need to go back to the Poston house.’

Crouching until it was safe to stand, they moved quietly through the village. The ducks were asleep under the long bushes by the duck pond and all was silent. The faint noise of a barn owl carried on the ever-increasing wind. Stealthily, they entered the lane that led to the Poston house. Halfway up, Charity paused.

‘What?’

Charity looked at Mr Appleton’s house and turned to the rubbish bin behind her. Scrunching up her nose against the smell, she fished inside, grateful for her gloves and there, at the bottom of the bin was a scrunched-up piece of paper. She pulled it out and unravelled it to see Miss Poston’s name at the top. With a gleeful smile, she showed it to Tipps.

‘How the devil did you know it would be here?’

Elated at her discovery and the solving of the case, she said, ‘I’ll tell you on the way home and tomorrow, we’ll return this wretched thing to Miss Poston. Along with something else I have in mind for her.’

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Sat in the study of Miss Poston's house, Charity shuddered against the cold wind. The house was even colder than last time, though the window was closed and the maid was lighting a fire. They sat in an awkward silence for a moment, Charity clutching her handbag tightly, conscious of its contents.

Once the maid had gone, Miss Poston said, 'Miss Nichols – Charity – I'm so very grateful. Who was it? Who took my letter? Do you have it?'

Charity opened her bag and fished out the crumpled and slightly stained letter. 'Before I give you this, Miss Poston, I have something else for you.' She took out the second item, wrapped loosely in brown paper. 'Think of it as an early Christmas present.'

Miss Poston's pale brow crinkled in confusion, then her eyes widened. 'A paperweight?' Charity nodded and Tipps bit his lip to stop the smile from covering his face. 'Why do I need a paperweight?' Just as she raised the question, the neighbour's cat jumped on to the window ledge and finding it closed, sprang down again.

'Miss Poston, no one stole your letter.'

'What? But—'

'I'm afraid that you really must stop leaving your personal letters on top of the desk if you're going to keep the window open for Mr Tiddles. Either that or use the paperweight.'

'So you mean—'

'Yes, Miss Poston. It was merely blown away on the breeze. You left it on the desk after hearing the bang and while you were off investigating, as the window was open to let Mr Tiddles in, should he care to join you, the wind blew the letter out of the window, and

probably, down the street. I think Mr Appleton, assumed it was more rubbish simply dropped on the ground, and picked it up and put it in the bin.'

'How very silly of me,' said Miss Poston, blushing prettily on the apples of her cheeks. 'You must think me such a fool.'

'Not at all, Miss Poston. An easy mistake to make. I'm just glad we're able to put your mind at rest. Do you think though,' Charity ventured tentatively, 'that you might speak to your father about your feelings for Daniel? Is there any possibility that he might agree to the marriage?'

Miss Poston looked hopeful. 'It might be worth a shot. I don't like all this sneaking around and if this event has taught me anything it's that secrets are more trouble than they're worth. Do you know, Miss Nicholls, I think I will.'

'Marvellous,' Charity replied, rising from her seat. Tipps did the same and they left Miss Poston to tend to their second order of business. Once outside, Charity turned to Tipps. 'Can I come with you to arrest John Rogers?'

Tipps's mouth hung open. 'No, you can't, Charity! What on earth would your parents say if I took you along to something like that?'

'Do let me, Tipps. They don't need to know. They had no idea I snuck out last night.'

'Well, I'm not risking it. There'd be no way I'd get anymore stew and dumplings if I did.'

Charity crossed her arms over her chest. 'You really do only think about your stomach.'

The End