

LIBRIS

We know  
books

Alexandra (A K) Benedict is a bestselling, award-winning writer of short stories, novels and scripts. Educated at Cambridge, Sussex and Clown School, she has been an indie-rock singer, an actor, a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and a composer for film and TV, as well as teaching and running the prestigious MA in Crime Thrillers at City University. She is now a full-time writer and creative coach, and lives on the south coast of England with writer Guy Adams, their daughter Verity, and dog, Dame Margaret Rutherford.

Follow her on X and Instagram:

X @ak\_benedict

Instagram @a.k.benedict

*Also by Alexandra Benedict*

Murder on the Christmas Express

The Christmas Murder Game

*As A K Benedict*

The Beauty of Murder

Jonathan Dark or The Evidence of Ghosts

The Stone House

ALEXANDRA BENEDICT

THE  
CHRISTMAS  
JIGSAW  
MURDERS



SIMON &  
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

## Game 1

Anagrams of novels and Christmas stories by one of my very favourite writers – Charles Dickens – are scattered throughout the novel. I've given the chapter in which each one is found as a hint, and will give the solutions at the end of the book.

*A Christmas Carol* – Ch.33

*A Tale of Two Cities* – Ch.3

*Dombey and Son* – Ch.13

*Great Expectations* – Ch.23

*Hard Times* – Ch.37

*Nicholas Nickleby* – Ch.26

*Oliver Twist* – Ch.11

*The Battle of Life* – Ch.42

*The Chimes* – Ch.54

*The Cricket on the Hearth* – Ch.58

*The Haunted Man* – Ch.54

*The Signalman* – Ch.43

## Game 2

In honour of the brilliant Christine McVie, who died in 2022, I've scattered the titles of fifteen Fleetwood Mac songs throughout the novel. The songs and their locations are revealed at the end of the book.

## Prize Game 3

At the top of each chapter is a jigsaw piece containing a letter or character. Rearrange the pieces to make a well-known Christmas song and its singer. The first to tweet me @ak\_benedict on Twitter or mention me in an Instagram/Threads post @a.k.benedict with the answer wins a special prize!

And for extra larks, Pips, just for fun, I've thrown in lots of references to one of my literary heroes, Charles Dickens. Let me know if you spot some . . .

*She tears your heart to pieces – and as it gets  
older and stronger, it will tear deeper*

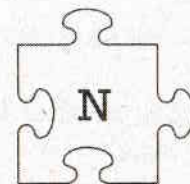
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

*I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into  
a better shape*

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

*'Bah,' said Scrooge. 'Humbug.'*

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*



## One

December 19th

No one was dead, not to begin with. That was about to change. Sitting at the desk, looking out to sea, the killer felt death's approach as keenly as needles into skin. Hands trembling, they pulled on white gloves that stopped short of the wrists. Santa would come in Reaper's weaves that year. Holly would be berried with murder.

They closed the newspaper, crossword complete. Every piece of the plan was in place; now to make the first move. But they hesitated. Right now, they were many things, but not a criminal. The killer stayed still, watching seagulls sweep across the sky, buffeted by unseen winds, eking out the minutes before their life changed forever.

The killer looked at the clock. There was much to do before dusk. Unlocking a deep drawer, they carefully took out the box and checked the contents. Bile rose in their throat at what they saw.

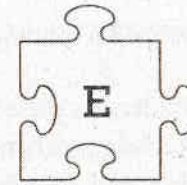
Rolling black-and-white-squared wrapping paper across the desk, they cut a length. The scissors sighed. Box placed on top, Sellotape already cut into long strips, they taped

up the present, adding layer after layer, as if stopping a hostage from getting away.

Arms stretched wide to measure a wingspan of red ribbon, the killer remembered a Christingle service, years ago. Regrets burned in them, as they always did. But those regrets were why they were doing this. Snuffing out the memories, they tied the ribbon around the box, looping it into a bow. The card, the one that would kick everything off, was slipped underneath the ribbon.

Holding the chequered present as reverently as myrrh for a precious child, the killer lowered it into the drawstring sack open on the rug. When they stood, it was with resolve. People would lose their lives before midnight on Christmas Eve. The knowledge sliced at the killer, but it had to be done. They picked up the present.

God bless us, and every one of our victims.



## Two

December was the worst of months, according to Edie O'Sullivan. It brought cold memories, and darkness that soaked into her like winter mist. At this time of year, she was never more than a foot away from shadows.

Not even four in the afternoon and day was submitting to night. *Night – a dark, rearranged thing that dismisses the sun.* She couldn't see the details of the jigsaw piece she was putting in place, even with her magnifying glass. With an eye on rising bills, she'd put off turning on the lights and heating for as long as possible, but some things were more important than saving money, and jigsaws were one of them.

She stood, knees cracking like a festive fire, and went over to the light switch. The mess of her living room, with its piles of books and unwashed cups, was now visible to the whole street. The French windows turned the room into a stage, the frames a proscenium arch, and Edie into a character in a farce, hurrying over to draw the curtains before she was seen. She stopped, though, by the window, her hand on the undrawn drapes.

On the other side of the road, Lucy Pringle, a perfectly nice young woman who lived opposite to Edie in every

way, was up a huge ladder, fixing yet more lights to her house. They had started decorating at the beginning of November, a worrying trend of which Edie wholeheartedly disapproved. This year, she'd seen baubles and selection packs sold next to barbecue briquettes in August. Edie would rather the festive season turn up on Christmas Eve and bugger off on Boxing Day. She considered that magnanimity itself. If it were up to her, Christmas would be binned, and not thrown back in the recycling bins from whence it came, but rather into the black bins. The ones that wouldn't get emptied for weeks over Christmas.

Lucy was gesticulating to her husband, Graeme, who was standing at the foot of the ladder. He nodded, ran into their garage and, seconds later, a huge Santa lit up above their front door. The shifting lights were supposed to make it look like he was waving, but from where Edie was standing, he looked like he was wanking. A masturbating Santa. That was all she needed.

Lucy came down the ladder and stood back on their lawn to inspect the sight. She clapped and turned, scanning the street to see if anyone else had been watching. Spotting Edie, illuminated in her front room, she waved and made a move as if about to walk across the street.

Edie's face burned. Her heart made arrhythmic kicks. She grabbed a piece of bubble gum from the table and started to chew. Blowing bubbles not only kept her calm, but created a literal barrier between her and others.

She had no idea why Lucy would want to talk to her. Maybe she pitied Edie, talked to her friends about being nice to the poor old woman who lived over the road. If

Lucy came over now, she'd want to make small talk, and Edie would have to stop her in a way that would only come across as surly.

Edie yanked the curtains shut. Best not to encourage pity visits, however bored she was and however much she occasionally longed for company. Besides, she didn't want Santa flashing through her front windows.

She kept still, waiting for the crunch of gravel towards her door, but nothing came. Lucy had got the message. She probably wouldn't come back again. Edie felt relief and sadness, mirror emotions she knew well. Peggoty, a silver Siberian, and one of three cats who deigned to be loved by Edie, shuttled between her slippered feet. Edie bent down and picked Peggoty up, nuzzling into her fur. Peggoty had an unerring, purring ability to know when Edie was unsettled. It prompted her to move, and she headed towards the cool kitchen to put the kettle on. Cats, puzzles and tea: Edie's triumvirate of solace.

As she walked past the dining room that she'd kept locked up for over twenty years, frozen memories began to thaw. Most of the year she could ignore that room, but now she couldn't help remembering the last time she'd been inside. It had been just before Christmas. Sky had been packing up her silversmith kit, laying her handmade jewellery in velvet-lined boxes, like the coffin to which she had just consigned their love.

Sky had turned to Edie, eyes full of pain. She held out a necklace – a silver crescent moon. 'This was going to be your present. I thought you could still have it, to remember us by.'

Edie grabbed the necklace and threw it against the wall. 'I don't want you or your shoddy baubles.' The chain slunk to the ground. She turned to Sky, wanting her to scream, to yell, to hurt.

Sky's voice, though, was low and soft. 'We could end this well. It's up to you. This is where we say our last words.'

If Edie knew anything, it was words. As a crossword setter, she could make them do anything she wanted, apart from wrap up what she was really feeling. 'The word "Baubles" has a perfect anagram. "Bubales". Definition: North African antelope of the genus *Alcelaphus*.'

Sky's tears looked like liquid silver. 'Goodbye, Edie.' She waited for Edie to say the same, but the word never came.

As Sky left, closing the front door as she had their relationship, not with a slam but achingly gently, Edie longed to run after her. But neither her legs nor her pride would let her. All she could do was step out of the room and padlock it, along with her heart.

Now Edie hurried past, shoving the memories to the back of her mental deep freeze and praying they'd stay there.

Outside, through the kitchen window, lights were coming on in other people's houses. Thin silver clouds swagged across the moon, reminding her of the necklace. But she must try not think of the Sky she once knew.

After making a pot of tea (one teaspoon loose Ceylon, one Assam, and one for the pot of Lady Grey, left for six

minutes exactly, then strained in time to a prayer to Mary), she sat back down in the living room with her jigsaw tray on her lap, a cat on either side of her, and continued placing the edges of each piece together. Every match she made helped calm her heart. This was what she could rely on, not anyone else, or even her own mind. The methodical, steady intersection of pieces to gain a complete picture, however long it took.

The doorbell rang. Lucy must have decided to come over after all. She was persistent, Edie gave her that. She wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of answering the door, though.

The footsteps, however, quickly spat away against the gravel, onto the pavement, and along the bin alley that nestled next to her garden. Probably a courier. Every Christmas, her boss at *The National* sent her a Fortnum's hamper, always with the same note: 'For the Nation's Best Crossword Compiler'. Very welcome it was, and if left on the doorstep it might disappear as fast as the purple chocolates in a Quality Street tin, even in this neighbourhood.

Edie dragged herself up again, taking care not to displace any pieces. Peggoty and Fezziwig followed her into the freezing hallway. The outline of a medium-sized box, resting on her doorstep, was visible through the glass.

Opening the door, she picked up the box, wrapped in printed black and white squares and blood-red ribbon. It was as light as the snow beginning to fall, and its contents shifted. The envelope tucked beneath the bow was addressed to her: *Ms Edith O'Sullivan*. Curiosity overcame

the cold and, placing the box on the porch parcel shelf, Edie opened the envelope. Pulling out a charity Christmas card with holly on the front, she read the printed message inside:

Ms O'Sullivan,

You are known for your cross words,  
but can you set your sights on a  
murderer? Four, maybe more, people will  
be dead by midnight on Christmas Eve,  
unless you can put all the pieces  
together and stop me. Make sure you do  
it properly, you never were a good  
cheater.

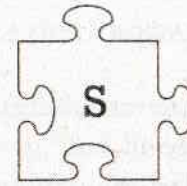
Yours,

Rest In Pieces

Edie's mind wouldn't move, but her hands shook, and her heart turned over as she ripped the paper off the present and took out a white, square box. She eased off the lid and stared down at six jigsaw pieces. Habit took over and she began placing them together, finding their matching edges. Her chest tightened as she slowly realised what she was seeing.

One piece had what seemed to be part of a handwritten sign. The other five pieces showed black and white tiles, covered in blood, and the partial chalk outline of a body. A crime scene in a box, and she was to try and solve it.

Merry bloody Christmas.



### Three

'If the sender thinks I'm going to play their stupid game, they're very much mistaken,' Edie said, when she'd drunk enough of Riga's 'Livener' cocktail to stop shaking.

Riga Novack was Edie's ninety-year-old next-door neighbour and one of the few people other than Sean, Edie's great-nephew and adopted son, that she could stand being with for any length of time. Within minutes of Riga moving in fifteen years ago, she'd come round to Edie's house, wearing vintage Chanel and carrying a tin of homemade lavender *kolaczki* biscuits. 'This is to make you like me,' Riga had said. 'But in the unlikely event that you do not appreciate biscuits, then I have booze.'

They'd been friends ever since.

Now they were in Riga's garden room. Vines and leaves covered the glass ceiling and walls, and sitting inside it gave Edie the strange sensation of being slowly digested by a carnivorous plant. More garden than room, it smelled of all the herbs Riga grew for her concoctions. She was a herbalist to some, kitchen witch to others. Best friend to Edie.

'You must be curious, though?' Riga said, handing back the box with the pieces in and taking off the gloves Edie

had made her wear to prevent contaminating the evidence. 'You are part cat, after all.'

'That's the most flattering thing you've ever said to me. No offence intended, Nicholas.' Edie looked over to Riga's favourite armchair, where Nicholas the dog was huddled on his blanket. Nicholas looked at her and sniffed. He was a very judgey pug. 'And of course I'm curious. It's a puzzle.' Edie settled back into Riga's second-best wicker chair. 'A big, shouty part of me wants to find out everything, including who sent it to me . . . I've got more questions than I've had Christmas cards this year. But this isn't like anything I've dealt with before.' She took a bite of Riga's shortbread. It was fragrant, rich and delicious. Much like Riga. 'Someone is threatening murder.'

'You always told me you could solve anything.' Riga moved with no sign of the pain that Edie knew she was in, other than the slowness with which she lowered herself into her third-best armchair.

'I meant word puzzles, not murder.'

'Are there no similarities between them?'

Edie thought for a moment. 'I suppose both have clues. And with a crime I'd start with clues that are easy to solve. Then I'd pencil in suspected answers until I could cross-reference guesses to see if they were correct.'

'Sounds like you'd make a good detective.'

'But why send the box to *me*?'

Riga read through the card again, bringing it close to her face. 'It mentions your crosswords, so it could be any one of thousands of nerds who've done your local or

national puzzles. Especially since that feature on you in *The Times* where they dubbed you the Pensioner Puzzler.'

Edie scowled. People had called her that for months after the article came out. She had always been known as a know-it-all, a brainbox, a swot. Now they had another name to call her.

'Whoever it is wants your puzzle-solving nous.'

'If they'd sent me a crossword then I'd agree. But jigsaws? Hardly anyone knows that's how I unwind.'

Riga's forehead cross-hatched in thought. 'So, it's personal, then. A grudge?' She pointed to the word 'cheater' in the message. 'I wouldn't have put you down as a cheater.'

Edie looked away. Not even Sky knew about the time Edie had been unfaithful to her. At least Edie hoped she didn't. 'Like anyone my age, I've cheated death a few times, but that's not a game any of us win. Otherwise, I don't see the point in cheating. I prefer winning fair and square.'

'Could it be a prank? Let's face it, you're not averse to pissing people off.'

'True. I said that to Sean when I left him a message.' Sean had recently been promoted to Detective Inspector in the Weymouth Constabulary. He'd know what to do. Edie kept looking at her phone to see if he had replied.

'Have you asked Lucy Pringle if she saw who delivered the package?'

'I came straight across to see you.'

Riga's eyes glinted. 'Because I'm more likely to be curtain-twitching?'