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Murder by CHRISTMAS

25 Puzzles to Solve the Crime

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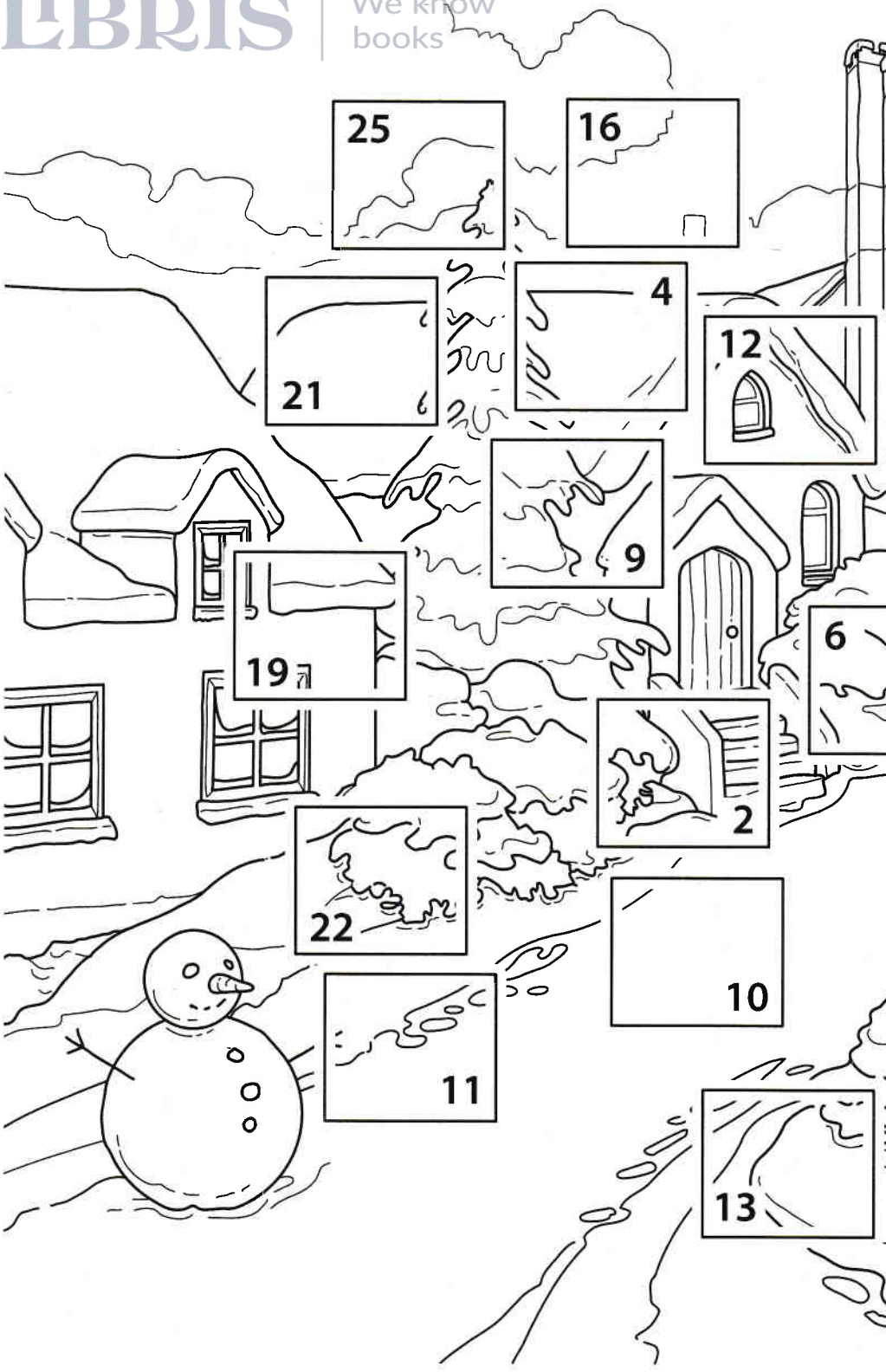
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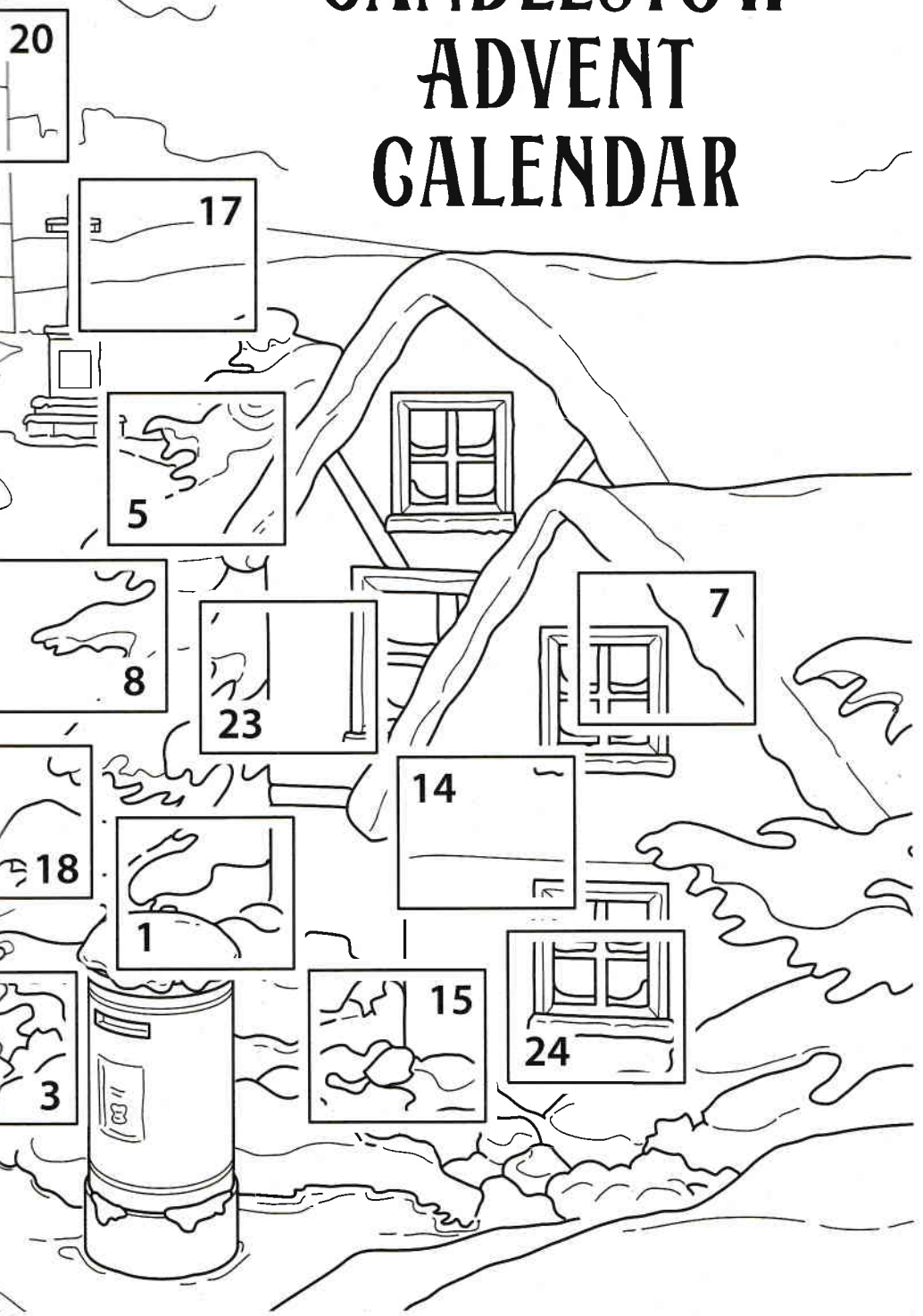
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CANDLESTOW ADVENT CALENDAR



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PROLOGUE

30th of November

Mr Holly's body lay on the paving in front of Candlestow village hall. Inspector Twelvetrees wasn't a poetic person, but he might have said he looked peaceful, if he hadn't known the man was dead.

The scene was a little tableau of tragedy. There was a ladder propped up against the front of the hall and a bevy of (currently unlit) Christmas decorations on the roof – a mix of light-up plastic snowmen, a Santa, some inflatable reindeer and strings of fairy lights. 'Blunt force trauma, couple of contusions – probably from the head injury,' said Dr Wodecki, the local pathologist, to Inspector Twelvetrees as he stood up. 'Died quickly. Best guess, couple of hours ago.'

They'd had the call from Dr Adeline Harker, a recently retired local GP who was part of the hall's management committee. It was still only just past 7 a.m., but she'd arrived early to open up the hall with an eye to getting things set up for the first rehearsal of the village's Christmas play.

Dr Wodecki said the ambulance would be a while (Candlestow was a small village tucked away in the countryside, far away from major towns) and went inside the hall to warm up. He gave a friendly nod as he passed Dr Harker, who was coming out holding a tray with mugs of tea. 'It appears he fell while fixing

one of the decorations,' said Dr Harker, with a peculiar emphasis on 'appears'.

'Did he normally do that?' Twelvetrees asked. The inspector hoped not. Mr Holly was in his eighties, and if it was anyone's idea other than his to get on the roof, the committee might be held liable.

'Not usually, no. Roy Hatt deals with them,' she replied. 'He went a bit over the top, but Mr Holly's very handy. He is … he *was* the church warden. I often told him not to do anything too taxing, but he rarely listened.'

So, a simple accident. Holly sees that one of the reindeer is looking a little flat, climbs up there to fix it, trips over a cable and falls to the ground. Except, Inspector Twelvetrees could hear a little voice in his ear. The voice that had dogged him ever since he left the academy. All he had ever wanted was an easy, peaceful life, but the voice never let him have it. And this time, the voice was joined by that of Dr Harker. 'If he fell off the roof …' she reflected, puzzled, 'why haven't any of the decorations been damaged or disturbed? Surely he would have knocked into at least one.'

That was exactly what Twelvetrees' voice had said. This was not the simple accident it seemed to be. It may well even be murder. 'Any news on next of kin?' Twelvetrees asked a nearby constable.

'None that we know of,' said Dr Harker before the constable could answer. 'He always said he felt like he belonged to the whole village, really. They're going to be distraught.'

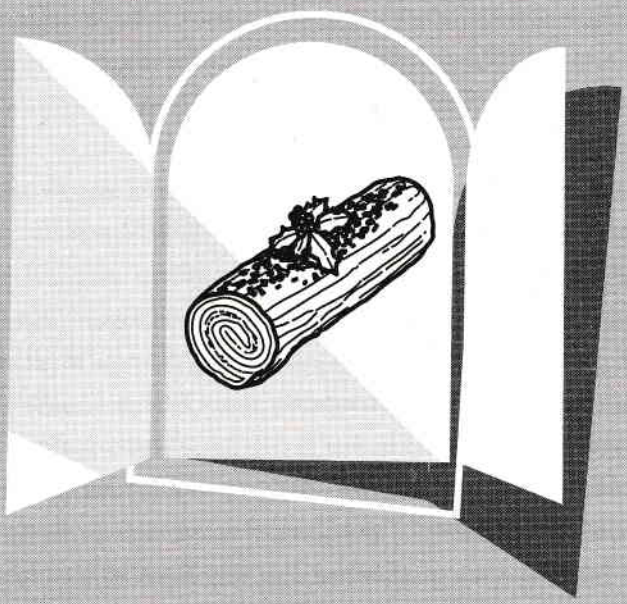
'He was well liked?' asked the inspector.

'Oh, um, yes. But I meant about the Christmas play. He was the director,' she said. The inspector considered chiding Dr Harker to remind her there were more important things to consider, but he knew how seriously these villages took their plays. Some of the villagers might even consider the ruined play the worst thing to happen to them that Christmas. Inspector Twelvetrees had no idea how wrong he would turn out to be.

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1st of December

YULE LOG





Dr Harker dreaded opening her emails this morning.

Yesterday, the village hall committee and everyone else working on the Christmas play had somehow miraculously kept their distance during all the turmoil. Meanwhile, the police removed Mr Holly's body, cordoned off the area and questioned her and any other possible witnesses. Nonetheless, as she expected, there were plenty of panicky messages today. She wished she hadn't agreed to be stage manager.

Amongst the various emails from the usual names, there was a strange one where, in place of the sender's name, there was a string of seemingly random letters and numbers. She was about to delete it when she noticed the thumbnail of the image attached. Something about it struck her as oddly familiar, so she cautiously opened it, trusting in her antivirus software.

The image was a photograph of an open door in an advent calendar. Inside it was a drawing of a yule log cake. No other details. Very odd.

Suddenly, she realized why it seemed familiar. The circular end of the yule log cake looked remarkably like the logo of the Hunnam Sisters' Wool Shop. Some kind of new promotion for Christmas, perhaps? She did need to get some colourful wool so she could make a Christmas hat to annoy her cat, Grendel – perhaps she could pop into the sisters' shop and see if they knew anything about the email.

Dr Harker arrived outside and could see Fiona, Gill and Petra busying themselves around the shop. The Hunnam sisters were perfectly cordial with customers, but since their mother had died they never seemed to speak to each other, and no one knew why. Fiona was spraying fake snow all over the windows and smiled at Dr Harker as she entered. Gill was creating a reindeer out of dozens of balls of wool. She had always been the sister who loved Christmas decorations the most. Petra, the oldest and most sensible, was manning the counter as usual and pretending not to be horrified by what her sisters were doing. She gave the doctor a friendly nod.

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After they had commiserated with each other about Mr Holly, and Dr Harker had ordered three balls of 'Coral Super Chunky' wool, the doctor got out her phone and showed Petra the picture of the advent calendar yule log. 'I got this photo in an email this morning and thought it looked familiar – is it something to do with you?' Dr Harker asked casually.

Petra's reaction was very surprising. She turned beetroot red in an instant and glared at Dr Harker with unexpected hatred. 'How dare you!' she shouted accusingly. 'Did one of them put you up to this?'

Petra gestured at her sisters to look at the picture. Nervous of what they were about to see, they came over to find out what had made Petra so uncharacteristically angry. When they saw the photo, they both turned a similar shade of crimson and looked just as upset. 'I didn't send anything!' protested Fiona, turning to glare at Gill.

'Neither did I! We agreed never to talk about it!' Gill countered, facing Fiona head-on.

Petra was eyeing her sisters suspiciously when her face dropped sadly and she said in a sullen voice: 'We agreed never to talk about anything …' A moment later, though, her fury returned with a vengeance. The three sisters began shouting at each other with increasing ferocity while Dr Harker looked on bewildered.

'Is there a problem here?' a loud, authoritative voice broke through the din to enquire. The sisters and Dr Harker all turned to see Inspector Twelvetrees standing in the doorway looking thoroughly displeased and holding a half-eaten prawn sandwich. The sisters immediately fell silent as Dr Harker showed him the image from the email.

'All I did was show them this. I wasn't expecting this reaction and for all hell to break loose.'

'Maybe I should explain,' Petra offered, a calm settling over the sisters now their argument had been interrupted. Fiona and Gill began to object but she held her hands up to quiet them.'Listen, it's time we got it out in the open,' she insisted.

Petra said it was all to do with their late mother, Enid. She had been a toxic influence in their lives, always pitting them against each other for her favour. Petra rummaged around behind the counter and pulled out an old family photo album. She started flicking through it as she spoke, pointing out the seemingly happy scenes that belied painful truths. 'If any of us succeeded in anything, Mum would be there claiming one or both of the others had done it first – or better,' explained Petra. Dr Harker knew this to be true; she had been their GP and Enid had been one of her most disagreeable patients, to put it politely.

'Christmas was the worst,' Petra continued. 'First, it was the tree – couldn't have too many or too few decorations! Then, the tinsel, what music we put on … She even rated her presents! But Christmas dinner was where the knives really came out – that was the real battlefield.' Gill and Fiona nodded sadly in agreement. 'Every year, one of us would have to make the yule log cake,' said Petra. 'We'd take it in turns. Slave over it for hours. And whichever one of us made it, you can bet it was the worst one she'd ever had!'

Gill took up the story: 'We decided we'd take matters into our own hands, and we worked out a way of figuring out which cake was really her favourite,' she said. 'Mum was getting on in years and it felt like it might be her last Christmas, so all three of us made separate yule logs – our best efforts! Then, we each cut one slice – all an end piece so they were as similar as possible – put them on three identical plates and plonked them in front of the old bat. We'd agreed that whichever one she ate first was the best.' The memory clearly stirred up old hostilities, and the sisters once more looked angrily at each other.

'Then what happened?' asked the Inspector.

'We decided to leave the room so we couldn't … influence the result,' said Petra. 'But then we heard this cry and the sound of a plate hitting the floor. We rushed in to find Mum sprawled on the carpet, her face turning blue!'

'We called the ambulance, but it was too late … She died twenty minutes later,' Fiona recalled mournfully. 'They claimed it was an embolism, but we knew it must have been the cake.' The sisters shared looks that were a mixture of guilt and accusation.

'So … which cake …?' the Inspector asked tentatively.

'That's the stupid thing,' replied Petra bitterly. 'In our rush to help Mum, we didn't pay any attention to which cake she'd eaten, and by the time we got back from the hospital, someone had cleared the table, no doubt thinking they were being helpful. We have no idea which slice she picked, so we've never been able to know which of us killed her …'

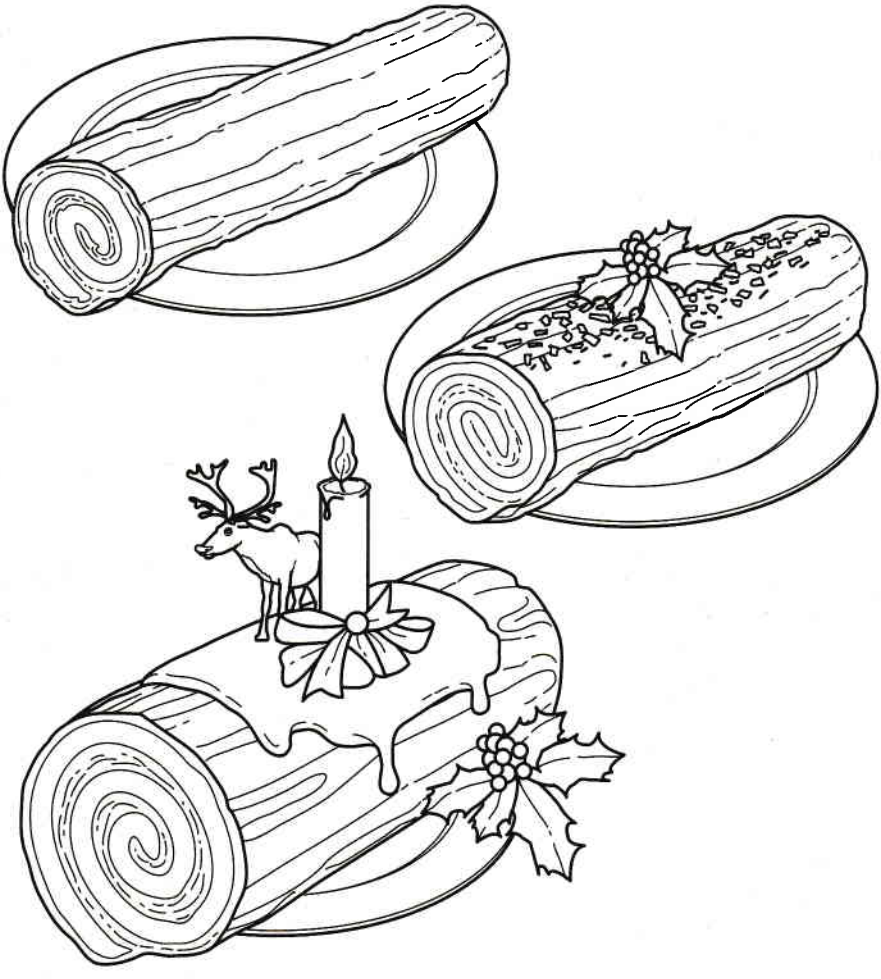
'And that's why you don't speak to each other?' asked Dr Harker, not unkindly. The sisters suddenly seemed much younger as they nodded in response. Dr Harker decided blunt honesty was the most helpful tactic in this situation. 'Listen, Enid was ninety-two. She was highly strung, smoked like a chimney, and though she always said she was dieting she couldn't resist anything with chocolate in it. Her death was caused by old age and poor health.' At these words, a shift came over the sisters and they looked like they had been released from a kind of prison. They suddenly burst into tears and drew together in a big hug, the relief evident on their faces.

The inspector looked altogether uncomfortable and leaned forward to whisper to Dr Harker. 'I, um, I'll get going. Good thing they never knew which cake she ate!'

But Dr Harker, looking at the photos and knowing what she did, could tell exactly which slice of cake Enid had eaten just before she died …

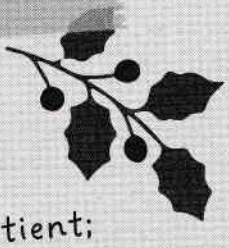
Here are the three yule log cakes that the sisters baked. Using the information that we know about them, combined with Dr Harker's notes about Enid's preferences, work out a) which cake was made by which sister and b) which cake Enid would have chosen to eat.

- Fiona – loves snow and decorations.
- Gill – isn't that keen on icing sugar but loves chocolate. She loves Christmas and quite likes decorations.
- Petra – not a fan of decorations, icing sugar or chocolate, preferring to concentrate on design.



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DR HARKER'S NOTES



Enid is a very difficult patient; she insists she only eats small portions but is clearly eating a lot of chocolate. She complained about Christmas the whole appointment, especially concerning snow and how much she hates too many decorations ...

