

THE
12
DAYS
OF
Murder

ANDREINA CORDANI

ZAFFRE

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Missing person initial report

Norfolk Constabulary

Officer dealing: PC 4591 Robert Mellow

Date of report: 26/12/2011

Call ref: 3242/11

Name of missing person: Boniface, Karl Edward

Date of birth: 26/03/1990 (age 21)

Current description: 6ft 4in (190cm) IC1. Slim build.

Left-handed. Brown eyes. Dark red/auburn hair. Fair complexion.

Clothing: Red velvet trousers with white fur edging, red velvet jacket with white fur edging, wide black belt, black boots and fake white beard (Santa Claus costume, minus hat). May appear to be wounded but blood is allegedly fake.

Medical issues: None

Car: Audi A1 Red. JJ11 XNZ. Also missing.

Full circumstances of disappearance:

At 0215 hours on 25/12/11 we were notified of a call from Alice Elektra Boniface regarding the missing person, Karl Boniface. Caller distraught, making a series of statements including 'he was meant to be the body' and 'how can you go missing from a locked room?' When she told the operator 'I stabbed him' the decision was made to attend immediately.

PC 4591 Robert Mellow attended the scene at Fenshawe Manor accompanied by PC 7752 Augustine Adeyousun. Upon arrival they discovered a group of students in 1930s costume and it became apparent

that the assembled party was using the Manor as the setting for a 'murder-mystery evening' which they had called Death of a Santa. It had, according to the assembled company, been MISPER's turn to 'be the dead body'. Miss Boniface, the MISPER's sister, had faked his stabbing in the Manor's drawing room at approximately 2100 hours then locked him inside, taking the key and hiding it. When she returned with the other players, MISPER was no longer in the room. There was no other known key, no signs that the lock had been tampered with and it was unlikely that he made his exit via the window, as the window aperture was too narrow.

The students searched for the MISPER for nearly two hours before giving up and assembling in the drawing room from which he had disappeared to await police attendance.

All the assembled party agreed that, once a murder-mystery game commenced, Mr Boniface would be completely committed to the proceedings and would be unlikely to simply leave. However, when pressed, they all admitted that he was not averse to playing pranks on his friends and that his recent behaviour had been odd and out of character. Officers conducted a thorough search of the property and MISPER was not found. His Santa Claus hat, which he had been wearing at the time of his disappearance, was discovered discarded up in his room and seized by police. His car and iPhone were gone, phone had been switched off. Thorough search of the property was conducted, witnesses interviewed.

Risk level is low. Decision to be reviewed at a later date. Subject has been listed as missing on police systems and his description has been circulated.



PART 1

INTRODUCTIONS

1



You Are Invited to a Murder.

Charley has been holding the heavy, cream-coloured invitation card for four hours now, running her fingers over the glossy, embossed calligraphy. The details: time and place of killing, dress code, RSVP. The black edges of the invitation are becoming worn away by the constant stroking of her fingertips.

The coach trip from London to Inverness lasts twelve hours when the traffic goes well, but this is Christmas Eve and it is as if everyone in the British Isles is trying to get home to their loved ones on the same section of road between Peterborough and Perth.

After three hours, Charley's book began to blur in front of her eyes, and after five hours her phone battery died in the middle of her favourite true-crime podcast. Now it's been nearly ten hours. The atmosphere on the coach has passed through restless to flat out, please-Lord-let-this-end exhaustion. Children wail a long,

grumbling litany of misery and boredom, adults shift in their seats, huffing and sighing. The sharp-elbowed manspreader sitting next to Charley tuts every time she fidgets from one numb buttock to the other. Charley stares out into the dingy light, watching the acres of traffic ahead and reminding herself yet again that this was the cheapest option. She needs to save every penny if she's going to move out of Matt's in the New Year, even if Ali does come through with the money.

When Charley had first shown the invitation to Matt, the idea of walking out on him hadn't been clear in her mind – it had just been a wisp of future intention, a thing that she might do at some point, if things got really bad. She was still telling herself that love wasn't about hearts and flowers and mutual support, it was about knowing someone's soul. They knew each other so well that Charley could always guess what he was going to say next, especially when it wasn't something she wanted to hear.

'What a load of pretentious bullshit,' he'd said, peering at the embossed heading. 'Who would give up their Christmas to play some silly game?'

'Well, I . . .' Charley had started to explain, but how could you put it into words? The marvellous creativity of it, Karl's brilliant inventiveness, the fun of shuffling off your old insecure-student identity for a few hours, or even a few days, and becoming someone different, someone glamorous or sneaky or downright murderous. When it was good, it had been so good. *Karl* had been so good. And then it had all gone wrong.

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Matt just rolled his eyes. ‘You’d have to be mad to spend time with those people. All you’ve ever done is moan about how they made you feel like crap,’ he’d said.

And he was right, of course, on one level. He always was. But while Charley couldn’t help but agree, another tiny voice inside added, ‘But *you* make me feel like crap, and I spend time with you.’

Still, the sensible part of her knows she should have ignored Ali’s invitation – torn it up, thrown it in the recycling as Matt had suggested. She has worked hard to wean herself off the sense of longing she had felt during her time in the Murder Masquerade Society, that baked-in belief that if she was that little bit funnier, that bit cleverer or quirkier, they would forget that she wasn’t like them – that her father was a hard-working cook, her house only had five rooms and that nobody had heard of the school she went to – and pull her into the fold.

But it’s not the sort of feeling you can just shrug off. It had clung to her like static electricity to nylon, shadowing her to every audition. It was a kind of hunger, but the sort that makes people pity you, rather than give you the job. That whiff of desperation was probably what had attracted Matt in the first place. He likes his girlfriends pliant and eager to please.

At first she had decided it was easier to ghost Ali. After all, it’s what most of the other Masqueraders had done to her since the group broke up. But Ali isn’t the ghostable type. A few weeks later an email had arrived, a persuasive, sweet-talking message.

I know they're not your favourite people but it's been a long time and they're all dying to see you again. And if you're still hesitating, just treat it like any other acting job!

Ali had followed that up with the offer of a tidy sum of money in advance, with another even larger sum to come to her in the New Year. The kind of money that could help her get a fresh start. By that time her vague intention of leaving Matt had hardened into something real. She had told him it was over, but was trapped, sleeping on his sofa as she tried to scrape together a deposit for her own place.

'This is what I mean, Charley,' he'd said during one of his nicer moments. 'You need me; you'll never cope on your own.' Well, maybe with a kick-start from Ali, she could.

Ali had spelled it out in her email: *don't forget, I've hooked you up with roles in the past and I've got a couple more opportunities in the pipeline already . . .*

That had been enough to convince her to set her worries aside and say yes.

All the remaining members of the Masquerade Society – well, everyone except Charley – had done amazingly well in the past dozen years. Ali was currently blazing a trail at one of the most successful advertising and PR agencies in the country. This year she is being lauded as the brains behind the tear-jerking Christmas advert that has had the whole country talking about #theboyandthetortoise. Even Charley has seen it and cried.

So the idea of having someone like Ali in her corner is hard

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to resist. If she does this right, there could be more lucrative advertising gigs in the future, which could lead to more connections, then more gigs . . .

What was it Matt had said? ‘I don’t know how to introduce you to people these days. Are you a failed actress or a successful receptionist?’

This could be the opportunity to change all that.

The coach driver speaks into his PA system, his words pulling Charley out of her trance.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for bearing with us on this difficult Christmas Eve journey. I know it’s taking a while, but why don’t we get the festivities started early with a lovely sing-song?’

Cheshire accent, thinks Charley. Not Manchester but somewhere just outside. And his voice is far too jolly for someone who’s been on a motorway for this long.

He flips a switch and the coach fills with the sound of a Christmas carol. The driver starts booming along tunelessly himself, flooding Charley with agonising embarrassment on his behalf. A few of the other adults are also visibly cringing but the driver ploughs on. In a way he reminds Charley of Karl. He could always get you to do the most ridiculous things by going all-in himself.

Some of the children are giggling, starting to join in, nudging their parents and forcing them to sing too. Some Americans near the back go for it big time, harmonising so well that they must

belong to a glee club. Slowly more and more voices pipe up. To Charley's surprise even Sharp Elbows clears his throat and belts out 'five gold rings' in a powerful bass. The coach moves forward slowly, a few car lengths, and then more and as it picks up speed the singing becomes louder as if their voices are clearing the traffic, propelling the coach forward.

'We're doing this!' shouts one child excitedly from the front. 'Sing louder!'

Now Charley joins in, exchanging a flash of a smile with Sharp Elbows as they get to eleven pipers piping and the coach lumbers up to thirty miles per hour. Charley's old singing tutor once told her she had a passable chorus voice with good strength and clarity and she allows her lungs to open up, the music swelling out of her. Passengers are grinning, laughing, breaking into the boxes of Celebrations they should have been saving for home and sharing them around. The coach hits fifty. Hope washes around the cabin and begins to soak into Charley's own thoughts. Maybe, just maybe, this trip won't be so bad. This could be a chance to rewrite the old script, forget the past and move on. Maybe they aren't angry with her anymore. Maybe she'd be able to build bridges with Pan and find some common ground with Shona. Maybe Leo would stop patronising her and Gideon would be less of a dick . . .

Now the singers have reached the dizzy heights of twelve drummers drumming. They're laughing, trying to remember all the ridiculous true-love presents in order and getting it wrong,

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when Charley sees a chain of brake lights illuminate in festive red on the road ahead. There's a flash of blue light too, growing brighter as they get nearer. The coach slows – first a little, then a lot.

'Sorry, folks, accident up ahead,' the driver calls out, trying to keep his voice cheery.

Peering out into the gloom, Charley can see that the road curves around the side of a large body of water, a loch or reservoir, and that a car has crashed through the barriers.

The singing peters out. Passengers gasp in shock. Sharp Elbows turns away and parents try to shield their children's eyes but watching is what Charley does. She looks. There's a car in the water, a dark shape lit up by the flicker of police and ambulance lights, slowly sinking. Police and paramedics swarm around, bright in their reflective jackets but hunched against the cold, sleety wind, talking into radios, rushing back and forth with equipment. Some are waist-deep in the water surrounding the car and one is leaning towards the passenger window. For a split second she can see something pressed up against the glass inside. A thin, pale hand.

Charley's breath catches. She's no longer on the overheated coach. Now she's back out there again – in the dark, the freezing water piercing her flesh and seeping into her bones. Reality falls away. She's flailing, trying to get to the surface, fighting to breathe, flooded with heart-pounding adrenalin. *This is it. I'm going to die.*



It's well past 4 p.m. when Charley finally arrives at Inverness Airport, although she's been travelling so long and it's so dark it feels like midnight. Part of her is hoping that the others will all be gone, and that then she will somehow be off the hook, but as she walks to the gate on wobbly, travel-sore legs, she catches sight of a familiar honey-blonde figure sitting in the coffee shop, fidgeting with her phone. Opposite her, Gideon, all floppy blond curls and red trousers. He is lolling across two of the cafe's chairs, his arm spreading across the chair next to him. His head is thrown back in raucous laughter.

A visceral shudder runs through her body. She remembers the things Gideon said on the night Karl went missing, of the way Pan treated her as though she didn't exist for months afterwards, ignoring her through two full terms' worth of lectures and workshops. Charley pivots on the balls of her feet and rushes into the nearby toilets, runs the taps, splashes cool water on her face.

Come on! She gives herself a long, stern look in the mirror. *You can do this. It's just a few days. Just an acting job. These people don't matter to you anymore.*

She knows this is a lie, though. Things might have felt different if she was proud of the life she had built since uni; if she had a career, a family or even a partner who loved her she'd feel far stronger right now. But she is empty-handed, adrift in the world.

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She runs the tap, splashes again. Then she senses movement behind her, looks up and glimpses something reflected in the mirror. It's a face. It's how you imagine a ghost might look, pressed up against the window of an abandoned house, or a young-but-crumbling Havisham playing games with the minds of men. Powdered-pale, veiled in black netting, eyes lined in black, a slash of deep purple at her lips. Charley yelps in shock, her heart hammering.

'Water represents the division between the living and the dead,' the creature intones. Its voice is low, dramatic and speaks in an accent Charley now knows is Edinburgh RP. 'In Russian myth, the Water of Death can revive the grievously wounded . . . But airport tap water won't do shit, love.'

'Hello, Shona.' Charley is not sure how to react. She never really had known how to deal with Shona. A lifetime of growing up with sensible people who worked, went to the pub and talked about football and *Love Island* just does not prepare you for someone like Shona, with her sharp cruelty and fervent belief in the supernatural. Charley had once joked to Karl that Shona should come with her own set of instructions, to which Karl had replied that the rules for vampires worked pretty well: Don't invite her in, don't let her smell blood.

Over the years, Charley has stalked Shona's Instagram from time to time, watching her flit from gallery to gallery, exhibiting her macabre installations made from animal bones and carcasses all over the world. Shona's look has evolved from fledgling goth

to full-on Concept Artist. Shona probably thinks she dresses to please herself, but in truth it's to shock others, to make them think of crypts and decay and other things most mainstream people don't like to talk about. Her face is heavily made-up but it's caked on in shades slightly paler than are natural for her. The effect is somewhere between geisha and haunted Victorian doll. Her pale, lilac-and-silver hair is cut in a thin, wispy style that wouldn't look out of place on a ninety-year-old but somehow looks edgy on her, and perched on top of it is a black pill-box hat with an outsized black netting veil. Around her throat she wears an ancient, moth-eaten black fur wrap, the kind that still has claws and teeth. Her pale beringed hand clutches at it dramatically.

The last time Charley saw Shona up close was the morning after that last masquerade. Charley's hair had still smelled of lake water, her throat dry from long hours calling for Karl, then talking to the police. Ali and Gideon were shouting things at her – vile, horrible things. Pan had called her a filthy little troublemaker. But Shona hadn't joined the shouting. She had made a complex gesture with her hand – some kind of curse – then turned away and walked back inside, her authentic Japanese silk kimono fluttering behind her.

'Come on,' Shona says, 'you're late.'

Shona puts a hand on her arm, but it doesn't feel comforting – more like a cold claw clamping around her, leading her out of the bathroom. Charley finds herself walking slowly towards the coffee shop where Pan and Gideon are waiting.

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As she approaches the table, Gideon's gaze locks onto her, and his expression changes.

'Good lord,' he says faintly, 'it's light-fingered Lil.'

'Gideon!' Pan gives him a shove. 'Come on, don't be like that. It was twelve years ago, move on.'

This is new. Pan can't be defending her, the idea is unthinkable. Perhaps she's just doing it to needle Gideon. You never could tell with Pan, she followed her own agenda, but she had always enjoyed toying with him – sending him away, luring him back. Karl had said it was like Ross and Rachel from *Friends* only even more irritating. 'More like will they/won't they/oh for Christ's sake just shag each other.'

Gideon looks like a kicked puppy but Pan ignores him, stands up and wraps Charley in a loose, perfume-scented cashmere hug. Charley's hands stay limp at her sides, almost scared to make a sudden movement in case Pan turns on her. When Pan pulls away she doesn't let Charley go, but holds her by the shoulders, inspecting her.

'Darling! Welcome! How *are* you? It's been *centuries*! Life has been so full-on hasn't it? It's hard to stay in touch with our roots. With the people who made us strong. I see you sometimes liking my Instagram posts and I keep meaning to message but . . .'

Pan's grip on Charley's shoulders is loose, but Charley still feels trapped, fighting the urge to pull away.

This is probably the most Pan has ever spoken to her directly. When Charley first joined the Murder Masquerade Society,

everyone else had been welcoming, if a little bemused by her. But Pan had ignored her completely, apart from the occasional patronising pronouncement about The Little People or The Working Classes. As part of a wealthy Greek shipping family, she had presumably been sheltered from the likes of Charley for most of her life. And then, after the missing necklace affair, the only words she'd had were vicious accusations.

'You have been busy, though,' Charley finds herself replying. 'How many followers is it now?'

'One point nine million wonderful Pan's People,' she says, in that practised way influencers have of bragging while sounding grateful. 'I should crack two by the spring, provided the algorithm doesn't change again.'

'We give our souls to that algorithm,' Shona says mournfully. 'Once our lives were controlled by lords and kings, now it's code.'

Even though there's a spare seat next to Pan, Shona moves around to where Gideon is sitting and chooses the seat he's leaning on, pulling it out from under his arm so he's knocked off-balance. Gideon looks aggrieved but says nothing.

Nobody has asked Charley to sit down but she slides awkwardly into the chair next to Pan, still not wanting to be too close to her. She feels awkward sitting there without a drink, but coffee is expensive.

'Where are the others? I thought I'd be the last one to get here.'

'Well, you *are* rather late, hon,' Pan says. 'What plane did you fly in on?'

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Charley looks away, mutters something. She doesn't want to talk about the coach, about how poor she really is. Luckily, Pan isn't expecting an answer.

'You're lucky we're still here. Ali hasn't shown up yet so we're all waiting for her. Sam and his little girlfriend are off persuading the driver to hang on until the next flight comes in and Leo is looking for her in case she's already here and we've missed her somehow.'

'Didn't they come up together?'

Leo and Ali got married at the beginning of the year. Charley had flicked through the wedding photos they'd posted online with a growing sense of shock. Why get married at Fenshawe Manor, a place with so many bad memories?

Gideon shrugs. 'Leo got the sleeper up to Edinburgh yesterday for a story, but Ali had to work until lunchtime, she was planning to catch the two o'clock flight, but she wasn't on that, and she's not answering her phone.'

The Masqueraders' eyes slide away from Charley in the same way that they did before. As if she's not important, a background character. At university, Charley had joined the Murder Masquerade Society in Fresher's Week on a whim, just because she loved dressing up and it was definitely more fun than the university's earnest, politically charged drama group. It had been like stepping into another world of smart, witty people who thought play was just as natural for grown-ups as it was for kids. She'd soon discovered that most of the core

members were already connected somehow, in the way posh people often are: Karl and Leo had been at school together, Leo and Sam were distantly related and Sam and Shona had been friends since childhood. So even after the society fell apart, they had all obviously kept in touch – just not with her. A pang of sadness pulls at her: if Karl was still around this would be the point when he'd nudge her and mutter a snide comment about one of them which would have her fighting not to laugh. But Karl, of course, was long gone.

Instead, Pan and Gideon are engaged in a competition to see who can subtly brag about their massive success without looking like they're consciously doing it.

Pan has a big sponsorship gig with a luxury bag brand.

Gideon brokered a multi-billion-pound deal with a pharmaceutical company.

Pan is so famous she had a stalker for a while, isn't that crazy?

Gideon is engaged to an Olympic-medal-winning Austrian skier.

Pan dated a Hollywood producer for a while.

And weren't they both in St Moritz at the same time last year?

Yes, yes they were. Wasn't that Ice Palace Ball the most overrated event ever? And wasn't Bono's behaviour on the dance floor completely full-on cringe?

Charley hasn't bothered to cyber-stalk Gideon since they left university. She had no curiosity about him, knew that he'd slide straight into a well-paid City job with his father's firm, something

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to do with investment in pharmaceuticals. She doesn't need to look at his social media to know that his job probably involves lots of time spent with clients on golf courses and in gentlemen's clubs and probably not much time actually crunching numbers or looking at spreadsheets. He'd always been impatient when it came to detail, forgetting plot points and constantly dropping out of character during masquerades.

Charley is sure Matt would have been impressed by Gideon's swagger, although he would have pretended not to be. She gives herself a mental slap. Thinking about Matt is definitely not allowed on this trip. She puts it in the box in her head along with all the other banned things that she's not allowed to dwell on. Karl's smile on that last night. The feeling of his fingers brushing her cheek. The chill grass under their bare feet as they raced across the park together . . . that cold, cold water . . .

'There it is again,' Shona says darkly. 'I could always see it there, that look of death upon your face.'

'I'm fine,' Charley gives her a reassuring smile. 'Just—'

'Someone walked over your grave?' Shona suggests eagerly.

'Something like that.'

Pan's phone rings – a grating, funky ringtone. She looks at it, her Botoxed brow trying to furrow. It's as if she's never heard it do this before.

'I think I have to get this,' she says, standing up and moving away, her eyes clouded with distraction.

'It's probably the click farm wanting its bill paid,' Shona says.

Then she looks up at something beyond Pan and waves. 'Hey, Sam, over here!'

Charley hasn't seen Sam in goodness-knows-how-long. He's dark-haired, and still good-looking in a tired, rumpled way, wearing the kind of check shirt you forget as soon as you've seen it. He's holding hands with a shy-looking woman in a Santa Claus jumper who is almost hiding behind him.

'Charley, hello,' Sam says. His tone is blandly friendly and Charley reacts cautiously. Apart from Karl, Sam was the only one who had spoken up for her at the height of the accusations and seemed the most down-to-earth of the lot of them. But his sense of humour sometimes had a cruel edge. He'd set you up, make you feel comfortable and then skewer you with a perfectly placed one-liner. Right now, though, he does at least look sincere as he gives her a brief arm-dangle of a hug and a cheek kiss. 'You seem well. I hear you're still acting, good for you.'

He is the first person to talk about her life rather than brag about his own. A point for him, then.

'What have you been in?' Gideon asks her. 'Anything I've seen?'

'Oh, Gideon, you should *never* ask an actor that,' Sam says but then makes it worse by adding, 'What about *Holby City*? *Everyone's* been in *Holby City*, haven't they?'

'N-no, not yet,' says Charley. 'Just ads, mainly. I'm thinking of taking some extra classes, I need to get a new headshot done too.' She is aware that her voice sounds weak, that Gideon's face has distorted into a sneer.

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‘Adverts? That’s not real acting.’

‘Don’t sell your artistic integrity, Charley,’ Shona adds. ‘Hold out for proper roles.’

Charley’s face goes hot. She has mixed feelings about her commercial work, about pushing products that aren’t what they’re cracked up to be. But ads pay, and she’s not in a position to turn them down. Squirming, she tries to shift the focus away from herself.

‘And this is . . .?’ She indicates the woman waiting patiently at Sam’s side.

‘My girlfriend Audrey,’ Sam says.

Charley manages a friendly hi, shakes her hand. Audrey’s skin is dry and there are no rings on her fingers, no gel or varnish on her bitten fingernails and her grip is firm, practical. She’s about the same age as the rest of them, maybe a little older and is pretty but looks as though she could do with a good night’s sleep. Charley feels giddy with relief to see someone new, someone who wasn’t part of the Murder Masquerade Society twelve years ago. Someone who doesn’t know about Karl, Ali, and necklace-gate. An oasis of sanity, she hopes.

‘Didn’t Ali say no partners?’ Gideon asks, turning his hostility onto Sam.

Sam looks indifferent. ‘I know Ali’s our host and all, but I work a fifty-six-hour week in the hospital and getting leave at this time of year is like some kind of Christmas miracle – I’m usually expected to work right through. So, if Ali thinks

I'm going to leave my girlfriend at home by herself to go and play some silly murder game, she must be even crazier than she was back at uni.'

'Of course,' Gideon replies, lolling back in his chair. 'I forgot you were a national treasure. I clapped for you every Thursday, you know. Not for the whole NHS, but for you personally, because you're such a hero.'

'I'm sure you did. How much is it you earn an hour? Enough for a new dialysis machine, or just enough to pay a nurse's salary for a month?' Sam's voice is calm, but there's steel in it. Gideon freezes. He's run out of clever comebacks, so he just stares at Sam. Sam stares back, unbowed.

Charley squirms. Audrey's face is etched with shock.

'Oh, I've missed this,' Shona says, beaming. 'Come on, Gideon, get on and punch him. At least he'll know how to fix himself up afterwards.'

And then Charley remembers that the day-to-day banter of the Masquerade Society had always been like this. They threw deadly insults at each other the way other people threw screwed-up balls of paper and minutes later they'd be drinking coffee, laughing and ganging up on the next victim.

'Oh, will you look at poor wee Audrey's face,' Shona says, laughing. 'Are you sure you did the right thing bringing her, Sammy? I don't think my Kip would survive five minutes with you lot.'

Charley's insta-stalking has offered up a few glimpses of Kip,

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a slender and self-effacing genderfluid person who hovers at the edges of Shona's bombastic online life, but she doesn't buy the idea of Shona being protective. Shona would have loved throwing Kip into the mix and watching her poor partner squirm. There has to be another reason why she's come solo.

'Actually, I was quite relieved when I got the invitation to spend Christmas with you lot,' Gideon says. 'It saved me from four days with my fiancée's parents nagging me to set a wedding date.' As he speaks, though, his eyes flicker over to where Pan is pacing, phone jammed between her ear and her shoulder.

She hangs up and returns, sliding into her old seat, her slender fingers, covered in thin, bejewelled stacking-rings, fidgeting restlessly with her phone. Her eyes are unfocused, miles away.

'Welcome back, Pandora love,' Shona says. 'Sam and Gideon were about to have a manly fight, weren't you, boys? Oh, now here's Leo with some news, hopefully.'

She looks up as a gentleman in a dog-tooth jacket and tucked-in blue shirt and tie pulls up a chair. Leo has a few more furrows in his brow these days but his essential Leo-ness hasn't changed over the last decade. Charley once saw a tweet calling him 'the Left's answer to Jacob Rees-Mogg' and not without good reason. Back at university, while everyone else was lolling around in hoodies from Jack Wills or (in Charley's case) Primark, Leo had worn jackets with elbow patches, a shirt and tie and, on one memorable occasion, he'd shown up at the student bar's Oktoberfest in a cravat.

Recently he's made an effort to tone things down, possibly at the behest of the Party, but he still can't quite do casual and bears himself with a retro, toff-ish air which makes him look like he's wandered off the set of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. His hair is the colour of weak tea, his chin still weaker. Leo would have benefited from growing a beard, but men of his class and political aspirations don't do facial hair. He might have got away with it in his day job running the *Financial Herald* news-desk, but not as the prospective parliamentary candidate for Old Bexley and Sidcup.

'I can't get hold of her,' he says. 'Bloody Ali, I just knew she was up to something when she said she wanted to travel up separately, and . . .'

He catches sight of Charley. 'Oh, *you're* here. Ali didn't mention you.'

'Light-fingered Lil,' Gideon says again with a knowing nod. Charley feels her face burning with humiliation.

'Oh, shut up you inbred idiot,' Pan snaps and Gideon's smug expression crumbles. For the first time in her life, Charley feels a flash of liking for Pan. Then she realises there was a catch in Pan's voice as she spoke and that her eyes are glistening with the beginnings of tears.

'Everything OK, Pan?'

A flash of irritation crosses her face. 'Yes, Charley, I'm fine. It's just a been a stressful week.' She produces a folded tissue from her handbag and dabs her eyes crossly but carefully. Very little eye makeup comes away. She gives a faux-happy sigh. 'Christmas in the country will be the perfect anecdote.'

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‘Antidote,’ Leo corrects happily. Noticing errors of language and pointing them out is one of his favourite hobbies. Other pastimes include reading Golden Age murder mysteries, dining out and tweeting virtue-signalling threads about social inequality from his spacious Georgian town house in Highgate.

Despite Leo’s grumbles, nobody seems to mind waiting for Ali; in fact, more coffees are bought (nobody offers one to Charley) and then Shona produces a hip flask and offers to make them all Irish.

The showing-off resumes. Shona talks to Gideon about her last exhibition, at a major gallery *not* owned by her parents for a change, and thanks him for helping sort out the sponsorship. Pan launches into a gushing story about the exhibition’s opening night and it becomes clear to Charley that the rest of the Masqueraders have been boosting each other’s careers.

‘We keep an eye out for each other is all,’ Shona says. ‘Like the Freemasons but cooler.’

‘It’s always about who you know, Charley,’ Leo says, lifting his coffee cup in a toast. It’s true: Leo’s columnist father had landed him a job on the news desk on the *Herald* and his North London political pals got him onto his party’s candidate shortlist.

Gideon ‘clinks’ his cardboard cup with Leo’s and smirks. ‘We’ve done all right for ourselves.’ It’s been an easy road for him, too, under the protection of his father, the formidable Sir Nathaniel St John.

‘I get by,’ Shona adds, although the fact her parents own a string of galleries couldn’t have done any harm to her artistic career.

‘Can’t complain,’ Pan agrees. Her launch into the social media world had been supercharged by her heiress status and her access to the glamorous life of the super-rich.

In fact, all of them had received a leg-up thanks to their connections. Charley has no doubt that Sam’s family money bolstered his NHS junior doctor’s pay and Ali had got her first job at the ad agency after a year-long internship that no normal person would have been able to afford.

‘But you all do such different things,’ Audrey says. ‘How do you end up helping each other out?’

‘Oh, Leo’s often placed – and buried – a few stories for me over the years,’ Gideon says, smiling. ‘And I’ve definitely sent some business Ali’s way.’

‘That’s the whole point of being an influencer,’ Pan adds. ‘Knowing people with influence! Thanks for that write-up by the way, Leo. What was it your paper called me? The queen of medical aesthetics? Brands were lining up to work with me after that.’

‘And then I gained a fair few followers after you tagged me,’ Leo gushes back.

‘More *real* followers means more votes.’ Pan’s megawatt smile glints.

Charley catches Audrey’s eye and they exchange a slightly appalled look. No doubt she is wondering what she’s got herself into.

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‘So,’ Pan changes the subject, turning to Leo with faux brightness, ‘what made Ali revive the murder games after all this time? What does she have planned for us all?’

Leo laughs. A short, cynical bark. ‘Don’t look at me for information, I’m just the husband. She started talking about getting the old gang back together after the wedding at Fenshawe. I think it’s . . . *closure* for her.’ The word sounds strange coming from Leo, too American, too therapy-speak, and he looks painfully conscious of it. ‘Anyway, it’s usual Murder Masquerade Society rules but played out over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, with two days after to relax. Our roles will be waiting for us at . . . what’s the place called again . . . Snellbronach?’

Shona looks thoughtful. ‘Snell . . . bronach . . . It’s a portmanteau word, made up by some cultural ignoramus, but it kind of fits. Snell is either Scots or Doric, meaning cold, but not just ordinary cold: biting, bone-chilling cold. Bronach is the Gaelic word for mourning. So Cold Mourning. Sounds like the perfect place for a murder.’

A couple of beats pass while the company takes in this fact, wonders whether that’s why Ali chose the place. Then they look at each other, eyes sparkling. Despite herself Charley feels a shiver of anticipation. A new mystery lies ahead, a new role to lose herself in, a new puzzle to solve. Because they weren’t just any old murder-mystery society. They didn’t just do *parties*. They weren’t sitting around playing Cluedo with costumes. They went all out. That was one thing they all had in common:

a joy and relish in playing games, solving riddles, being someone else for a few hours. That decadent joy was missing from the day-to-day grind of Charley's life.

'It's going to be fun, isn't it?' Shona says.

Gideon grins, Leo fidgets in his chair, even Pan puts down her phone for a moment.

'It's fitting, isn't it?' she says. 'It's what Karl would have wanted.'

The mention of Karl's name sends a charge through the air, a ripple of electricity as potent as if Karl himself had wandered into the café. Everyone falls silent. Charley feels sure that each one of them is remembering the man who brought them together. Flamboyant, egotistical, fascinating, infuriating Karl.

Charley had looked for Karl, even when she was sure all the others had stopped. She looked for him in the sensible places, like missing persons groups online, and the ludicrous ones too, like in the background of films, at acting gigs for historical re-enactment societies. It wasn't unknown for her to chase someone down the street after seeing a flash of red hair. In the months after he disappeared, she had a constant feeling that she was being followed, being watched. At first she had found the experience almost comforting, believing it was Karl checking up on her, hoping he would make himself known and explain everything. But as time passed, that sweet hope had curdled.

Karl wasn't coming back. Ali had been right in what she'd said all those years ago. People like Karl don't just vanish. Karl had

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never done anything quietly his whole life. Sneaking off into the night without a word? Living discreetly in some obscure corner of the world? That wasn't his style.

But then the alternative was too terrifying, too desperately sad, to contemplate.

No. Karl couldn't be dead. Someone at this table knew where he'd gone, and why.