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Fool Me Twice: Two Twisty Mysteries

Don't Hang Up (audio only)

EVERYONE THIS CHRISTMAS HAS A SECRET

BENJAMIN STEVENSON



PENGUIN BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

There are quite a few differences between an Australian Christmas and the stereotypical Northern Hemisphere fare seen in most books and movies. For one thing, we don't get snow down under. What we do get, in my specific experience, is more murders.

But before the killing starts (or the recounting of the killings, to be more precise), allow me to introduce myself. My name's Ernest Cunningham. You can call me Ern, or Ernie. I used to be a fan of reading Golden Age murder mysteries, until I found myself with a haphazard career getting stuck in the middle of real-life ones. I'm not a private investigator. I just happen to have a knack for understanding how mysteries tick, provided they follow the rules set out by the classics, of course.

Which brings us here. After having solved two relatively high-profile cases – one, the murders committed by an imaginatively gruesome serial killer named the Black Tongue, and the second, the public murder of a celebrity – I know exactly where I'm at in my literary canon. So too, it seems, does

whichever literary god had the foresight to drop a corpse at my feet at Christmas time.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It's an honour, in a way, to be part of the esteemed pantheon of the 'Christmas Special'. A time-honoured tradition in which favourite characters don Santa hats, and mistletoe is alluringly hung.

If murder mysteries have rules, so too do Holiday Specials, which the universe has kindly obliged here. You'll find ahead Santa-fied clues aplenty, and don't rule out characters having to dress up in silly costumes for some tangentially related plot reason, which I will satisfy in a minor turn as Rudolph. And of course, by the end of these things, the detective has to learn the true meaning of the word Christmas. So we'll get there too.

I'll remind the cynics out there that the favourites aren't immune to a little yuletide cash grab. Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle both caved to the whims of the popular desire for holiday murders, though Sherlock Holmes only picks up his single festive case on 27 December. I'm writing this all out late on Christmas Day, the rest of my family shipwrecked on couches and beside the pool, glasses of iced white wine sweating beside them, between lunch, dinner or third serves of pudding. On Christmas Day, every meal is the same meal. My point is, I've solved my crimes by the time Sherlock takes his on. Not that it's a competition.

Tinsel-draped as the corpses may be, this is still a fair-play mystery. You'll find no hidden clues or unreliable narrators here. My job is to relay to you everything you need to reach the same 'lightbulb moment' as I did. A lightbulb moment is,

of course, par for the course in these books. In a fair-play mystery, we get to the illumination together.

With all that in mind, this whole thing's best treated as an advent calendar. Twenty-four chapters hold twenty-four clues and various bits and bobs that help me with the case. Well, twenty-three clues and a killer, because the best chocolate's always behind door number twenty-four. If you start on 1 December and take a chapter a day, you'll have it all solved by Christmas Eve, but it's not like I'm going to supervise. Many people like to eat all the chocolates at once.

I'm aware of the irony that this book may be wrapped under a tree at some point. So let's start there. Presents. Seven of them, to be precise, piled under a moulting pine. Boxes, spheres, prisms. One is wrapped in newspaper and trussed in twine, one is a big, shiny blue box, and one is so haphazardly sticky-taped it looks like it's been mummified.

I mention the presents to start us off because it serves as quite a handy who's who around the murders in the pages ahead. And the murders this time around might be festive, but they are no less complex than usual: a murder committed without laying a hand; a victim decapitated by a piece of paper; and a suspect, covered in blood, with no memory of how it got on them.

Six suspects. Seven gifts.

Let's open them.

CHAPTER 1

‘I didn’t know he’d book a magician!’

It’s saying something, given my recent experiences include the skinning of my right hand and being stabbed in both the stomach and the shoulder, that suggesting my well-meaning but dim-witted uncle Andy had booked my wedding entertainment might be the thing that led to my demise. Thankfully, a Bluetooth connection and the fact I was driving one hundred kilometres an hour *away* from my fiancée Juliette were keeping me physically safe.

‘I know he means well.’ Juliette sighed, which made the car’s speakers crackle. This is another thing about Holiday Specials: sometimes the makers can’t afford the whole cast, so several main characters are reduced to voice or pictorial cameos. It doesn’t usually apply to books, but here we are. ‘And I want him to be involved. But couldn’t you have given him something a little less crucial than the entertainment? Marcelo’s not cooking the wedding cake.’

Marcelo is my stepfather, and cooks about as well as Andy chooses wedding bands.

'I thought he'd book a band,' I defended. 'Hell, *Rylan Blaze*. With a name like that I thought he *had* booked a band.' Rylan Blaze was well-known enough that Juliette might have caught me out there, had her knowledge of magicians not stopped at Houdini. 'I only found out this morning.'

'At which point in our relationship did you think I would enjoy a band called *Rylan Blaze* at my wedding?'

'Our wedding,' I corrected.

'Not if there's a magician.'

'That'd be the trick then, wouldn't it? The Disappearing Bride.' An hour and a half out of Sydney and the road had turned from a freeway to a set of hairpins, climbing up to the mountains at an angle that pushed me back against the headrest like an astronaut at take-off. 'What if I let you saw Andy in half?'

I could almost hear her eyes narrow and her nose crinkle in the way they did when she was still trying to pretend to be mad at me. 'Acceptable,' she said. 'Where are you driving, anyway? Reception's terrible.'

'I just had to make a quick trip.'

'Ernest,' she said, and it was all over. I am cellophane around Juliette; she sees right through me. I have no idea how people have affairs.

'I promised I'd go watch,' I blurted out. 'This Blaze bloke. In the mountains.'

'The *mountains*? Which mountains?'

'Blue Mountains. He's doing a Christmas show out near Katoomba.' I was up the climb now. The area was a World

Heritage-listed national park, and actually a plateau rather than a mountain range; everything around me had eroded into valleys, waterfalls and forests. The eponymous *blue* came from haze that seemed to condense above the treetops, a result of droplets of eucalyptus oil hanging in the air and refracting the light just so. The most famous spot was the Three Sisters – three gigantic rock pillars that stand watching over the valley. People say these pillars have distinct personalities depending on the time of day: from bright happiness to shadowy glowering. If one were to believe they were women personified, perhaps dusk – when the rocky features were overcast and dour – was when they'd been notified of a magic act at their wedding.

'I know it's dumb,' I continued. This part of my alibi would hold up if she glimpsed our bank accounts: I had booked a seat at the show. I turned on the hard sell. 'This is my end of the bargain: I watch the show, give it a chance, and *then* tell him it's not for us. Besides, poor guy said he paid a – and I quote – *monstrous* deposit, and I promised I'd try to get it back.'

'Whoa,' she whistled.

'What?'

'I just looked him up. How much was your ticket? How would we afford . . . Does this guy even *do* weddings?'

'I didn't realise he was that big a deal,' I squeaked out. My neck was sweating. 'Andy knows a guy.'

'Riiight,' Juliette said, stretching the word in a way that meant she was about to agree but still deciding how annoyed

she was. 'You staying the night? Seems an excessive errand for December twenty-first.'

'Show's at half-past eight. Hour, hour and a half tops. I'll skip out at interval if it drags.'

The sun was late afternoon lava, a mandarin in the sky. The mountains were a wildflower haven. December's heat had just about done away with the cherry blossoms and purple fists of jacaranda trees, but I still had to turn my wind-screen wipers on to scrape away swirls of pink, white and purple petals. The mist in the air was living up to its blue trademark. A glass-floored cable car winched its way over a valley, 270 metres high. I'd love to tell you I don't have to perilously hang off it at any stage, but such is my lot in life.

'Erin lives up there, right?' Juliette said, offhand.

The literary detective's pact of honesty is with the reader, not, unfortunately, with other characters in the story. Take, for example, fiancées. Erin is my ex-wife, and the real reason I'm headed to the mountains.

'Does she?' I overacted like I was entering a surprise party I already knew about. Erin's text message, that morning, flashed in my mind. *I need you*. I'd ignored it and the following voicemail for a few hours. But curiosity condemns both felines and Cunninghams. I was packing an overnight bag before the desperate, whispered recording had even finished.

'We could have hand-delivered her wedding invite, then.' Juliette interrupted my memory. 'Damn.'

Yes, I'm cruel to sully Andy's good name as a cover for my trip. But Andy, a former horticulturist and now part-time

detective hobbyist, has interests in the following order: lawnmowers, trains, amateur magic, and improv theatresports. Which means he is difficult to sully any further than he sullies himself. Given Andy's involvement was as convincing an alibi as I could muster for purchasing a ticket to Rylan Blaze's magic show, I didn't feel too torn up about it.

'We can spring for a stamp. Besides, it's Christmas week. Erin's probably too busy to meet up,' I said, rolling into the car park of the place where we would do exactly that.

Juliette and I said goodbye as I switched off the engine. The heat was baking, the tar binding the bitumen gooey, and the humidity was like Jupiter's gravity, the oppressive type that bears on you heavy enough to shorten you an inch. We were in the middle of a conversation-stopper of a heatwave, by which I mean that any chat in an Australian summer is merely a pin pulled on the hand grenade of someone saying 'Hot out, isn't it?'

Half the car park was in a kaleidoscopic wildflower carpet, ground to paint as I walked over it. I hunched over a little as I hurried across the yard just in case I was spotted. After solving two murder sprees I was now, much to my annoyance, a minor celebrity, and while this place was not somewhere anyone would want to be seen heading into, if someone caught a photo of me here, I knew there'd be some kind of story. A place like this, with an ex-wife sitting behind a locked door waiting for you, is not a place to be papped. The last thing I needed was another tabloid article by Josh Felman, chronicler of reality star divorces and, recently, my

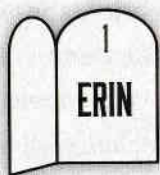
investigations. I suppose he's my Watson. That is, if Watson was out to discredit Holmes, and wasn't a particularly great speller.

The waiting room was dispiritingly busy. Small town methamphetamine crisis represented in the clientele. The chairs were cheap, hard plastic and I stood in line instead of taking one. A sad spindly Christmas tree leaned in the corner, made impressive by the fact that it seemed to have wilted despite being made of plastic. Limp tinsel couldn't bring itself to sparkle under fluorescent ceiling lights. This was an odd place to try and inject Christmas cheer into: no one was coming in here with their families.

'Erin Cunningham,' I said when I reached the front, accidentally giving my surname instead of Erin's since-reclaimed one. 'Er, Gillford. Sorry.'

The lady flicked through sheets of bookings. She seemed to have trouble finding Erin. 'Help me out,' she said. 'We have a couple of wings.'

'I expect she'll be in a holding cell,' I said. 'She's just been charged with murder.'



CHAPTER 2

Katoomba police station either had a very comprehensive or a very lax understanding of the law, given how quickly they put me in a room with an accused murderer. I was slightly disappointed: I'd expected obstruction and had prepared a treatise on how someone in custody may invite a lawyer or a friend to consult, but there was no call for my recent education at Google University.

It wasn't quite an interview room nor quite a jail cell: alongside an aluminium chair was a wire-framed bed with a tortilla-thin mattress and a blanket so threadbare it would classify as indecent were you to wear it. The door was just a regular door, painted a horrid bile-green, not a set of bars. Erin wasn't cuffed, she was sitting on the bed.

Her hands still had blood on them.

Don't get the wrong idea: she didn't need a napkin. Her hands weren't dripping with it. But her palms showed incriminating dull pink skin and brownish black under uncleaned fingernails. Her eyes were red-rimmed too. At first I thought this was anguished rawness, but a closer examination