

CHAPTER 1

So I'm writing again. Which is good news, I suppose, for those wanting a second book, but more unfortunate for the people who had to die so I could write it.

I'm starting this from my cabin on the train, as I want to get a few things down before I forget or exaggerate them. We're parked, not at a station but just sitting on the tracks about an hour from Adelaide. The long red desert of the last four days has been replaced first by the golden wheat belt and then by the lush green paddocks of dairy farms, the previously flat horizon now a rolling grass ocean peppered with the slow, steady turn of dozens of wind turbines. We should have been in Adelaide by now, but we've had to stop so the authorities can clean up the bodies. I say clean up, but I think the delay is mainly that they're having trouble finding them. Or at least all the pieces.

So here I am with a head start on my writing.

My publisher tells me sequels are tricky. There are certain rules to follow, like doling out backstory for both those who've read me before and those who've never heard of me. I'm told you don't want to bore the returnees, but you don't want to leave anything out that

might confuse the newbies. I'm not sure which one you are, so let's start with this:

My name's Ernest Cunningham, and I've done this before. Written a book, that is. But, also, solved a series of murders.

At the time, it came quite naturally. The writing, not the deaths, of which the causes were the opposite of *natural*, of course. Of the survivors, I thought myself the most qualified to tell the story, as I had something that could generously be called a 'career' in writing already. I used to write books about how to write books: the rules for writing mystery books, to be precise. And they were more pamphlets than books, if you insist on honesty. Self-published, a-buck-a-piece online. It's not every writer's dream, but it was a living. Then when everything happened last year up in the snow and the media came knocking, I thought I might as well apply some of what I knew and have a crack at writing it all down. I had help, of course, in the guiding principles of Golden Age murder mysteries set out by writers like Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle and, in particular, a bloke named Ronald Knox, who wrote out the 'Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction'. Knox isn't the only one with a set of rules: various writers over the years have had a crack at breaking down a murder mystery into a schematic. Even Henry McTavish had a set.

If you think you don't already know the rules to writing a murder mystery, trust me, you do. It's all intuitive. Let me give you an example. I'm writing this in first person. That means, in order to have sat down and physically written about it, I survive the events of the book. First person equals survival. Apologies in advance for the lack of suspense when I almost bite the dust in Chapter 28.

The rules are simple: nothing supernatural; no surprise identical twins; the killer must be introduced early on (in fact, I've already done that and we're not even through the first chapter yet, though I expect you may have skipped the prelims) and be a major enough

character to impact the plot. That last one's important. Gone are the days when the butler dunnit: in order to play fair, the killer must have a name, often used. To prove the point, I'll tell you that I use the killer's name, in all its forms, exactly 106 times from here. And, most importantly, the essence of every rule boils down to this: *absolutely* no concealing obvious truths from the reader.

That's why I'm talking to you like this. I am, you may have realised, a bit chattier than your usual detective in these books. That's because I'm not going to hide anything from you. This is a fair-play mystery, after all.

And so I promise to be that rarity in modern crime novels: a reliable narrator. You can count on me for the truth at every turn. No hoodwinking. I also promise to say the dreaded sentence 'it was all a dream' only once, and even then I believe it's permissible in context.

Alas, no writers cared to jot down any rules specifically for sequels (Conan Doyle famously delighted in killing off Sherlock Holmes, begrudgingly bringing him back just for the money), so I'm going it alone here. The only help I have is my publisher, whose advice seems to come via the marketing department.

Her first piece of advice was to avoid repetition. That makes good sense – nobody wants to read the same old plots rehashed again and again. But her second piece of advice was to not deliver a book completely unlike the first, as readers will expect more of the same. Just to reiterate: I don't have any control over the events of the book. I'm just writing down what happened, so those are two difficult rules to follow. I will point out that one inadvertent mimicry is the curious coincidence that both cases are solved by a piece of punctuation. Last year it was a full stop. This time, a comma saves the day.

And what sort of mystery book would this be if we didn't have at least one anagram, code or puzzle? So that's in here as well.

My publisher also warned me to work in enough tantalising references to the previous book that readers will want to buy that one also, but not to spoil the ending. She calls that ‘natural marketing’. Sequels, it seems, are about doing two things at once: to be new and familiar at the same time.

I’m already breaking those rules I mentioned. Golden Age mystery novelist S.S. Van Dine recommends there only be one crime solver. This time, there are five wannabe detectives. But I guess that’s what happens when you put six crime writers in a room. I say six writers and five detectives, because one’s the murder victim. It’s not the one wearing the blue scarf; that’s the other one.

I’d say Van Dine would be rolling in his grave, though that would break one of the general rules about the supernatural. So he’d be lying very still, but disappointed all the same.

If I may repeat myself, it’s not up to me which rules I break when I’m simply cataloguing what happened. How I managed to stumble into another labyrinthine mystery is anyone’s guess, and the same people who accused me of profiteering from a serial killer picking off my extended family one by one in the last book (natural marketing, see?) will likely accuse me of the same here. I wish it hadn’t happened, not now, and not back then.

Besides, everyone hates sequels: they are so often accused of being a pale imitation of what’s come before. Being that the last murders happened on a snowy mountain and these ones happened in a desert, the joke’s on the naysayers: a pale imitation this won’t be, because at least I’ve got a tan.

Time to shore up my bona fides as a reliable narrator. The rap sheet for the crimes committed in this book amounts to murder, attempted murder, rape, stealing, trespassing, evidence tampering, conspiracy, blackmail, smoking on public transport, headbutting (I guess the technical term is assault), burglary (yes, this is different to stealing) and improper use of adverbs.

Here are some further truths. Seven writers board a train. At the end of the line, five will leave it alive. One will be in cuffs.

Body count: nine. Bit lower than last time.

And me? I don't kill anybody this time around.

Let's get started. Again.