

KERRY N MAYNE



'A book you
will devour!'

SALLY
HEPWORTH

LENNY
MARKS
GETS AWAY
WITH
MURDER
OR DOES SHE?

About the Book

Lenny Marks is good at not remembering.

She has spent the last twenty years not thinking about the day her mother left her when she was still a child. Her stepfather's parting words, however, remain annoyingly unforgettable: *You did this*.

Now thirty-seven, Lenny prefers contentment and order over the unreliability of happiness and the messiness of relationships. She fills her days teaching at the local primary school, and her nights playing Scrabble with her pretend housemate, watching reruns of *Friends* and rearranging her thirty-six copies of *The Hobbit*.

Recently though, if only to appease her beloved foster mum, Lenny *has* set herself the goal of 'getting a life'.

Then, out of the blue, a letter arrives from the Adult Parole Board. And when her desperate attempts to ignore it fail, Lenny starts to unravel.

Worse, she starts to remember . . .

Kerryn Mayne's stunning debut novel is both chilling and charming, suspenseful and uplifting. And, of course, simply unforgettable . . .



Penguin
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**LENNY
MARKS
GETS AWAY
WITH
MURDER**

KERRY N MAYNE



BANTAM

SYDNEY AUCKLAND TORONTO NEW YORK LONDON

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*For my mum, Heather,
who surrounded us with books.*

CHAPTER 1

Monday 16 May 2022

Lenny Marks seldom found herself unprepared. Lessons for her grade five students were religiously compiled a fortnight in advance, her tax return would be ready to submit no later than the fifteenth of July every year and her home fire escape plan was reviewed and updated each summer. Lenny knew the location of both of Selby South Primary School's defibrillators and exactly how to use them, she serviced her bicycle regularly to keep it in prime shape and carried a bottle opener on her set of keys despite never – as yet – needing it. She found tremendous peace in this level of organisation, which was as close to happiness as Lenny Marks ever planned to be. Happiness, she knew, was unstable and quite unreliable. And Lenny was neither of those things. Instead she aimed for the contentment of a routine, which had served her quite well up to and into her thirty-seventh year.

And still, despite knowing exactly what her Monday morning should contain, Lenny now found herself under the unexpected and interrogating gaze of Mrs Finlay, office administration. The clock had barely ticked over 8 am and Lenny had only just turned her teapot the requisite three times – the way her grandmother had taught her, despite it apparently not making a jot of difference to the taste – when Mrs Finlay bustled in to disturb the good order of things.

'So, is it a secret husband?' Mrs Finlay asked, eyes alarmingly wide and voice predictably loud.

'Is what?' Lenny asked.

'Well, it's addressed to Helena Winters. And I didn't know who that was. A mistake, I thought, and was going to send it back *return to sender*. But Lora said, "That's no mistake, that's Lenny Marks."'

Lenny read the front of the envelope: *Helena Winters*. A name from long ago and of a girl she thought she'd left well and truly behind.

She didn't reply, which failed to slow Mrs Finlay. Lenny cast her eyes

around, hoping the other occupants of the staffroom were not listening. It was fairly clear they were. Or at least Kirra Reid, grade four, was. Kirra dallied over the instant hot water tap a few moments too long. It was instant hot water after all, and there was no need to wait for it to boil; it wasn't a lengthy task. Deidre Heffernan, grade two, on the other hand, was poring over the form guide – as per usual – and had not even registered there were other people in the same space as her.

'And I thought to myself, I never knew Lenny was married. How interesting. Isn't it?'

'Isn't what?'

'That you've been married?'

'I haven't,' Lenny replied, lowering her voice. Lenny deplored other people knowing her business and felt anxiety growing at the thought of being the subject of office scuttlebutt.

'So why the different name then? I've racked my brain all weekend trying to figure it out.'

Lenny hesitated, hoping she had a quick-witted, reasonable answer that didn't invite more questions. She didn't and quick-wittedness had never been her thing. Perhaps she should've claimed a secret husband she didn't have. Mrs Finlay, not one to be deterred, changed tack.

'And it's from the Parole Board, just when I thought I had you all figured out. I said to Lora, "She's an enigma that one, isn't she?"'

Lenny ran her fingers over the smoothness of the envelope. *Adult Parole Board Victoria* was emblazoned proudly in the top right corner, as if this was a regular and not at all concerning place from which to receive mail. It was clear, even to Lenny, who often found social nuances hard to decipher, what Mrs Finlay was up to. She was meddling, hoping Lenny would spill all after a few pointed questions. But little did Mrs Finlay know, Lenny had nothing to disclose. The letter was unexpected and she didn't intend to indulge Mrs Finlay's nosiness with speculation about what it may contain. And she was absolutely not going to open it, not in front of Mrs Finlay and possibly not at all. Lenny's curiosity didn't push her to explore the unknown; she was more than happy to retreat to what she knew and forget what she didn't.

She was good at forgetting, most of the time. Thoughts of Fergus Sullivan, for example, were normally pushed to the furthest corners of her memory. Now his image was disturbingly front and centre. It made no sense whatsoever. It had been over twenty years since she'd seen her stepfather and

surely she would be the least likely person to need to know anything about him. But what else could possibly be in that envelope?

Fergus Sullivan.

You did this.

When she did think of Fergus, which was as little as possible, her skin turned hot with the memory of the stifling garden shed, the last place she'd seen him. *You did this.* Three words, three syllables, a mere eighteen points on a Scrabble board. And yet infuriatingly unforgettable.

'I love true crime, you know, I listen to all the podcasts. When I'm out on my after-dinner walks, I pop the headphones on and off I go, thinking maybe I'll solve this one.'

Mrs Finlay was particularly hard to tune out; her voice had a pitch and rasp that made it impossible to ignore. Lenny was usually able to distance and calm herself by rearranging words, and yet Mrs Finlay kept breaking through and interrupting her anagrams.

Mrs Finlay: rainfly, family, flimsy, snarly, mails, fail, liar

The letters would move around in a manner that was as involuntary as sneezing. She'd done it ever since she could remember and it was the easiest way to calm her thoughts or shut them off.

'My Frank says to me, "Jeannie, you'll end up *on* one of those podcasts the way you block your ears up like that. Anyone could sneak up behind you." And I just laugh, he's such a fuddy-duddy, but wouldn't that be ironic? Woman murdered listening to story about murder.'

Mrs Finlay guffawed in the way of someone who had never had anything bad happen to them, and therefore thought horrific crimes were fascinating.

'Did you get my work order, Jeannie?' Kirra asked from across the table, cutting off Mrs Finlay, whose open mouth indicated she was poised and ready to carry on her cross-examination.

Mrs Finlay turned to Kirra, and Lenny remembered to breathe. She was thankful for the reprieve, although it was incredibly poor manners of Kirra to interrupt.

'What's that, Mrs Reid?'

'I put one in for the sink last week, the one in here's not draining properly. And it's still not. Hopefully the work order I put in hasn't got lost? Like the last one?'

'Oh.' Mrs Finlay hesitated. 'Of course not. It's just hard to get a plumber in. Tradesmen can be incredibly unreliable, you know.'

‘Yes, they can. Unreliability is a particularly annoying trait,’ Kirra said. Mrs Finlay checked her watch and Kirra took the opportunity to shoot Lenny a wink. Lenny wasn’t sure what the wink implied, but she wasn’t a fan of them in general. They always seemed so unnatural and a little slimy.

‘Anyway, ladies, I must go, I’ve got other mail to attend to.’ Mrs Finlay stood up and Lenny realised the downside of not ever disclosing her home address – even on official paperwork – was the opportunity it presented for exactly this sort of prying.

Lenny held the envelope, moving her thumb over the printed name in the clear window, just in case it wiped it away. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t. Lenny pulled her satchel around from where it hung on the back of her chair and drove the letter deep inside. There was the unlikely, but faint, chance it might just disappear, Narnia-style, out the other side and no longer be her problem.

You did this.

By 8.15 the staffroom was a hive of activity and the urge to leave was overwhelming. Lenny told herself that as soon as her tea was done, she could escape. She had the same internal negotiation most school mornings and was usually able to convince herself to stay put. At some point she assumed it would seem easier and perhaps she’d even initiate the conversations.

But this morning was different. Thoughts of Fergus were looming and hard to ignore, her shins felt sharp with anxiety and she couldn’t even distract herself with her anagrams.

Fergus Sullivan: frailness, slaving, gainless, argues, evil

‘Lenny, are you with us this morning?’ Yvonne Gillespie asked. Lenny hadn’t noticed her come in. Gregory Schwartz was in the staffroom now too; his arrival time was always haphazard, a trait Lenny found disconcerting. He had a habit of slurping his morning cereal and Lenny preferred to be packed up and off to her classroom before he poured his cornflakes.

‘Good morning, Yvonne,’ Lenny said, hoping Yvonne wouldn’t regale her with one of her weekend monologues. It was always hard to slip out once she started. Not to mention, Yvonne’s stories were notoriously boring.

Yvonne was also Lenny’s number one suspect for tea theft. On more than one occasion, despite clearly Dymo-labelling her belongings so their ownership could never be mistaken, Lenny had found her tin of tea leaves a few scoops short. She hadn’t mentioned her suspicions, not wanting to appear confrontational.

Thankfully Yvonne didn't start on a weekend story, giving Lenny the opportunity to depart. She tipped the remains of her tea into the sink, noticing it was indeed backed up, as Kirra had pointed out, and then put her things away in her drawer – which was also clearly labelled with her name. Perhaps Yvonne needed to get her glasses prescription checked. Or else she was really just a thief.

She heard Greg splashing milk into his bowl, and Trudi Kerr, music and arts, walked in with her normal Monday chirpiness. Lenny was at her limit for polite interactions and pleasantries and knew it was time to go. No point pushing herself; she had made significant progress in the past few weeks and was quite complimentary in her self-evaluations.

Lenny hadn't found it easy to make friends, but Fay, her foster mum, had been insistent that she try.

After Fay had caught her in a rare emotional outburst over Easter, Lenny had been cornered into one of those revealing conversations that she prided herself on avoiding. She was never quite right in the school holidays. Even fifteen years into teaching, she still couldn't get used to the times when she didn't have the bell to structure her day. She would always ensure there were a couple of house projects on the go, but even then she could never shake the feeling of being lost during the term breaks.

So she told Fay she was lonely. She meant it at the time, although it felt clunky and unnatural to say, even to her foster mum whom she was almost always honest with. It had never occurred to her before that particular moment that she was *lonely*. Although she knew the only text messages she got were scams or appointment reminders, and even they were few and far between of late. Lenny didn't have friends, she had acquaintances. Like the man who delivered her chicken pad thai each Saturday night, or Ned at the grocery store. She saw her colleagues daily, but didn't know a thing about them outside the school perimeter and was likely to avoid them if she saw them on the other side of the fence.

Of course she regretted her outburst as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Fay, true to form, insisted she take action, even delivering an ultimatum: make some friends (*it's time to get a life, Lenny-girl*) or go and speak to a psychologist (*it's time to get some help*). It really just made her shins ache.

It was not the first time this had come up with Fay. There had been cause to discuss this very topic at various life intervals: high school, university,

then over the years while teaching. And Lenny had, in fact, had friends along the way – of sorts. Like Caroline Gordon, who taught at Selby South for eight of the years Lenny had. Together they shared quiet lunchtimes and polite, impersonal conversations, never asking each other ‘what are you up to tonight?’ (because it was never much). Occasionally they’d meet up at the library for a game of Scrabble. It was a pleasant companionship she found with Caroline, who was in her fifties when Lenny met her. But two years ago, Caroline had moved back to New South Wales to support her elderly mother. They promised they’d keep in touch although it was never the sort of friendship that would survive outside of a shared workplace. They hadn’t found cause to visit one another when they lived three suburbs apart, so it was extremely unlikely they would with a state border in between.

Caroline’s departure was the start of a staff turnover at Selby South. Two teachers retired, another moved and one went to a private college closer to Melbourne – the thought of the bustling traffic and towering buildings made Lenny shudder. This heralded the arrival of a new band of colleagues at the start of the school year, including Kirra and the prep teachers.

Once she’d wiped her tears and digested her outburst, Lenny realised perhaps she really was lonely. And saying it out loud, intentionally or not, meant that now Fay would push her. The challenge was set and Lenny was an outwardly reluctant, inwardly hopeful participant in Fay’s plan. Perhaps she could, once and for all, get a life.

Choosing two of the new teachers, Amy Cleary and Ashleigh Burton, as her friendship targets had been a matter of simple deduction. She removed the too-old: Trudi Kerr and Deidre Heffernan; and the intolerable: Gregory Schwartz. She didn’t consider Yvonne Gillespie for obvious reasons (her thievery) and Lora Pham, as principal, was too intimidating. There was Kirra Reid, but she wasn’t quite sure what to make of her – a not unusual problem for Lenny Marks. And besides, it was hard not to covet friendship with the young, effortlessly personable prep leaders, Amy and Ashleigh. They wore bright colours and sparkly earrings and oozed confidence.

She gauged her progress with Amy and Ashleigh as significant, having been asked to cover their yard duty on no less than three occasions. She felt an out-of-school-hours invite was imminent; perhaps they’d even exchange phone numbers.

This was equal parts thrilling and terrifying. It was one thing to have someone’s phone number, but what on earth would she do with it? Amy and

Ashleigh were as tight-knit as Monica and Rachel, and Lenny hoped to soon be their Phoebe.

‘How was your weekend, Lenny?’ Trudi Kerr asked as Lenny swung her satchel over her shoulder. It somehow felt weightier now it held the letter, which she knew was ridiculous.

‘Fine. It was fine,’ Lenny said briskly as she turned to leave. She didn’t believe in redundant goodbyes, she would see these people at different points during the day and there was no obvious need for her to say hello and goodbye on each of those occasions.

She was disappointed not to have seen either Ashleigh or Amy as yet, although this was not entirely unexpected. They both had a tendency to arrive so close to the morning bell they’d have to dash from their respective cars to their classrooms. That sort of on-edge existence was something Lenny would never be comfortable with, but they managed to make it look spontaneous in a good way. She would have to catch up with them at first recess.

Lenny hurried out of the staffroom and towards her classroom, looking forward to the morning bell, twenty-three sets of grade-five eyes and the comfort of her pre-planned morning maths lesson.

CHAPTER 2

Every weekday at 4 pm, and never before, Lenny ensured her blackboard was clean and her classroom was straightened before heading home. She would unlock her mint green Polygon Zenith, and ride the twenty-one minutes to her Tree House – which was not actually in a tree as the name may suggest. Lenny still felt a thrill when the wind buffeted her ears and threw her hair behind her as she rode. It felt like flying and she looked into cars as she whisked past them, feeling sorry for the occupants, who might not know how cathartic it was to be uncontained. Even on the days when the rain stung her bare skin like darts being hurled, she still revelled in it.

Two afternoons a week – always Mondays and Thursdays unless there was a public holiday – she would ride out of her way to the little cluster of shops set well back from the main shopping strip of Belgrave to purchase her groceries. She was a regular customer at McKnight's General Store; however, her patronage was less about loyalty and more due to the shop's proximity (hardly out of her way), lack of noise (they played no 'background' music) and age (Lenny struggled to feel at ease with the modern lines and minimalist features of many new buildings).

Ned at McKnight's was one of the few people outside of work she counted as an acquaintance. Calling him a friend would've been far too ambitious, but regardless, she always enjoyed the repartee with Ned, son of *the* Mr McKnight whose family name was proudly emblazoned over the entrance. She found herself looking forward to her twice-weekly visits and the possibility of seeing Ned's bespectacled, black-stubbed face appearing from behind the deli counter or arrangement of thirty per cent off Weet-Bix boxes. He had been too brash for her liking when she first met him; he'd turned heads exclaiming over a Sunnydale High School patch sewn onto her satchel. Eyes wide, he'd asked her whether she thought Faith or Buffy was the better Slayer. She explained, with minimal detail to disguise her lack of knowledge, why she thought it was Faith. They'd been on first-name terms ever since. She never explained to him that Fay bought her an eclectic range

of TV-show-inspired sew-on patches and she'd liked the colours on the Sunnydale High one the best, and that was the sole basis of using it on her bag. She wasn't much of a fan until that conversation with Ned. After it, though, she'd made sure to become well accustomed with Buffy and her gang of misfits so she could hold her own in any future conversations. Lenny refused to analyse her desire to impress Ned with her Slayer familiarity.

McKnight's General Store was a quaint Dandenongs institution. The green and cream gabled roofline sat comfortably between the community library and a residence that would have been more suitably placed in the English countryside. The front of the store was always, assuredly, set up in the same manner. A row of newspaper and magazine covers lined the footpath, encased in little metal cages to keep them proudly upright. A red postbox was conveniently placed by the door and a mix of woven baskets hung from a rope under the awnings. Lenny couldn't recall ever seeing one of the baskets replaced, let alone sold, and was of the mind they were more a fixture of the store than inventory. A shingle hung above the door announcing they'd been in business since 1955. She guessed the decorating hadn't been updated since, although the windowpanes always sparkled and the stock was never dusty or neglected.

She propped her bicycle next to the store and diligently locked it. She wouldn't be long but there was no accounting for the opportunism of thieves. The local paper informed her there had been an increase in thefts that went, so they reported, hand in hand with a surge in cannabis availability. Lenny had no desire to add to these statistics by providing a would-be thief, and a drug-addicted one no less, the easy pinch of her primary mode of transport.

The doorbell jingled as she entered and she was greeted by a giant smile from Ned, who was standing behind McKnight's lone register. There were no customers with him and he looked actually quite delighted by her arrival – or perhaps she'd imagined that.

'Lennnnnnny, you'll never guess what I just got,' Ned crowed as he bustled towards her. He was loud and she noticed heads turned as he boomed across the small grocery store. She blushed involuntarily at the attention he was drawing but met him halfway in any case, hoping as she gained proximity to him that he would drop a few decibels. He did not.

'Would I be able to guess?' she asked.

'No, never. Look.' He pulled an oversized smartphone from his pocket and tapped away on it madly with his thumbs. He found what he was

scrolling for and proudly faced the screen towards her.

‘Coming from the States so I don’t have it yet but whaddya reckon?’

A lady with a half-filled shopping basket brushed against Lenny’s arm and she prickled at the unexpected touch. She backed up against the diced tomato tins to avoid any further contact from inconsiderate shoppers with little spatial awareness.

‘Mr Pointy,’ Ned said, barely containing his glee. ‘The *actual* one, touched by *the* Sarah Michelle Gellar. Given to Buffy by Kendra in season two, episode twenty-one. *That* one.’

His screen displayed the listing, with a bright green ‘successful bidder’ banner above it and a slideshow of photographs of Mr Pointy, the infamous stake used by Buffy to dispatch many a vampire. It also revealed the cost and although she never would have asked, she couldn’t help reeling at the hefty price tag.

He noticed. ‘It’s an investment, you know. This stuff is priceless.’

It was his money and his business what he spent it on; she had no intention of dampening his spirits or dispensing financial advice.

‘What a find! There will be some disappointed fans who missed out on that one.’

‘I know, I’ve already posted that I got it and there’s some haters out there. *And* someone has already offered me double for it.’ He considered the possibility. ‘I just hope it doesn’t get lost in the post.’

‘Or seized at customs as a weapon.’

He obviously hadn’t thought of this. ‘Would they do that?’

‘Oh, no,’ she hurried to reassure him, ‘it’s clearly not a weapon. It’s memorabilia.’

She wondered why she had rained on his parade. Despite knowing importation of weapons was frowned upon by Australia’s Border Force, a television prop would hardly be considered a risk to national security. Why some things rolled out of her mouth in the fashion they did she was never quite sure. It happened often in the company of Ned; something about him did manage to make her a tad discombobulated.

Discombobulated: combustible, bombilated, modulate, adieu, edit

‘You’ll have to bring it in and show me when you get it,’ she said, hoping to move on from her inconsiderate comment.

‘Oh, no way it’s coming in here. But you should come by and see it. I’ve wanted to show you my collection for ages. My girlfriend is mightily

unimpressed. I don't think she realised the gravity of my deep-seated geekiness until she saw all my stuff.'

Lenny hadn't known Ned had a girlfriend, not that it was the sort of conversation she would ever have thought appropriate to broach. She couldn't help but feel a little crestfallen. She had no right to be disappointed and yet it felt exactly like that.

Crestfallen: cleanser, reflects, careens, falters, fester, secret

'Oh, yes. Maybe we can do that. At some point. But I should really get going. Do you know if eggplants are on special? I need one.'

It was a poor attempt at redirecting the conversation, but it did the job. She most certainly did not need an eggplant – nor did she know where to start to cook one – but they were in her line of sight, and therefore the first thing to come out of her mouth.

'Oh, nah, they're not. But the olives are and I know how much you love the lime-infused kalamatas.'

With a careful balance of groceries between the front handlebars and the rear rack, Lenny cycled home.

She analysed her conversation with Ned as she pedalled, chastising herself for her inability to just have a *normal* exchange with someone. Her social ineptitude never failed to disappoint her, no matter how old she got. At thirty-seven she should have been used to her own quirks. The analysis that followed almost any conversation was exhausting. She would rehash something again and again until she'd dissected it like a year nine science project. If she kept putting her proverbial foot in it, she would have to find an alternative place to purchase her weekly supplies, even though the thought made her queasy. On the most recent of her rare trips into the Belgrave Hills IGA, they'd used the intercom so frequently and at such a volume she'd thought someone was yelling at her down an aisle. She abandoned her trolley and left through a fire exit, which triggered an alarm. She didn't look back and knew she wouldn't return.

Arriving home never failed to delight Lenny. The descent down her driveway was almost a meditative experience. Not that she involved herself with nonsense such as meditation. It was a place where Lenny felt completely and totally at home, which was entirely fitting given that was exactly what it was.

Her house had already been christened the Tree House by its previous

owners. Lenny found this misleading because it wasn't in a tree, nor did it resemble the child-size tree house that might spring to mind at mention of the name. It was, however, surrounded by mammoth mountain ash and sat high on its sloping block, perhaps giving some the idea it was just another tree rising from the ground. This was not Lenny's impression; it looked like a full-size house to her, but she liked the hand-painted sign beside the door and felt there was no harm in the house retaining its name. It was her favourite place in the whole wide world, not that she'd explored very much of the whole wide world. Lenny brought her shopping inside and double-locked the door behind her. She would check it at least eight more times before she went to bed.

Shoes off at the door and slippers on; they were exactly where she'd left them that morning. In fact, nothing had moved in the house: it was gratifyingly the same. She unpacked the groceries and tipped the kalamata olives directly into the bin. She put the container on the sink to wash for the recycling. Weeks ago, Ned had raved about them and she'd been so infected by his enthusiasm, she'd bought some. She'd positively hated them, despite telling him otherwise. She'd made two more obligatory purchases of them since and both lots ended up in the same final resting place. It was a small price to pay to avoid a conversation to explain why she'd lied in the first place.

The house was very much Lenny, which was to say it was homely and thoughtful but not inspired by any home and garden sort of magazine. She was not inclined to decorate and bought things as and when she needed them. She didn't have throw pillows, because her couch came with perfectly comfortable cushions of its own. She'd chosen her rugs because the hardwood floorboards were cold in winter, not because she'd seen them on a season of *The Block*. Which she didn't watch in any case, as the competitiveness caused her angst. Everything in the Tree House belonged somewhere, and if it wasn't needed it was no longer kept. Her bookshelf held books: no trinkets, knick-knacks or photo frames. Errol was the exception Lenny made to discarding items of no practical use. He'd accompanied her to each house she travelled through in her childhood: Mum's, her grandmother's and Fay's. Although he was a teddy, he wasn't the sort children were allowed to play with. And now he sat on Lenny's bookshelf, keeping watch as he'd always done.

He'd seen a lot, that bear; he knew what she knew and he was good at