

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SALLY
HEPWORTH

MAD

They called it murder.
She called it justice.

Mabel



About *Mad Mabel*

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Soulmate* and *Darling Girls* comes the story of Mad Mabel. They called it murder. She called it justice.

‘In 1959, at just fifteen years of age, Mabel Waller became the youngest Australian in history to be convicted of murder.’

In 2025, on a quiet Melbourne lane, an elderly man is found dead by his neighbour, 81-year-old Elsie Fitzpatrick. No one suspects any foul play.

Until they discover Elsie’s past.

In the 1950s, her name was not Elsie. It was Mabel.

‘She is known around the world as Mad Mabel. But is she mad? More importantly, is she guilty?’

When the police open a new investigation and the media descend upon her, the elderly Mabel decides it’s time to set the record straight.

‘In a world first, at the age of 81, Mabel Waller is speaking.’

New York Times bestselling author Sally Hepworth is at her finest in this twisty, compulsive thriller of friendship, family and murder. Or is it justice . . . ?

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The Secrets of Midwives
The Things We Keep
The Family Next Door
The Mother-in-Law
The Good Sister
The Younger Wife
The Soulmate
Darling Girls

**SALLY
HEPWORTH**

**MAD
Mabel**



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PROLOGUE

It's interesting to note that there are two groups of people who are rarely, if ever, suspected of murder. These groups are elderly women and little girls.

On the whole, when it comes to murder, the stats very much favour the men. The odd woman is thrown into the mix every now and again, but she's inevitably perimenopausal (and having been through the change myself, I certainly understand why). But an elderly woman or little girl committing murder? It's one in a million.

I've always liked to think I was special.

1

My name is Elsie Mabel Fitzpatrick and I am eighty-one years old. I want it on the record that I don't look eighty-one. Not because I'm particularly attractive or youthful-looking – on the contrary, I've seen hairless mole rats more attractive – but because if storybooks are anything to go by (and I, for one, believe they are), eighty-one-year-olds are frail, birdlike creatures with silver hair who call people 'dear' and go inside the bank to speak to an 'actual person' rather than use the much more convenient ATM. At six feet tall with broad shoulders and a sturdy backbone, no one would ever accuse me of being birdlike – unless the bird in question was an ostrich. My hair is reddish-grey, and I call people 'dipshit' with far more regularity than 'dear'. Most importantly, I adore the ATM. Who wouldn't? I'm eighty-one years old, and I don't want to spend the precious time I have left in a stuffy, air-conditioned room talking to a power-tripping branch manager called Barry through plexiglass.

I digress.

I've lived on Kenny Lane for close to sixty years. Kenny Lane is a peculiar little cobbled street on the periphery of central Melbourne, made up of the back doors of restaurants and half a dozen single-fronted terrace homes, each adorned with intricately tiled porches and wrought-iron fences in varying states of disrepair. The tiny front gardens tell diverse stories: mine meticulously tended with blooming roses, the rest ranging from untamed beauty to sparse weed patches. Parking is limited to a single row along one side, and any non-resident who dares to park their vehicle in these public spots is destined to suffer the wrath of Mrs Nguyen. (I've yet to see a person make this mistake twice.)

There's the usual assortment of neighbours: Peter Pantages (aka Pete the Greek) at number 1; Joan Waters (litigious, and a real piece of work) at

number 3; and Roxanne (sex-crazed single mother) and her evil seven-year-old spawn, Persephone, at number 5. On the other side there's me at number 2; Old Ishaan (my nemesis) and his deranged Chihuahua, Nugget, next door at number 4; and the Nguyens – very nice couple so long as you don't utilise the public parking on Kenny Lane – at number 6.

The houses are close enough together that I could throw a tennis ball back and forth with residents opposite me if I was so inclined, which, needless to say, I am not. In fact, beyond the necessary interactions of neighbours – accusations of stealing space in each other's rubbish bins, lobbing dog droppings over the fence when Nugget does her business in my front garden, and shared complaints about the dreadful postman Dwayne – we don't interact at all, which is exactly how I like it.

It's a funny little street, to be sure. But it's home to me. The only real home I've ever had. And while I consider myself flexible about a lot of things, I'm not flexible about Kenny Lane. In fact, I'll tell you something for nothing: the only way anyone is going to get me out of this street is in a mahogany box. An extra-long one.

I am dangling a Lady Grey tea bag in hot water when I see it. From the kitchen I have a direct eyeline down the long corridor to the front door, under which I see a protruding piece of paper.

'Well, well, looky here,' I say to Daphne, who sits patiently at my round table, waiting for her cuppa. 'Must be another letter from Joan.'

Joan at number 3 is sixty-odd, has a neat grey bob, polished black orthotic footwear and darting, suspicious eyes. Since the day she moved in, I've been receiving notes underneath my door: about my porch security light shining into her bedroom window, about the placement of my rubbish bins, about my roses creeping too far over the fence line into the laneway. If I wasn't so full of myself I might have feared she didn't like me. Joan's nephew, she is forever at pains to point out, is a partner in a law firm. She's managed to include this detail in every one of her letters.

Your nephew sounds marvellous, I replied to her last note. But I'm assuming he's going to be a little young for me, and besides, I'm not looking to date at this time.

Daphne snorted her tea when I read that out to her.

In the year she's lived on the street, I've never heard Joan speak. Not a word. Each time I shout, 'Good morning,' she scurries away like a rat in a sewer. I suppose Joan is more of a pen pal than a neighbour.

'I wonder what I've done this time?' I say.

'Perhaps she's discovered our cannabis racket?' Daphne muses. 'You don't think she knows a lawyer, do you?'

We chuckle wickedly.

I shuffle toward the door, thinking this will make for most enjoyable conversation while we have our afternoon cuppa. I might read out the letter using a voice akin to the Queen's to make Daphne laugh.

Daphne laughs easily, a grossly underrated quality. Also grossly underrated are the bizarre outfits she wears. Today it's a magenta T-shirt with a bedazzled Eiffel Tower on the front. The rims of her glasses are magenta, just like her shirt. Daphne has always been quirky but it feels more pronounced somehow now she is an old lady. The comfort she brings me, too, feels more pronounced. If my life is a jagged graph of highs and lows, she is the thick, solid line right down the middle. Not a black line either, nothing as dull as that. Daphne's line is magenta.

I bend to retrieve the note, supporting my temperamental lumbar spine. I'd planned to wait until I was sitting down to open it – it's folded in half – but as I straighten, it opens itself, having not been folded with enough passion along the line. *Arthritis playing up, is it, Joan?*

I lift my glasses from the chain around my neck and perch them on my nose. It's a photocopy of an old news article. A very old news article. It must have been copied many times because much of the font is blurred, impossible to read. I can make out the headline though, clear as day. The sight of it makes me feel lightheaded, like I might faint.

'What is it?' Daphne asks.

I turn the page around to face her. She reads the headline slowly, her mouth bending around each word silently as she squints at the page. Finally, her lips stop moving and her eyes find mine.

‘Someone knows,’ I say unnecessarily. ‘Someone knows who I am.’

*

This is a love story, by the way. It may not seem like it, what with all the blood and guts and murder, but nevertheless, that’s what it is. And there is no greater love story than that of platonic female love. The kind of love I have with Daphne.

We aren’t lesbians, before you start. Frankly, I find it appalling that people would assume such a thing – not that I take issue with lesbians, each to their own, I say, but because people have so little regard for female friendship that they can’t fathom a closeness such as we have without the romantic element. More fool them.

There will be those who disagree with me, of course. People who say romantic love trumps platonic female friendship. Or parental love. Or love of self. Those people are just giving away the fact that they’ve never experienced true platonic female friendship. The kind of friendship you’d do anything to preserve – fight, steal. Even kill.

Here’s a little-spoken fact for you: friends are like oxygen. If you’ve been blessed enough to have always been surrounded by friends, you might think I’m overplaying this. I don’t blame you. If you’d always been surrounded by air, you wouldn’t think to credit it for your very existence either. But I’ve spent much of my life gasping for breath, so I promise you, it’s true: friends are like oxygen. And the only reason I’m still alive is Daphne.

2

‘*E*lsa?’

When you are as ancient as I am, the days are predictable. Early each morning, for example, I know I’ll hear a few crazies singing as they make their way home from a night out at the bars. I know I’ll see Mrs Nguyen from two doors down scurry past my window on her way to the nail salon. I know I’ll hear Nugget, Ishaan’s godforsaken Chihuahua, yapping for her breakfast. And so on and so forth. A lot of people think old folk find comfort in such sameness, and perhaps some of them do. Not me. I like change. Usually. Then again, the arrival of the *enfant terrible* Persephone on the street is one change that has me yearning for days of yore.

‘ELSA!’

I should, I suppose, take my share of responsibility. After all, I leave myself open to this sort of harassment by choosing to spend time on my porch of a morning. Unfortunately, as quaint as my terrace home is, it is measly in natural light and a woman has to get her vitamin D from somewhere.

‘It’s Elsie,’ I tell the child. ‘Else to my friends, which you are not. Elsa to no one.’

Daphne and I are on the front porch, open novels in our laps, trying to find relief from Nugget’s vile yapping. Honest to God, it’s the kind of noise that could make a woman insane. *Yap. Yap. Yap.* Equally spaced. No pauses. Highly pitched, vulnerable and vicious all at once. The only consolation is that the noise helps distract me from the article.

‘Forget about it,’ Daphne keeps saying. ‘Put the silly article out of your mind.’

And I do, for short periods. But my mind keeps getting drawn back to it like a fly to manure. I'm aware that people know my story, of course – I am a footnote in practically every article written about childhood evils. The difference is that while I am free to engage with or ignore those articles from the safety of my relative anonymity, now that Joan – or whoever put that note under my door – knows where I live, I feel exposed in a way I haven't been since I was fifteen years old.

As for the article itself, it had some inaccuracies, but I'd seen plenty worse. They got my name right, and my parents' names. They knew I was a reclusive child, and that I spent time in hospital. And, of course, they were correct in reporting that, over the course of my young life, everyone around me died. Without the latter detail, of course, the former would be entirely immaterial.

'But I like Elsa!' Persephone whines. 'From *Frozen*.'

'I like Maleficent.' I turn the page of my novel. 'Can I call you that?'

The child giggles. So does Daphne. *For pity's sake*.

Persephone is seven years old, daughter of Roxanne – the very attractive woman who moved in to number 5 a couple of months ago. The child's father doesn't appear to be in the picture, though there *has* been a string of unsavoury men in and out of the place at all hours of the night.

'I like the sex,' Roxanne told me when I raised an eyebrow at her, after watching her wave off yet another fellow one Saturday morning.

'Good for you, dear,' Daphne had told her cheerily, giving a little air punch.

'Is he your boyfriend?' I inquired.

Roxanne wrinkled her nose. 'God, no. No boyfriends for me.'

'Chicks before dicks,' Daphne agreed. 'Holes before poles.'

I'll admit, I chuckled at that. (Poor Joan, who had been walking by at the time, had just about passed out.)

I wonder if it's the sex or the child that makes Roxanne so tired. Every time I see her the poor girl has bags under her eyes. I sympathise, and yet it has to be said she has a fairly laissez-faire attitude to parenting, making herself scarce as Persephone terrorises the street – going from neighbour to

neighbour, demanding gold coin donations for school fundraisers or handing out substandard pictures she'd drawn and then returning to ensure they'd been properly displayed. One has to wonder where the child gets her audacity.

‘Elsa!’

I sigh and peer over the top of my glasses at her. ‘*What?*’

‘I have to interview an old person for my homework.’

Persephone, clearly, is ill-named. Anyone could tell you that a name like Persephone comes with a burden of expectation. A Persephone is lithe with golden hair, searching eyes, and a pensive, troubled spirit. This child is chubby and has a mouse-brown bob and smallish eyes; plain as a mud fence. She’s also missing enough teeth that she resembles a sixteenth-century beggar. The child should have been named Medusa. Or Tempestas.

‘And?’ I prompt.

‘And . . .’ She stares demonstrably at Daphne and me. ‘You’re old.’

Daphne snorts. ‘Elsie’s older. She’ll do the interview.’

The child looks at me. ‘Will you do it?’

‘Corsets she will!’

I give Daphne the stink eye. Traitor.

I wave to Peter, aka Pete the Greek, who is on his way home from a trip to Aldi, judging by the shopping bags. Peter lives directly opposite me. He’s sixty-six years old and he spends most of his time drinking coffee and playing Tavli on his porch. The only time he ever leaves his house is to line up outside Aldi to purchase a television set or an automatic dog-feeder or whatever happens to be on sale that week. Upon his return, he always holds up his wares for me to admire, and I dutifully oblige because I’m fond of Peter. Occasionally he tries to sell me a coffee machine (because now he has three, *all paid for in cash*), but I draw the line. I’m not *that* fond of Peter.

‘Elsie!’ he calls out. ‘Did you see that they’ve got long-handled hedge trimmers on special at Aldi this week? Not a bad price.’

‘Is that right?’ I say. No need to point out that Peter doesn’t have a hedge, nor does he have so much as a plant in his entire courtyard. Typical

Greek, he paved the thing to within an inch of its life the moment he moved in.

‘Is that bloody dog still barking?’ he says.

‘Hasn’t stopped all day.’

Peter is instantly up in arms. ‘We should call the council,’ he says.

Peter loves being up in arms. So do I, truth be told. It’s a magnificent feeling. Superior-like.

Peter disappears inside his house. Once he’s gone I notice Persephone is observing me closely. ‘You smile whenever Peter’s around.’

‘What? Nonsense.’

‘You do.’

I’m about to protest further, but there’s no point, the child has moved on. She climbs into the chair opposite, right onto Daphne’s lap. Daphne beams. Unlike me, she’s always had a soft spot for children.

‘Right then,’ Persephone says, her pencil poised over a clipboard. ‘Why don’t we nip this in the butt?’

I take a slow, deep breath and let it out with otherworldly patience. ‘The bud.’

She ignores me. ‘How old are you, Elsie?’

‘How old do you think I am?’

She takes a moment to assess me. ‘I’d say . . . 167.’

‘At least,’ Daphne adds.

I give them both the stink eye. ‘I’m eighty-one.’

‘Eighty-one.’ Persephone is sceptical, but she writes it down. It feels unethical to dislike a child this much. ‘Now. Tell me something interesting. About the olden days.’

She gazes up at me as if expecting tales of riding dinosaurs and etching our ABCs into stone, Fred Flintstone-style.

‘Such as?’ I ask.

She thinks for a moment. ‘Something gory.’

I find myself wondering if it might have been Persephone who put that article under my door. ‘Such as . . .?’

‘Emma’s grandpa went to war and got shot in the leg!’