

MURDER AT THE MARIGOLD

A small town. A missing florist. A very nosy cat.



PENNY WILDE

CHAPTER ONE

Flowers for a missing woman

On Tuesday, someone ordered funeral flowers for a woman who was still alive. On Wednesday, the woman disappeared. By Thursday, Bea's cat had dragged a pearl earring through the kitchen window and deposited it in the butter dish.

Bea put down her toast. 'That,' she told the cat, 'is not breakfast.' Marmalade began washing a paw. He had the satisfied manner of a professional who had completed his portion of a shared project.

Across the lane, the Marigold flower shop remained closed. Its owner, June Bell, had never missed the Thursday delivery in the twenty-three years Bea had lived opposite. A bucket of unopened lilies sat on the pavement.

Bea lifted the earring with a teaspoon. She knew it. Everyone in the village knew it. June had worn its partner to the summer fair, where she had announced, rather loudly, that she was finally leaving her husband.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

The Thursday delivery

The delivery driver was sitting on the step, filling out a form with increasing resentment. He brightened when Bea crossed the road carrying a mug of tea.

'You haven't seen June?' she asked. 'Not since Monday. She seemed in a hurry.' 'She was always in a hurry.' 'Not like that.' He took the mug and looked toward the shop's side passage.

The door was open an inch. Bea could smell cut stems, damp ribbon and something sweeter underneath. Marmalade slipped past her ankles before she could stop him.

Inside, the shop looked exactly as it always had, which somehow made it worse. Scissors beside the register. A cardigan over a chair. An order book open to Tuesday.

Bea read the first line. White lilies. No message. Paid in cash. Under recipient, in June's neat handwriting, was a name that was not June Bell. It was Bea's.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

An arrangement of clues

Bea called the constable before touching anything else. This was what sensible people did. Then, because sensible people could also read, she looked at the carbon copy beneath the order.

Someone had pressed hard enough to leave a second address. The old railway house, empty since Christmas. Bea had passed it yesterday and noticed smoke in the chimney.

A crash came from the back room. Marmalade emerged carrying a length of lavender ribbon. At its end was a small brass key.

'You are going to make this very difficult to explain,' Bea said. The cat dropped the key at her feet. Outside, the delivery driver asked whether he could have his mug back.

Bea looked again at her name in the order book. Whoever had sent the flowers had made one mistake. She was very much alive, and she had nothing planned for the afternoon.