

The Magical Flower Shop: A Secret is Seldom Solo

By Gina Mayer

Chapter One: The Odd Woman

Before Violet opened the door of the flower shop, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. That fragrance! It wafted through the keyhole and the cracks around the door and filled the entire house.

Violet laughed, and she had every reason to. Two weeks of vacation stretched out before her. And Aunt June had not only agreed that she could spend the whole day in Aunt Abigail's flower shop, but for the first time she was also allowed to spend the night at Abigail's! She didn't have to go home again until tomorrow evening.

When she opened her eyes again she saw Lord Nelson. The fat, honey-colored cat sat on the bottom step and observed Violet with his head tilted. Had he been here the whole time, or had he sneaked up quietly while Violet had her eyes closed?

“Hello, Nelson.” She stretched out her hand to pet the cat, but he ducked away from her fingers and disappeared upstairs. Not because he was shy or timid. Lord Nelson decided when it was time to be affectionate, and apparently this was not the right moment.

The voices of two women could be heard coming from the shop. One was Aunt Abigail, but the other one? Curious, Violet opened the back door to the store and looked inside.

The shop seemed to be fuller than usual today. On the shelves, next to the cash register and on the floor were vases, buckets and pots of flowers radiating every color. Golden yellow daffodils, pink buttercups, light blue hyacinths and bright red tulips all competed for attention.

In front of the workbench stood Mrs. Blue from the pastry shop on the town square. She had her back to Violet.

Aunt Abigail was busy wrapping a bunch of peonies in green tissue paper. Violet couldn't see her face, but she knew her aunt wore a melancholy smile, as she always did when wrapping up flowers. She would rather have kept the peonies instead of selling them.

“Too bad, too bad, too bad,” squawked Lady Madonna in her cage, hanging above the cash register. From that vantage point the turquoise parakeet could keep an eye on, and comment on, everything going on in the shop.

“I wish I had never taught her to talk,” Aunt Abigail sighed at least three times a day. “Then I wouldn't have to listen to her cheeky commentary all the time.”

“Really too bad,” Lady Madonna twittered as Abigail taped the tissue paper together.

Lady Madonna is right, Violet thought, it's really too bad about the peonies. The blooms were white and huge, almost as big as Violet's head. And they gave off a beautiful scent that Violet could smell from where she stood, even though she hadn't moved from the doorway.

“Cut the stems on the diagonal and change the water every other day, and the flowers will stay fresh for a long time.” Aunt Abigail handed over the bouquet across the workbench. “Here you go!”

“Thank you!” called Lady Madonna.

Mrs. Blue eagerly held her nose to the flowers. “Delightful, Miss Abigail. Your flowers smell better than my cakes.” She pulled out her wallet and gave Aunt Abigail a few bills. Aunt Abigail opened the old-fashioned cash register and took out the change. When she raised her head again, she saw Violet.

“Violet, *darling!*” She smiled at her niece.

Mrs. Blue turned around toward her, too. “Oh, hello, Violet. Are you here for some flowers, too?”

“No, no, I belong to the shop,” Violet said, although that wasn't really true.

The flower shop belonged to Aunt Abigail, and Violet was only there with her on Saturdays and Wednesdays after school. The rest of the week she lived with her foster parents, the Berrys. Aunt June and Uncle Nick.

Today, however, was neither Saturday nor Wednesday, but Thursday. Unlike Violet, Aunt June didn't have vacation; it was a normal workday at the bank for her. And Uncle Nick was on the road driving his truck. So that Violet wouldn't have to be home alone, she was allowed to be with Aunt Abigail. And tonight – that was the best part – she didn't have to go home, like she usually did, but was going to have dinner with Abigail and then her aunt would read her a story and then Violet was going to sleep on her flower-covered sofa. Aunt June and Uncle Nick planned to go see a movie.

“I wonder why we don't do this more often. You two can go out at night and I'll stay with Aunt Abigail,” Violet had suggested at breakfast. “It would be convenient for you two, wouldn't it?”

Concern immediately cast a shadow on Aunt June's face. “Aw, kid, sometimes I think you'd like to just move in with Abigail.”

“Nonsense!” Violet replied. “I love you.”

“Well that's a relief!” said Uncle Nick. “Cuz we're crazy about you, too!”

The Berrys were truly the best foster parents anyone could wish for. Aunt June made superb apple pie and Uncle Nick sang sailors' songs to Violet that sounded ghastly because he couldn't carry a tune. For years they had hoped to have children, but didn't have any – until they took in Violet. But a year ago Aunt Abigail had turned up in the city, and ever since then Aunt June had worried constantly that she could lose Violet. Aunt Abigail was Violet's actual aunt, while Aunt June was ‘only’ her foster mother. That was complete nonsense, of course; Violet didn't want to go anywhere. She liked all three of them: Aunt June, Uncle Nick, and Aunt Abigail.

“How lovely that you're finally here, Violet,” Aunt Abigail said now.

“And I can stay until tomorrow night,” Violet replied.

“Well, I don't want to keep you any longer,” Mrs. Blue said. “Have a good day.”

“You, too.” Aunt Abigail watched Mrs. Blue carry the peonies out of the store with regret. “Don't forget to cut the...” but the door was already falling shut and Mrs. Blue couldn't hear Abigail's words anymore.

“Too bad, too bad, really too bad.” Lady Madonna chirped.

“Shut up,” Aunt Abigail retorted, then turned to Violet again. “Tea?”

“Of course! Of course!” Lady Madonna rejoiced. “You’re welcome! Thank you!”

“Of course,” Violet said also, although she had just finished breakfast. But Aunt Abigail’s tea was something quite special. She didn’t use pre-made tea bags, but instead made tea from rose petals, fresh mint, rose hips or hibiscus flowers. Sometimes she even added dried apples, orange peel or cinnamon. Her tea tasted different every time, but always fantastic.

“Come with me, then.” Aunt Abigail came out from behind the counter and wanted to go to the kitchen, but at that moment the bell above the door chimed. A tall, thin woman came into the flower shop.

“Good morning,” Aunt Abigail said, glancing at the rest of the peonies nervously. She probably would have liked to tuck them safely to the side so that no one could buy any more of them and take them away.

“Good morning.” The thin woman stood still in the middle of the store, fumbled for a note in her purse, and stared at the piece of paper.

“Can I help you, or would you like to look around for a bit first?” Aunt Abigail asked.

“Help.” Now the woman raised her head and looked at Aunt Abigail. There was a strange gleam in her eyes, as if she had a fever. “I need help.”

“What are you looking for?” Abigail asked in a friendly tone.

“Bananas?” Lady Madonna suggested. “Lemons? Have a look! Thank you!”

The woman’s face showed her irritation as she looked over at Violet. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Violet responded. “That was Lady Madonna, our parakeet.” She pointed to the cage hanging above the register.

“You’re welcome!” Lady Madonna chirped.

The stranger’s glance flew briefly to the bird, then back to Violet and from her to Abigail. “Your daughter?” For a moment her face brightened. “The resemblance is obvious.”

“My niece,” Aunt Abigail said.

“Ah, I see. I apologize.”

“No need to be sorry,” said Violet. It wasn’t the first time that someone had thought she was Aunt Abigail’s daughter; they really did look a lot alike. They had the same unruly, orange-red, curly hair and countless freckles on their noses, cheeks and foreheads. Even on their arms and necks and on their toes.

The woman looked down at her note again. Maybe she had written down what kind of flowers she was supposed to buy.

“I just got in some beautiful primroses,” Aunt Abigail commented, clearly attempting to steer her away from the peonies.

The woman shook her head. “No, no, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Maybe a little basket of forget-me-nots?” Violet suggested.

Another shake of her head. “Pim-pi-nel-la,” the thin woman spoke, enunciating each syllable.

“Pimpinella?” Violet asked. What kind of a flower was that? She looked at Aunt Abigail questioningly, and noticed something astonishing.

Her aunt’s body suddenly seemed to grow larger. Her shoulders were squared, her head stretched higher, and her expression appeared curious, anxious and secretive, all at the same time.

“Oh,” was Abigail’s reply. And then, “Violet, why don’t you go on upstairs and put the kettle on for tea?”

Violet, however, didn’t want to go upstairs just at that moment. She wanted to know why they were acting so mysterious. And what pimpinella meant.

But she was not going to find out. The thin woman didn’t utter another sound and held onto the note with both hands, as if she were afraid that Violet might take it away from her. Aunt Abigail didn’t say anything, either.

The only one who continued babbling happily was Lady Madonna. “Happy birthday to you!” she sang. “Enjoy your tea!”

“I’m happy to wait,” Violet said. “We can go upstairs together whenever you’re ready.”

“Go upstairs, Violet.” There was a strange glistening in Aunt Abigail’s light green eyes that Violet had only seen one time before: when Lord Nelson ate an entire delivery of marigolds. Danger, high voltage is what that look meant.

“I’m going already,” Violet mumbled.

“Bye-bye!” cried Lady Madonna. Stupid bird.