

ALL GOOD THINGS

BY ROSEMARY REEVE

CHAPTER ONE

There wasn't enough blood. That was the problem. If it had spattered across the clean, white pages of her brief, everyone would have agreed that her disappearance was suspicious. But as it was, the stain on her office carpet was only a little larger than a quarter. It should have been easy to overlook, easy to step over, but I couldn't take my eyes off it. I was sure I hadn't seen it there before.

It happened Monday morning. Harmony's door had been closed when I got in. Nothing unusual there. Harmony stayed late and came early. About nine, I knocked to see if she wanted to run downstairs for a latte. She didn't answer. I figured she was on the phone. About ten, Bob from the mailroom came by to ask me if Harmony had been around. He hadn't seen her all morning, either, he said, and she hadn't touched the stack of faxes he had left on her chair.

Bob and I walked into her office. It looked like she was there. Her computer was humming, but the screen was dark. I touched a key, and the blue screen leapt to life. She was in e-mail. I logged her out, mindful of the e-mail bandits who liked to sneak into unsuspecting associates' offices and send messages - sometimes humorous, often stupid, usually cruel - from their computers. As I turned around, I saw the thick brief spread on her desk, peppered with edits and revisions in her round, precise handwriting. Her fountain pen lay across the paper, uncapped.

"I left her the first fax just after seven," Bob said. "I've been back three times with the rest, but she's not picking them up."

Bob seemed upset. He took his delivery duties seriously. More than once, he'd tracked me down in the men's room to bestow the latest urgent message from someone who was just too busy and too important to use overnight mail.

Now his face was pinched. "She always tells us if she's going to be out," he said. "She tells us; she tells Janet; she puts it on her voicemail. She's the only one who does." He reddened a moment, embarrassed by his unintentional reproach. "But Janet doesn't know where she is, and I don't know where she is, and it's just not like Harmony to let people down."

"It certainly is not." Bob and I jumped at the voice from the doorway. Janet Daniels, Harmony's secretary and a much-feared fixture of the 42nd floor, was staring at me with disapproval, as if it were my fault that Harmony was late and hadn't called in. "You wouldn't happen to know where Ms. Piper is this morning, would you, Jack?"

Ms. Piper. Geez. Harmony was twenty-nine-years old. Janet was somewhere between fifty and death, an iron-voiced lady with rusty white hair and a surprisingly - and deceptively - sweet face. She terrorized the staff and associates, but she was always nice to Harmony. Maybe it was because Harmony's grandfather had been Humphrey Piper, the original Piper of Piper Whatcom & Hardcastle. Maybe it was because Harmony's father was Humphrey Piper II, the current Piper of Piper Whatcom & Hardcastle. Or maybe it was just because Harmony was easy to like.

"She was here late last night," I told Janet. "I left around midnight, and she was still here." When I saw Janet's expression, I added, "I offered her a ride, but she said she was going to put in a few more hours and take a cab home. I'm sure she's just sleeping in. She's been working awfully hard on all this stuff."

As I tapped the brief on Harmony's desk, the fountain pen skidded off the papers and spun onto the floor. Janet made a disgusted, guttural noise. I got down on my knees to assess the damage. The pen had rolled underneath

Harmony's desk and out the other side, by the two chairs she kept for visitors. There was a dark stain by the nib. I crawled further under the desk to get the pen, but Janet was too fast for me. From beneath the desk, I saw Janet's cruel high heels by the chair legs, her thin, ringed hand grasp the pen. I heard her hiss, "Really, Jack," and saw her handkerchief daubing at the stain. And then Janet took the handkerchief away, and I heard nothing at all.

Puzzled, I crawled out, straightened up, and faced Janet across the desk. She was holding the pen in one hand, her handkerchief in the other. Her thumb was pressed against the pen nib, but it hadn't left so much as a shadow of ink on her skin. On her handkerchief was a brownish smear. She was looking from one hand to the other in bewilderment. Without speaking, she suddenly thrust the pen and handkerchief at me.

The nib of the pen was dry. I tried it on the corner of one of Harmony's papers, and it left an exhausted, chalky trail. When I touched the stain on Janet's handkerchief, no one had to tell me it was blood. It was flaky and copperish, and it seemed perversely alive.