

A PIPER SAIL MYSTERY

THE SECRET INVESTIGATOR OF ASTOR STREET

STEPHANIE MORRILL



CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER 1, 1924
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

I gaze up at the Applegates' imposing brick house and take a bracing breath. Mrs. Applegate has never liked me—the feeling is mutual—but Rebecca Jensen's disappearance is far more important than our petty disputes over the years. I glance at my watch. Only five minutes until I should start walking to Presley's for the awards ceremony. I could delay this conversation until after . . . but doing so might impact how fast we find Rebecca. I'll just have to be late for the ceremony. When someone is missing, every minute matters.

I unlatch the wrought iron gate and tug on Sidekick's leash. He plants his rear on the sidewalk despite the snow, and gives me a look that clearly reads *no*. Gone are the days of Sidekick giving me timid glances or shivering in the cold because he was malnourished. His once lanky body is now thick with muscle and covered in a fluffy coat of fur the color of sun-bleached sand.

My exhale is visible in the early December chill. "Believe me, I understand. She likes you better than me, though."

With another pull and some scratching of his floppy ears, I convince Sidekick that walking through the gate is something he can do. I adjust my cloche and survey my attire to make sure there's nothing about my appearance that Mrs. Applegate will

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find offensive. I'm unusually tidy, thanks to my morning plans. My coat covers most of my drop-waist dress, but even so, it's clean and a tasteful shade of burgundy. I already know she hates my bobbed hair, but I can't do anything about that. I *am* wearing stockings rather than bare legs, which will hopefully count for something.

I inhale, exhale, and rap on Mrs. Applegate's door.

Sidekick edges toward a potted evergreen, eyeing the festive red velvet bow. I wrap his leash around my hand an extra time. "No."

He looks up at me with woeful eyes.

"I'm sorry, but you'll ruin the whole interview if you eat her Christmas decorations."

From the other side of the door, footsteps approach, and I force a polite smile onto my face. There's probably no amount of politeness that can make up for an entire rambunctious childhood of living next door to Mrs. Applegate, but it doesn't hurt to try.

Mrs. Applegate opens the door. She's a large woman, tall and solidly built. Her steel-streaked hair is wound into a large knot on the crown of her head, and her brown eyes are magnified behind thick eyeglasses. She takes one look at me and frowns.

"Hello, Mrs. Applegate." I use the sweet and courteous tone I always heard Lydia use with our neighbors, which is why everybody adored Lydia. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm fine, Piper." Her critical gaze runs over the length of me. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, actually. Do you mind answering a few questions for me?"

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Mrs. Applegate's sharp gaze flicks from me to Sidekick and back to me. "Is this about Rosamund's granddaughter?"

In recent months, I've spent some time practicing an *I'm not surprised* look in the mirror, because it seems like that could be useful during investigations. I try it now but have a feeling I fall short. "So, you've heard that she went missing yesterday? When did you last see her?"

Mrs. Applegate looks at me in a way she never has before—with a hint of a smile and a sheen in her eyes that, if I had to label it, I would say is compassion. "They found Rebecca safe and sound last night. She fell asleep on the train and missed her stop. That's all, Piper."

I inhale deeply. It's the first easy breath I've taken since last night, when I heard that Mrs. Jensen's fourteen-year-old granddaughter boarded the train for Detroit but hadn't yet arrived, despite it being hours past when she should've. "You're sure?"

"I'm quite sure. I spoke with Rosamund this morning, who spoke to her daughter-in-law. Rebecca is home."

"I'm so relieved to hear that." My eyes brim with tears. "I'd feared the worst."

Mrs. Applegate nods, and her gaze drifts to my scarred cheek, which I did my best to conceal with liquid makeup this morning. "Of course you did."

I take another deep breath. Rebecca is home. I can go to Emma's award ceremony without having to worry about what happened to Mrs. Jensen's granddaughter or where she might be.

I check my wristwatch and step back from the door. "Thank you, Mrs. Applegate. Sorry to rush off so quickly, but I'm headed to Presley's. Emma Crane has won the Service to School and Others award, and the ceremony is this morning."

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Mrs. Applegate's eyes light. "How wonderful for our Emma! You've been so fortunate as to have the loveliest of friends."

An unvoiced question lingers in her compliment of Lydia and Emma. *Why are these lovely girls friends with you, Piper Sail?*

But I just smile and say, "Yes, I'm very lucky," before I turn and dash down the final steps. "Good day, Mrs. Applegate!"

Though if I were truly lucky, Lydia would still be here with us. She wouldn't have been kidnapped, right here in the Astor Street District, and killed a short time later. This morning, Astor Street appears magical, with its manicured trees balancing ribbons of snow on their branches, the sky a bright blue overhead. I've lived here for most of my life, so I often overlook how picturesque my neighborhood is. These days, it's hard for me to notice the beauty without also noticing the shadow it casts.

Last night, I'd laid awake for hours making lists of everyone in the neighborhood I'd seen Rebecca speak to during the week of Thanksgiving. This morning, I telephoned the train station, asking about options for traveling to Detroit, and then I'd gone so far as to place a long-distance call to the Detroit station to ask about arrivals from Chicago. I knew the call would take a chunk out of my weekly allowance, but if I could help find Rebecca before anything horrible happened to her, the expense was well worth it.

And as it turns out, none of that was necessary, because the girl had, thankfully, just fallen asleep on the train. I'm grateful, of course. But I'm something else too. Something I can't quite label.

Something I don't have time to dwell on, because I need to get Sidekick back inside and grab my handbag. Hopefully, I can still make it to Presley's somewhat on time.

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I run up my front steps and burst through the door. As I loosen Sidekick's leash, I look up to find my father's wife, Jane, in the living room. She sits at the small desk and works on something that involves both a monthly calendar and a notepad. In the not quite six months they've been married, Jane has heartily embraced the life available to Astor Street wives. She's likely planning some sort of tea or fund-raiser or another similar gathering that primarily serves to keep a woman's mind needlessly and harmlessly occupied.

Jane looks up with a smile fixed on her face. Her appearance is lovely and ladylike, as always. Her raven hair is freshly trimmed at her chin, and the forest green shade of her dress makes her hazel eyes appear lighter.

"Piper." She says my name with surprise. "Where have you been?"

"They found Rebecca."

Jane blinks at me several times, and it's clear she's trying to interpret my meaning without having to ask.

"Rebecca Jensen," I add. "Mrs. Jensen's granddaughter? They found her."

"Oh, yes." Jane chuckles. "Yes, I know. She fell asleep on the train, silly thing. Rosamund came around late last night to let us know. You'd already gone to bed."

Jane goes back to her note-taking and I stare at the top of her head. "You should've told me that. I've been really worried."

Jane looks up, eyes wide. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize." Her gaze is assessing. "Though I should have, shouldn't I?"

I snatch my small, beaded bag from the hook. "I need to leave. Sidekick has already been walked and fed."

"Piper, I really am sorry."

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I intended to slam the door behind me, but Jane's tone—sincere, regretful—makes me pause. I scrub the last of the anger from my voice and say, "All that matters is that Rebecca is home safe."

I pull the door closed as Jane is saying something else—likely an inquiry about when I'll be home. She likes to pretend to have a maternal role in my life even though to be my mother, she would've had to give birth to me when she was nine.

As I trot down my front steps, I flip up the collar of my red plaid coat to keep the wind's chill off my neck. I glance again at my watch, as though it's going to tell me something besides *you're already running late*.

I'll walk fast. It'll help keep me warm.

I've just closed our front gate when a male voice calls out, "Piper!" from the Buick parked along the sidewalk.

I know the voice instantly but have to draw closer before I can see Jeremiah Crane's face in the driver's seat. He wears his trilby the same as always: skewed slightly and paired with a smirk that implies he's God's gift to the ladies of Chicago. Jeremiah's handsome enough to get away with such a look, but I would absolutely never tell him that.

I bend so I can speak to him through the open passenger window. "How are you?"

"Emma said you need a ride to the ceremony."

I frown. When I mentioned to Jeremiah's sister that I'd be relying on public transportation this morning, I hadn't intended for her to pass that information along to her older brother. "That isn't entirely accurate—"

"Do you have a ride to the school or no?"

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I instinctively hold my cloche to my head as a breeze kicks up, a reflex for all Chicagoans. “Well, no, but—”

“Okay, then.” Jeremiah starts the car and calls over the thrum of the engine, “Hop in.”

The direct order to get inside Jeremiah’s Buick makes me bristle. For a moment, I imagine myself turning and walking away, my shoulders square and my chin high. “Stubborn to a fault” is how my mother used to describe me, and she wasn’t wrong. It’s one of my many flaws.

With a sigh that’s kept private thanks to the engine’s continued growl, I open the passenger door and climb inside. “Thank you,” I force myself to say.

Jeremiah exhales a scoffing laugh. “You do *not* mean that.”

I forget sometimes how well Jeremiah knows me. How similar we are. “You’re right.” I bite my lip to keep from grinning. “But I probably *am* appreciative. Deep inside.”

His laugh is a warm rumble, and the look he casts my direction is so admiring, I turn away, cheeks burning. “Mariano wanted to come this morning, but he’s working. Otherwise he would have driven me.”

This isn’t much subtler than flat-out saying, *Do not look at me like that. I’m dating someone else*. Something had to be said, though.

Jeremiah’s smile cools and he nods once. “I’m sure he would’ve.”

He fixes his gaze on the road as he waits to turn onto Lake Shore Drive, and an uncomfortable silence buckles itself into the seat between us.

Once upon a time, whenever Jeremiah paid attention to me, I flirted back. Or I at least attempted to flirt back. Our

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conversations involved too much bickering to be considered “flirtatious” in the classic sense of the word. When it comes to flattering boys, I’ve always felt like I’m an elephant stomping around, inadvertently crushing egos. But Jeremiah also has a rather antagonizing style of conversing—of doing everything, really—and we might’ve been good together, if we’d had the chance to try.

“It’s kind of you to come support Emma this morning,” Jeremiah says as he navigates the busy street.

I fuss with the hem of my coat, trying to cover as much of my legs as possible. “Emma was nice enough to extend an invitation. How could I say no?”

“In my experience, it’s very easy. No is a single syllable, same as the word yes.”

I smile. For Jeremiah, saying no really is as simple as that, and I suspect that his unemotional, confident decision-making serves him very well at *The Daily Chicagoan*, the newspaper his father started two decades ago. Jeremiah works there now as a reporter, and he’ll someday run the whole thing.

“It isn’t as though I wanted to say no. Or like I have a busy schedule these days.” I press my teeth into my lower lip. What an awkward thing to say. When will I learn to think before words shoot out from my mouth? “Did you hear Rebecca Jensen arrived home safely?”

“No.” He drags out the word. “Should I know who that is?”

This response isn’t too surprising, considering Jeremiah no longer lives in the neighborhood.

“Mrs. Jensen’s granddaughter. Her family was here from Detroit for Thanksgiving, and then Rebecca stayed on a few more days. She was supposed to return home yesterday, only

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she never got off the train.” I look out the window at the wide, choppy waters of Lake Michigan. “Everyone was panicked, understandably, but it appears she fell asleep and missed her stop. She’s home safe now.”

“I’m glad to hear everything turned out okay.”

“Me too.”

My throat constricts as I think of Rebecca, and then of Lydia, who was also missing but then stolen from us forever. While I’m relieved about Rebecca, relieved for her family and kind Mrs. Jensen, I can’t deny there’s another feeling wrapped around that relief. I couldn’t name it initially, but I can now: disappointment.

I’m not at all disappointed that Rebecca’s safe, of course, but for the few hours while I was searching for her, I felt useful in a way I haven’t since solving the mystery of Lydia’s death. If only *that* were a career option for women—being a detective.

I glance at Jeremiah and find he’s once again looking at me with unwarranted affection. Instead of pointedly reminding him of Mariano once more, I reach for the unromantic subject of the Chicago crime scene.

“I read your article on the brewing war between the North and South Side gangs. I can’t believe you called out specific mobsters by name.”

Jeremiah winks. “Pretty brave of me, don’t you think?”

“I was thinking it was pretty stupid of you, actually. And Emma agrees with me, by the way.”

“Traitorous sister,” Jeremiah says with a laugh. “Well, it’s either stupid or brave. Time will tell.”

My diversion works. For the next few minutes, Jeremiah shares details of another piece he’s working on, this one about the consequences Prohibition has had in Chicago, and he’s still

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talking about that as the high limestone walls of Presley's School for Girls come into view.

My chest tightens. I spent my four years as a student longing to be done with the place, and yet now there's something inside me that yearns to be a Presley's girl once more. Why is that?

"Finally," Jeremiah says as he spots a space wide enough to park the car. "Sorry, I should've dropped you off at the door. We'll have to walk a bit."

"I'm fine. I originally planned to walk to and from the L station, remember? I'm not going to complain about a trek across campus."

I collect my beaded handbag from beside me, and it feels pointlessly small in my grasp. I've grown accustomed to carrying a leather shopping bag that was once my mother's instead of these tiny, stylish bags that hold nothing more than pin money and a lipstick. Well, and a pocketknife. I refuse to go anywhere without that.

I exit the car before Jeremiah can do anything needlessly chivalrous, like open my door for me, and then I again take in the familiar building. Maybe my longing to be a student once more is normal nostalgia rather than a sign of immaturity or cowardice? Maybe I would feel this way even if I had left to attend Bryn Mawr or one of the other universities I'd been accepted to but never confirmed.

Throughout childhood, as I navigated the narrow, ordained path of one grade leading to the next, I'd assumed the moment I graduated would feel like blissful freedom. That the whole world would feel wide open to me. I didn't know that instead it would feel terrifying and lonely, as though I've taken an incorrect step and ended up living the wrong life.

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“Ready?”

I startle. Jeremiah looks at me, hands in his pockets, eyebrows raised. I swallow the truth: *No. Not at all.*

“Yes.” I put on a smile and take a step forward, wobbling slightly as my heel presses into the slick ground. “I’m ready.”