



## *Caught in the Middle*

By Gayle Roper

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### Chapter 1

“It was a dark and sleety night,” I muttered as I slid behind the wheel and slammed the car door, grateful to have reached protection without drowning. I tossed my briefcase onto the seat and shook the water out of my rain-frizzed hair.

“Merrileigh Kramer, what have you done?” my mother had asked in horror when I’d had my waist length hair drastically cut at summer’s end on the new-look, new-person theory.

I’d gazed in the mirror and wondered the same thing myself. I hadn’t cut my hair, except for its annual split ends trimming, since ninth grade. For a woman who hated change, I’d done a very drastic thing when I entered that beauty parlor. And it had only been step one.

Now my hand bounced on my curly mass like a kid on a trampoline. I sighed and reminded myself that it would grow eventually. The only trouble was that I had to keep it curly until it grew. I didn’t know what else to do with it.

I eased my way across the parking lot, uncertain how slippery the millions of needles of icy rain had made things. The others who had been attending the Wednesday evening Board of Education meeting with me moved just as slowly. What had begun as a cold, nasty rain had turned to sleet when we weren’t looking.

When it was my turn to pull out onto the road, I stepped slowly on the gas. The wheels spun for an instant on the thin layer of ice, then grabbed hold.

I hated ice. Every time I drove on it, I thought of my mother and the winter’s day in Pittsburgh years ago when she had been driving me and four friends home from Brownies. I remembered the terrifying spin across the other lane and the oncoming cars scrambling to avoid us. I remembered the thud of our car as it hit the utility pole. I still felt my heaving stomach and tasted the fear.

Mostly I remembered the screams and my mother’s white face and the blood from the bashed noses. The fact that no one had been badly hurt then did not ease my fluttering heart tonight.

I drove carefully, watching for trouble. At Manor Avenue and Lyme Street I detoured slowly around a pair of cars blocking the intersection as they sat with their left headlights locked together. Their drivers stood in the rain doing a good imitation of their cars, their noses mere inches apart.

I couldn't help grinning at the, but I gripped the wheel more tightly. My heart throbbed in my temple.

With relief I turned onto Main Street where the traffic was moving more quickly, keeping the road from freezing. When I passed *The News* office, the lights were still on, and I felt a surge of belonging. I beeped my horn in greeting to whoever was working so late. Don, my fearsome editor? Mac, his lecherous but charming assistant? Larry, the sports guy?

Tomorrow Don would bestow on me the honor of writing a story about the first ice storm of the season. I knew it. Such stories were favorite ploys of editors, and as new kid on the block, I was certain to get the assignment. I'd had worse. At least there'd be plenty of material in the police report about all the fender benders. Between the ice storm and the Board of Education meeting, I'd be plenty busy before deadline. Then I had scheduled an interview with a local artist. Variety to be sure.

I turned onto Oak Lane and felt the wheels slue.

*Hang on, I told myself. You're almost home.*

I took my foot off the gas, gritted my teeth, and proceeded slowly between the rows of cars parked against each curb.

Suddenly a car on my right roared to life like a lion scenting its prey. Without looking, it sprang from its parking place, barely leaving the paint on my fender. I instinctively did exactly what I'd always lectured myself about not doing. I hit the brakes hard on ice.

Of course I went into an immediate skid. My headlights raked across the offending car as it pulled away, briefly revealing a man, hat pulled down over his eyes, collar up against the weather, staring intently ahead, completely unaware of me or anything else.

My stomach became mush, and my heart thumped wildly in my ears as I skidded helplessly toward a new blue car parked on the left. I whipped my wheel into the skid just like everyone said you should, but still the shiny blue door panels with their navy and-red racing stripes rushed at me. My headlights blazed on the chrome; the black windows loomed darkly.

But my real terror was for the man who had suddenly materialized at the front bumper of the blue car, standing like a pedestrian waiting for a clear path to jaywalk. I had no idea where he'd come from.

"Please, God, don't let me hit him!" I was a Brownie again, panic-stricken.

His features were indistinct through the rain-washed window, but I could see the O of his mouth as he saw me rushing toward him. He turned to run.

I closed my eyes involuntarily against the crash, shoulders hunched, face screwed up in apprehension. I was probably screaming, but thankfully I don't remember.

Screaming has always struck me as a sign of weakness, and I'd like to imagine I react with style even when I'm afraid. And I was afraid.

After a very long, slow-motion moment, my car shuddered to a silent halt. I cautiously opened my eyes and found myself mere inches from the blue car's front fender, the two cars neatly side by side and too close together for my door to open. I could not have parked so well had I tried.

I slid across the seat and flung open the far door. I didn't think I'd hit the man – I had neither heard nor felt a thump – but I had to make sure he wasn't crushed under my wheels. I pressed a hand against my anxiety-cramped abdomen and climbed into the downpour.

The man wasn't lying broken on the road. In fact he wasn't anywhere, lying or standing, broken or whole. He had completely disappeared.

I leaned against my car, weak with relief, and took deep breaths. I barely felt the icy sleet running down my neck. Finally I was able to move enough to get myself back into the car, and with a strange, shaky feeling, I drove the few remaining blocks home. I couldn't wait to get there, take a hot shower, and relax with Whiskers purring in my lap as I drank a Diet Coke and ate a handful of Oreos. By then my heart would probably be beating regularly again.

My snug, cozy carriage-house apartment had once been part of the estate of Amhearst's leading citizen, Charlie Mullens, a man who'd made millions in the stock market in the twenties and built a great mansion to forget his New York tenement beginnings. He had lost his fortune in the Great Crash of '29 and his life shortly thereafter when he drove the new Rolls Royce he could no longer pay for into the railroad overpass. His heirs, reduced to working for a living, soon sold the gracious, money eating mansion and moved from Amhearst.

Over the next forty years the property passed from hand to hand, deteriorating steadily until it was razed in the early seventies. At the time the carriage house, which had sat peacefully behind the mansion, unnoticed and unused, was renovated into four one-bedroom apartments, two on the ground floor and two above. A long, narrow drive off Oak Lane gave access to the quaint building, and I turned down the drive, grateful to be home.

It was still somewhat strange to me that this was home. Here I was, all alone in Amhearst, working as a reporter on *The News*, responsible to no one but God and Don Eldredge, the newspaper's owner-editor.

*I don't have to do anything*, I understood one evening during my first week in Amhearst. *I'm completely on my own. If I want to eat and pay the rent, I'd better go to work, but I don't have to. There's no one here who cares enough to make me.*

It had been a strange, lonely, and frightening realization. There were no family, no friends, no acquaintances here. It was just me, making my own choices. The next day I had gone to the animal shelter and gotten Whiskers, a huge, gray-and-white mottled cat with marvelous white whiskers. Now at least I was responsible to one other living being.

Now I had to fulfill at least one obligation every day or my shins would be black and blue from Whiskers butting them, his special was of asking for dinner.

Leaving Pittsburgh and home had been hard for me. I like to think of myself as independent, but the truth is that I like to be “independent” surrounded by familiar things.

I’d gone back home after college, moving in with my parents, content to be where everything was known and comfortable. I hadn’t had to find a new doctor or a new dentist or a new church. I’d become a general reporter at the paper where I had worked for three of my college summers, and I’d done very well, even winning a couple of minor journalism awards.

And, of course, Jack was in Pittsburgh: handsome, personable, accomplished, irresponsible Jack.

I had expected to live at home one, maybe two years at the very longest. After all, I was an independent spirit. I was amazed and appalled when I woke up one morning and realized I had been there for four years, waiting for life to happen. Waiting for Jack.

“Just a little more time, Merry,” he’d say. “That’s all I’m asking. Just a little more time.”

Eventually, to save myself from drowning in despair, I’d come to Amhearst, and my first weeks here had been terrible. I hated all the new people, the new streets, the new stores. I got a toothache, probably from grinding my teeth all night in fear, and I had to find a new dentist. I hated him too.

But I’d made it. I’d learned to like my job, and I slowly remembered that being alone wasn’t the worst thing in the world. I might not be laughing much yet, but I was slowly regaining some self-respect.

“Forgetting what is behind,” Dad said one night on the phone, quoting St. Paul. “Straining toward what’s ahead. Pressing ahead toward a new life. We’re proud of you, Merry.”

Jack spoke to me on the phone a few times too and even came to visit me once. I agonized over that visit, filled with equal measures hope and dread. The reality was dull, compared to my nightmares and daydreams.

“Come back when you’re ready to get married,” he told me as he left.

“I’ll come back when I have a ring on my finger and a date on the calendar, not before,” I replied. Then I went into my apartment and cried myself sick.

And so summer had become fall, and fall a nasty, sleety, early December night with icy roads, and I was finally home.

I parked, climbed out into the cold and wet, and hurried to my trunk where I’d stashed a case of Diet Coke. The dim light by the walk barely illuminated the area.

I looked uncomfortably over my shoulder. It was dark and spooky back here even on a nice night, but in the rain and sleet, it was worse than usual. The large lilac at the edge of the house was especially eerie tonight with its branches creaking and complaining about their icy bath.

I eyed the dripping tree, trying to penetrate it to make certain it wasn't hiding someone. Come May, those blossoms had better be beautiful and fragrant to make up for my heart palpitations the rest of the year.

Although, I told myself with false bravado, no bad guy in his right mind would be lurking behind a lilac tree on a night like this.

Even so, the last thing I expected to find when I raised the lid of my trunk was a dead body.

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