



*Christmas in
Peppercorn Street*

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Chapter One

December

Heavy rain blurred the windscreen in spite of the wipers, as Luke Morgan drove slowly along the twisting country road. It wasn't yet four o'clock but it was already almost dark. Well, it was the first of December, heading towards the shortest day. He couldn't help yawning. He'd got up at five o'clock this morning to drive to Birmingham and give a talk at a conference and had just driven back to Wiltshire, so he was feeling exhausted.

He'd have stayed overnight at a friend's house, only nowadays he had to get back to his daughter. OK, Dee was sixteen, but he didn't want to leave her alone in the house.

His ex had been avoiding him ever since she'd brought Dee to live with him a few weeks ago, turning up out of the blue with a tear-stained daughter and all her possessions. The only explanation Angie had given was she could no longer cope with Dee, who kept upsetting her new partner.

Angie had taken off for Spain with that partner the day afterwards and wasn't responding to his emails or attempts to phone her. He was worried sick about poor Dee, who was clearly upset but was refusing to talk about it.

He was glad to be off the motorway and driving along these quieter country roads. Seeing the sign for the village of Bartons End, he slowed down, looking forward to getting home and—

Suddenly a large golden dog bounded onto the road in front of him and as he slammed on the brakes, a woman chasing after it ran right into the path of his car.

He pumped the brakes hard and everything seemed to happen in slow motion as he skidded towards her. 'Jump back!' he yelled, as if she could hear him.

By the time the woman became aware of the car, it was too late. She opened her mouth in an involuntary scream and turned just as the front wing of the car sent her flying sideways like a human skittle. The dog vanished through a hedge and the car squealed to a halt a few yards past where she was lying.

Sick to his stomach, Luke wrenched open the car door and rushed back to where she was sprawled like a broken doll by the side of the road. She wasn't moving.

Oh, hell, she wasn't moving!

He knelt beside her, half dazzled by the headlights of another car which had also stopped. Willing her not to be dead, he reached out and groaned in relief as his fingers found a pulse beating in her throat. For a moment, he couldn't think, couldn't move, only kneel there with relief shuddering through him that she was alive.

Then he realised there was blood on her forehead and

she needed medical help, so jerked to his feet and turned towards his car.

A man immediately blocked his path. 'You're not going anywhere.'

'My phone's in the car. I need to call an ambulance.'

The man gestured to the other vehicle. 'My wife's already phoning for one.'

'Thank goodness! Do you know anything about first aid?'

'Sorry, nothing at all.' The man walked back to his car.

Only then did Luke realise that rain was beating down on them all. Dragging off his leather jacket, he flung it over the woman and knelt again. If he remembered correctly, you weren't supposed to move an unconscious person who'd been injured.

'Use this.' The man was back, thrusting an open umbrella into Luke's hands.

He tried to hold it over her face. Wind howled around them and the umbrella nearly turned inside out, so his companion muttered something and took over holding it, protecting it from the wind with his body.

How long would the ambulance take to get here?

When the woman stirred and moaned, Luke bent closer. 'Lie still! You've been in an accident.'

She blinked and tried to focus her eyes. He leant closer to hear what she was saying.

Claire squinted up at the man bending over her, his head haloed by light so that she couldn't see his face properly. Everything seemed slightly out of focus and she was cold, so cold it hurt. Or was the pain from something else? Where was she? What had happened to her?

She closed her eyes for a moment then tried to move, letting out an involuntary ‘Ahh!’ as pain jabbed her shoulder.

‘Lie still! You’ve been in an accident.’

‘How?’ Why couldn’t she remember?

That same deep voice said, ‘You were chasing a dog and ran into the road right in front of my car. I couldn’t avoid hitting you. We’ve sent for an ambulance. What’s your name?’

‘Claire P— Small.’ She corrected herself in time.

She realised she was lying on the ground beside the road and rain was pattering down on an umbrella someone was holding over her. She shivered, still unable to bring the scene into proper focus. To have an accident now, of all times! Fear trickled through her, even sharper than the physical pain.

Her shoulder hurt a lot if she made the slightest attempt to move it. Was something broken? Oh, please, no! She’d be so helpless.

‘The ambulance will be here soon. Lie still, Mrs Small.’

How could she lie there? Gabby would be waiting for her. Once again she tried to move but the pain was too bad and she had trouble co-ordinating her body. ‘My daughter – I need to pick her up from school. And my dog . . . can you see her?’

‘It was a dog which caused this accident and it ran away afterwards. A golden Labrador. If it was yours, you should keep it under better control.’

She couldn’t hold back the tears, felt them spill from her closed eyes and make lukewarm trails on her chilled cheeks.

A warm hand clasped hers. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to shout at you. I’ve never had an accident before and I’m a bit shaken up myself.’

She was glad the stranger had continued to hold her cold hand between his. She clung to that warmth, shivering uncontrollably. 'I try to – keep Helly in – but the landlord won't – mend the fence.' She looked up at his face, so close to hers under the umbrella. 'I'm sorry! Is your car badly damaged?'

'Who cares? It's you I'm worried about, not my car.'

Without thinking she moved her arm and pain jabbed through her again, so sharply that a cry escaped her control.

For a moment her companion's face came into better focus. Good-looking in a rugged way with dark, rain-slicked hair. But then the image blurred again and she gave in to a sudden need to close her eyes.

She was desperately afraid she'd be incapacitated, unable to look after Gabby. Then how would they keep safe?

The stranger's hands were still there, large and warm around hers. Comforting. She couldn't bear to let go of them as she made an effort to speak.

'My daughter. Gabby. She'll be waiting at the primary school. She's only eight. Have to pick her up. And get the dog back.'

Luke stared down at the woman's hands, slender and shapely but as damp and cold as the rest of her. She looked vulnerable and was clearly in pain, yet her concern had been for her child, not herself. And for her dog.

It suddenly occurred to him that there was something he could do to make up for knocking her down.

'Look, I'll pick your daughter up from school myself just as soon as the ambulance comes and we'll find the dog.'

Tell me her name and where to find her, and I'll bring her to you at the hospital.'

'She's called Gabby P—' The woman groaned in her throat, then said, '*Small*. Gabby Small.'

That was the second time she'd started to say P and corrected it to Small. She must have changed her name recently – divorced, perhaps? 'Bartons End Primary?'

'Yes. It's not far from here.' Her voice was a mere thread. 'And the dog. Could you catch Helly and tie her up. *Please!* I don't want them putting her in the pound. She's a good watchdog and Gabby would be lost without her.'

'I'll see to everything. I know the school. We used to live nearby and my daughter went there when she was little.'

'Thank you.' With a soft sigh, she closed her eyes.

He wasn't sure whether she'd slipped into unconsciousness again or was just resting. Either way, he didn't want to disturb her, so stayed where he was, not trying to talk.

But the other man said, 'You can't pick up a strange child from school. They won't let you.'

'Someone has to. And she agreed to it.'

'She isn't thinking straight, probably concussed.'

A car drove past, slowed down and stopped. The window went down and a voice called, 'Need any help?'

'No, thanks. We're just waiting for the ambulance to arrive.'

'Good luck, then.'

It drove on and silence reigned again. The man from the other car was no talker, that was sure, but at least he was still holding the umbrella over them. His wife hadn't even set foot out of their vehicle.

Luke stared along the road. 'Where's that ambulance?'

‘They told my wife it’d take fifteen minutes. That’s about eight more minutes.’

It was the longest eight minutes of Luke’s life. What if Claire was bleeding internally? What if she never recovered consciousness again?

He stayed where he was, crouching at the roadside, still holding her hands to try to share some of his warmth. The rain had eased off a little, thank goodness.

His thoughts kept wandering all over the place, but he kept his eyes on the woman. With that long hair she looked like one of the water fairies in the books he’d read to his daughter when she was little. No doubt the books would now have been thrown away by his ex, together with everything else from their life together. That’d be a pity. He’d enjoyed reading them because the illustrations were so beautiful.

What stupid things came into your mind after an accident!

His daughter had been a hell of a lot easier to deal with when she was little, pretty and feminine in those days. Now, Dee wore nothing but black, had her nose and one eyebrow pierced and seemed to hate the whole world, him included. Their latest row had been about her desire for a tattoo.

What the hell was he going to do about her? His ex had washed her hands of Dee, saying the girl was impossible and since she took after her father, he could bloody well look after her from now on.

As if you could wash your hands of your own child, whatever she did!

He groaned in relief as he heard the faint wailing

of a siren in the distance. It grew rapidly louder and an ambulance appeared, stopping beside them. Its blue light was still flashing, but the noise stopped, thank goodness.

A paramedic jumped out and came to kneel beside him, feeling for the woman's pulse as he asked, 'What happened?'

'She was chasing a dog and ran out in front of my car. I couldn't stop in time and she was flung sideways.'

'Right. Thank you, sir. If you'll just move back a little.'

The other driver thrust the umbrella at him. 'You can hold this now. I'm frozen.' He walked back to his car, shoulders hunched.

'Sir, could you please try to keep the umbrella over her face? Good. That's better. Just hold it for a little longer till we can get her in the ambulance. Terrible weather, isn't it?'

'Yes.' Luke stayed there, shivering, his shirt soaked and clinging to him, water trickling down his neck. The rain was only falling lightly now, thank goodness.

Within minutes, the woman was in a neck brace and was being wheeled away on a stretcher. She was still only semi-conscious and Luke hoped she'd stay like that until they got her to hospital. He'd broken an ankle once and it had been damned painful at first.

He turned to find a police car drawing up.

An officer got out and came to stand beside him. 'Sir, are you the driver of this vehicle? Oh, it's you, Luke.'

'Yes. Look, Ted, I have to go and pick up the injured woman's daughter from school. Can I make a formal statement tomorrow?'

'Sorry, but there are some things we have to do now.' He whipped out a breathalyser.

'I haven't had anything to drink. Oh, very well!' Luke

blew into the mouthpiece impatiently and wasn't surprised when Ted nodded and said it was fine.

As if he'd drink and drive! He wasn't stupid.

Luckily the other couple who'd stopped could corroborate his description of how the accident had happened and he had his driving licence with him, showing an unblemished record.

He looked at his watch. 'I promised her I'd pick up her child and take her to the hospital.'

The female officer shook her head. 'Do you know them?'
'No.'

'Then I can't let you pick up a strange child from school.'

'I've known him for years. He's OK,' Ted protested.

'Doesn't matter. We'll have to pick her up, not him.'

'The mother's worried about the dog, as well,' Luke said.

Ted grinned at him. 'You go and look for it. We'll go to the school and collect the daughter. Meet you at the hospital.'

'I'll follow you to the school first. The daughter may know where I can find their dog.'

'OK. See you there.'

Luke ran to his car. He knew he couldn't have avoided the accident but he still felt guilty. Well, at least he could find her dog for her. That'd be something.

Some Christmas music jangled away on his radio and he switched it off impatiently. He was sick of hearing Christmas songs and it was only early December. He hadn't figured out how to celebrate Christmas in a way that would cheer Dee up. She'd just shrugged when he asked her.

When Luke arrived at the school, the police car was standing in front of the entrance and he could see the two officers inside, together with a woman and a child. The little girl was wearing a bright yellow rain cape with the hood thrown back and jiggling up and down, peering outside then looking up to say something. The resemblance to the injured woman spoke for who she was.

He joined them inside. There were Christmas decorations all round the reception area. He should at least put some up at home, whatever Dee said.

Ted introduced Luke to the woman. 'It was Mr Moran's car that Mrs Small ran in front of. Unfortunately he couldn't stop in time.'

When the teacher looked at him suspiciously, Luke said, 'Miss Roberts, isn't it? You taught my daughter Dee a few years ago.'

'Oh, yes. A very bright child. She left the school rather suddenly.'

'My wife and I split up.' Angie had left with Dee while he was away on a job. He'd come home to an empty house and most of the furniture gone with her. He'd missed his daughter dreadfully, but not Angie. By that time they were barely polite to one another.

He watched as the female officer bent to talk directly to the child. 'Your mother's been hurt in an accident, Gabby.'

The child's smile vanished instantly.

'It's all right. She's not badly hurt but she's been taken to hospital to be checked up, so we've come to take you to her.'

Luke stepped forward. 'And I promised your mother I'd go and find your dog.'

Ted's phone rang just then. He moved a few steps away and answered it. 'Oh, hell! Just a minute.'

He turned to the teacher. 'Is there any chance you can take Gabby to the hospital to join her mother, Miss Roberts? There's been a big pile-up a couple of miles away and we're the closest unit.'

She sighed but nodded. 'Very well.'

Luke intervened. 'Do you know where the dog is likely to be, Gabby?'

'Yes. In Fountains Park. She always goes there when she gets out.'

'Fountains Park. I know it.' He looked at Ted. 'I'll take the dog to the hospital and find out what the woman wants to do about it.'

Ted nodded. 'Thanks. We have to get off now.'

Miss Roberts didn't look happy and she was scowling at Luke as if he'd caused the accident on purpose.

The two officers ran back to the police car and while the teacher locked up, Luke went out to his own car.

As the teacher and Gabby reached him, the child stopped. 'If you bring Helly to the hospital, Mr Morgan, I'll look after her while I wait for Mum. We can't afford to pay the fine if the council officer takes her away, you see.'

He saw the tears in her eyes and promised, 'I won't let the council officer take her away.'

Her face cleared immediately. 'Thank you.' Only then did she let herself be pulled away by the teacher.

Luke started his car, shivering. He could have done without that icy wind on a damp shirt. Which reminded him that his leather jacket had gone off to hospital in the ambulance.

They must have thought it belonged to their patient. He'd have had to go there to get it back, anyway, even without taking the dog there.

He found the stupid animal trotting round the edge of a pond and grabbed a couple of biscuits from his emergency supplies before getting out. He bent down and called her. 'Good dog. Here you are, Helly.'

She edged a little closer, tail wagging tentatively and studying him, as if working out whether to trust him or not. He remained still, praying she'd not run away.

After another sniff at the biscuit he was holding out, she took it from him and as she swallowed it, he was able to grab her collar. Speaking soothingly, he walked her slowly towards his car and she came with him.

He groaned aloud. That dog was very wet indeed, not to mention muddy, and he definitely didn't want to let her into his car, which was only two months old. Unfortunately, there was no choice. When he opened the nearest rear door and gave her a push, she leapt inside and he shut it quickly. What that would do to the leather upholstery, he didn't like to think.

He drove off, praying the dog wouldn't jump about and make it difficult for him to drive safely, but she settled down as if used to being in cars.

The hospital was on the outskirts of the nearby town of Sexton Bassett and it took him twenty minutes to drive there at a modest pace and find a place to park.

He left the animal sitting in the car with the window slightly open. There was an overpowering smell of damp dog already and muddy water all over the pale grey leather of his almost new Mercedes.

He ran through the rain to the casualty department and found Gabby inside standing next to her teacher at the reception desk. She turned to look anxiously at him as he joined them.

‘I got Helly. I left her in my car.’

‘Oh, thank goodness!’

The woman behind the counter consulted a list on a clipboard. ‘Mrs Small is being attended to now. Are you a relative?’

‘I’m Gabby’s teacher.’

Luke moved forward to join them. ‘And I’ve got her dog in my car, so I need to see her too.’

Miss Roberts looked up at the clock and then told the woman behind the counter, ‘I can’t stay. I have to go and pick up my elderly mother. Can Gabby wait for her mother here?’

The woman frowned. ‘Isn’t there someone else who can pick up your mother? The child’s a bit young to leave on her own.’

‘No. My mother has dementia and she’s at the day care place. She wouldn’t go with anyone else but she still recognises me.’

‘I’ll sit with Gabby,’ Luke volunteered. ‘And the people can see her from here, so she’ll be safe. I can’t leave till I’ve asked her mother about the dog.’

‘Very well.’ The teacher turned and walked away.

Another shiver reminded him to ask the receptionist about his jacket. ‘I used it to keep Mrs Small warm and I need it myself now.’

She looked as if she was going to refuse to look into that, so he said, ‘Please! I’m really cold.’

‘Could you describe it, please, sir?’

Impatiently he did so, enumerating the contents of the pockets as well.

She beckoned to an orderly, who went off to look for it.

When he looked round, there was no sign of the teacher.

Gabby looked up at him. ‘Miss Roberts said I was to stay in reception and not go off with you in your car.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘Here you are, sir.’ A man held out the jacket.

Luke took it back with relief. It was a bit creased but not damp on the inside, so he shrugged into it, glad of the extra warmth.

He phoned Dee to tell her he’d be late, was about to explain why, when she said OK and broke the connection. With a sigh he put the phone away.

An unconscious man was brought in just then and people came rushing with a crash cart.

‘Please wait over there, Mr Morgan, I’ll call you when the doctor’s finished with Mrs Small.’

He gestured to some seats and the child sat down next to him.

‘Where’s Helly?’ she asked.

‘In my car.’

‘Did she come to you?’

‘Yes. But I had a biscuit.’

‘She doesn’t usually go to people, only the ones she thinks are all right. Mum says she has good instincts. I feel safe with you anyway. You have a nice smile.’

‘Thank you.’

There was something about the child that touched him. He’d definitely stay with her till they’d finished with the

mother, wanted to make sure she was all right. The A&E people were all very busy. Who knew how long Gabby would have to wait for them to finish with her mother?

Anyway, there was still the dog to think about. He hated to think what she was doing to his car.