



CHRISTMAS MIRACLES  
of MARBLE COVE

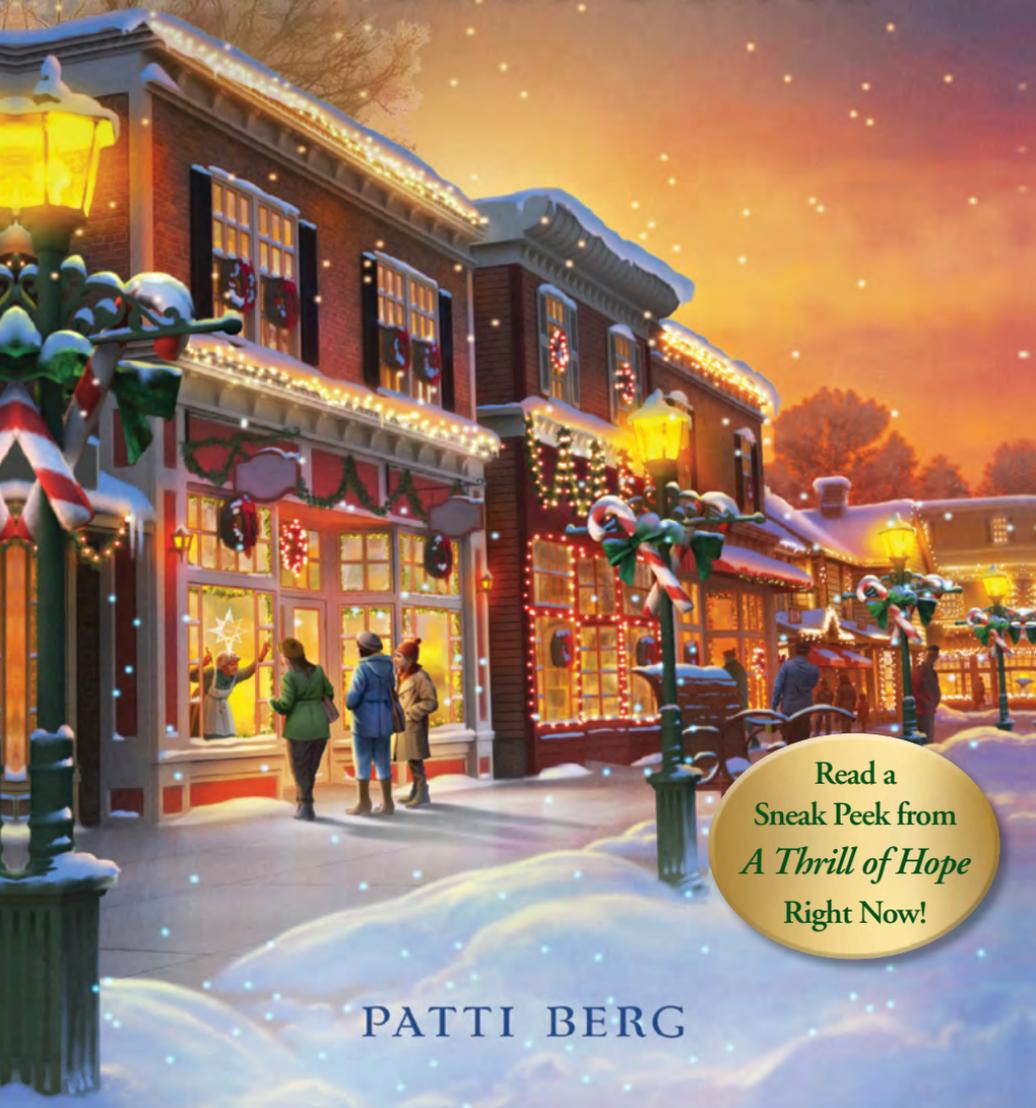
• *Two Books in One* •

VOLUME ONE

# A THRILL OF HOPE

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# HEAVENLY PEACE



Read a  
Sneak Peek from  
*A Thrill of Hope*  
Right Now!

PATTI BERG

# CHAPTER ONE

from *A Thrill of Hope*

by Patti Berg

*Something's coming. Something . . . good.* Diane Spencer could feel it in every fiber of her being as she walked out of church on the first Sunday of Advent. That good feeling radiated way down deep in her bones; in the depths of her heart.

Christmas was coming, and that made her smile. It lightened her step. But she knew there was something more, something she couldn't pinpoint. Something that could very easily catch her by surprise.

She stepped through the giant double doors of Marble Cove Community Church and into the brisk December morning. Surrounded by friends and acquaintances, she thought again about Pastor Carl's sermon, the way he'd rested his elbows on the pulpit, leaned forward and spoke to the congregation in his deep, warm voice. "And so we wait for God in patient hope. And we dream of a time when He will return." He'd paused, drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Be on your guard," he'd continued, referencing Jesus's words in Mark 13, "stay awake, because you never know when the time will come."

No wonder she felt that something good was coming, but she'd known it long before Pastor Carl uttered Christ's words, long before the first candle on the Advent wreath was lit. There was something else on its way. She didn't have an inkling what it could be, but she sensed it as surely as she tasted Christmas in the chilly, pine-scented air.

Sunshine bathed Marble Cove, Maine, but still she shivered, when a sudden gust of wind wrapped around her legs, and nearly knocked her over. Gathering her camel-colored lambswool coat



around her, she tucked her chin into her scarf, and took careful steps down the stairs, accidentally bumping into the back of Lee Waters, who'd come to an abrupt halt in front of her.

Lee, owner of the Pet Place, one of Diane and her dog Rocky's favorite stores, spun around. A moment after his eyes settled on Diane, a smile touched his face. "Merry Christmas, Diane." The young man took Diane's hand and shook it heartily. His friendliness was infectious. "How's Rocky doing? Staying away from the ornaments on your Christmas tree, I hope?"

"So far so good." Rocky hadn't seemed at all interested in the tree she'd decorated last night, but he sure hadn't wanted to be left alone this morning. She couldn't forget the sad eyes her yellow lab-retriever mix fixed on her when she left for church. He'd wanted a run on the beach, to play with the Frisbee he clutched in his mouth, not to be left alone for hours on end. Thankfully her furry pal didn't have a mischievous bone in his body.

"I got lucky when I found Rocky," she said. "He doesn't touch anything that doesn't belong to him. Doubt he ever will." She rapped her knuckles against the sapphire cloche hat she was wearing. "Knock on wood."

A melodious tune rang out on Lee's cell phone and brought an abrupt end to their conversation. "Have a great day," he said, waving a hasty good-bye as he put the phone to his ear and continued down the stairs, his voice fading in the wind.

Diane shared quick greetings with a few other parishioners, who appeared anxious to get to their cars and out of the chilly weather. Her own trip to the parking lot, however, was stopped short, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, Diane! I was so hoping to catch you."

Diane turned at the sound of Rita Candleford's breathless voice.

“Good morning,” Diane said, happy to see her friend. “Nice service this morning, wasn’t it?”

“One of Pastor Carl’s best!”

Diane couldn’t agree more. “His words about hope gave me inspiration for my next blog post.”

“I don’t know how you can possibly find time to keep up a blog, especially this time of year,” Rita said, looking harried and rushed. “I’ve been in overdrive for the last two weeks. Getting ready for Thanksgiving nearly did me in and now . . . well. . .” She drew in a deep breath. “I know it’s Christmastime and I’m sure you’re as busy as I am, but I’m hoping you can hold Bible study at your home this Thursday. I know I said we could meet at my place, but I have so many Christmas projects under way—a new quilt, a crocheted afghan and taffeta dresses for my three granddaughters.” Rita’s face was flushed and Diane knew her friend was embarrassed to ask for help. “I hate to admit it, but my home is an absolute disaster, and yours is always so neat and clean, never a thing out of place. . . Well”—Rita’s eyes widened—“could you do it?”

Diane was already on overload herself. It was, after all, the Christmas season. She had a mile long to-do list, but as was her style when asked to help out, she managed to say, “I’d be happy to.”

“You’re such a dear. I owe you one.”

Rita gave Diane a quick hug and rushed off, catching up with her husband, who was just opening the passenger door for his wife. A few moments later their car pulled away from the curb and disappeared up the street. Bless her heart, Rita Candleford was always in a rush and always on overload, no matter the time of year.

Diane half-way wished that she hadn’t agreed to host Bible study this week, but she was proud of her oceanfront cottage and loved to

entertain small groups of friends. As she walked toward the parking lot, already she was thinking about what to serve her guests. Her creamy pumpkin delight, which was nothing more than layer upon layer of cheesecake, pumpkin chiffon pie filling, and whipped cream, came to mind. On the other hand, she could skip the traditional and try out the recipe her daughter Jessica had given her for deep-dish peanut butter and Snickers pie, with salted caramel drizzled over the top. Her friends would love it.

Again the wind stirred, catching her skirt and wrapping it tightly around her legs. Brittle amber and gold leaves whipped up from the winter-brown lawn. The few puffy white clouds that had been resting lazily above her lovely town, seemed to suddenly and rapidly sail across the bright blue skies, as if they were in a hurry to get somewhere.

And then an unexpected gust of icy air caught her hat, lifted it off her head, and carried it away. The cloche, one of many hats in her collection—hats she rarely wore, only admired—bobbed and curtsied and tumbled, far across the lawn and into the parking lot, dodging cars that were slowly pulling out of parking spots and heading toward the street.

Diane raced after it, thankful her boots were flat, not high heeled, but every time she thought she could catch hold of the hat, it eluded her, as if it had a mind of its own.

She continued her sprint, watching this person and that trying to catch the slippery felt hat. When she reached her compact SUV, she leaned against the hood to catch her breath. The hat appeared to be history. She wasn't big on giving up, but it appeared that this time, the hat had won.

After taking one last deep breath, she dug into her purse, shoveling aside papers of all shapes and sizes with notes scribbled on them,

looking for her keys.

“Lose something?”

The familiar voice startled her yet made her smile, a smile that widened when she caught sight of her dear friend Leo Spangler. He might not be all that tall, he might be a touch too slender, and what little hair he had left was more salt than pepper, but he was the best vet in all of the USA, at least in her opinion. And right now he wore a beautiful smile, as he held her runaway hat over his heart.

“Oh, Leo,” she uttered, somewhat out of breath. “I’m so glad you caught it.”

“I didn’t. It sailed right through my truck’s open window and plopped down on my lap.”

“You’re kidding!”

Leo shook his head. “Strangest thing I’ve ever seen. And then I saw you running and I thought, ‘Looks like Diane’s taken my suggestion to wear more hats, since she looks so beautiful in them. Then I envisioned you doing your Mary Tyler Moore impression, tossing the hat in the air, and having it get away from you.’”

“How did you know?” Diane grinned. “And just like Mary, I’m going to make it after all!”

Leo’s laugh was infectious, and she’d learned of late that she couldn’t get enough of it.

Leo brushed a few wisps of Diane’s short and windblown brown hair away from her face and placed the hat on her head. She imagined it was at some cockeyed angle and she wished she had a mirror to make it perfect, but something told her Leo didn’t mind. He’d seen her with hair falling out from chemo, seen her with no hair, and seen it growing back in fits and starts. He’d had a special way of looking beyond all that, yet she still wanted to look good for him.

“I missed you in church this morning,” she said. “I’m sure everyone else did, too.” Although she was sure she was the one who missed him the most. She’d grown accustomed to him sitting at her side, their arms and legs brushing. He was becoming a big part of her life, and her heart fairly burst thinking about their blossoming relationship.

“Had to deliver a breach-birth foal this morning,” he said, “and before you start worrying, it all turned out well. Mama and baby are healthy, and the little guy was testing out his spindly legs when I left.”

“Thank God.”

Leo nodded. He wasn’t one to wear his faith on his sleeve, but it was apparent in everything he did. “I thought I might get here before the service was over. When that didn’t look like it would happen, I figured I’d get here in time to at least wish you a good morning and. . .” Leo’s eyes sparkled as his sentence came to a dead stop. When he cupped her wind-chilled cheek with a warm and lightly callused hand, there appeared to be no more need for words.

Leo Spangler had flirted with her when she first moved to Marble Cove, although she hadn’t given it much thought at the time. Still, it was impossible to forget the compassionate smile he’d worn the day she rescued Rocky and told her he’d do all he could to save the severely injured dog’s life. Their friendship had grown over the years; now, at last, that friendship had flourished.

“How about having dinner with me tonight?” he asked, his hands on her scarf, tugging her close.

“A bowl of clam chowder from Captain Calhoun’s sounds heavenly,” she said, already imagining the delectable scents that permeated every inch of Marble Cove’s venerable old seafood café.

“I was thinking something more along the lines of driving into Augusta, eating Thai at Sabieng and maybe taking in a movie.”

She'd just returned home from her daughter's in Boston on Friday night. The drive had been long and tiring, and she couldn't help but think of her expanding Christmas to-do list. "I'd love to, but I have Christmas cards waiting at home for me to finish up, lights to hang outside. . ."

"Not to worry, Diane," Leo interrupted. "We'll do Augusta and Thai food some other time."

"You could always come by later, and if you're brave, you can help me get the knots out of the lights so I can get them hung."

His face brightened. "Thought you'd never ask." He winked. "I'll pick up clam chowder and a crusty loaf of bread. How about seven o'clock?"

"Sounds perfect!"

She smiled and knew, without a doubt, that something good was definitely on the way.

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