

Mary Alice Monroe

A Lowcountry Christmas



GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Prologue

CHRISTMAS EVE 2015

Taylor

It's Christmas Eve and for the first time in longer than I can remember, I'm happy. A cold wind rattles the shutters outdoors, but inside a gentle fire crackles in my hearth, even as one burns in my heart, warming me with serenity and peace.

Peace. I roll the word around in my mouth. It feels as fresh and new as the soft flakes of snow falling outside my window. And as rare. I live on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, and I vividly remember the last time we saw snow. *Peace.* As a Marine who's seen more than my share of battles, it's a word I do not take lightly.

Prologue

I didn't always feel joy at Christmas. In the first five years since I'd returned from Afghanistan, I've barely acknowledged the holiday. I have to smile now as I look around my living room—heavy boughs of pine and glossy magnolia leaves drape the mantel, the air thick with the scent of pine and burning wood. Across the room I see the two reasons for the joy in my heart—my wife and daughter. Harper, her face glowing with maternal love in the firelight, is sitting on the sofa nursing Marietta. She's unaware that I'm standing across the room soaking in the sight, treasuring this moment, taking a mental photograph to keep forever. Many years from now when I'm old and my daughter is holding her own child, I'll pull this memory out from a dusty corner of my mind, smile, and think, *Ah, yes, that was Marietta's first Christmas.*

Though she's only three months old, seeing her fills me with dreams of Christmases still to come. Sitting in a wing chair by the fire, Mamaw, Marietta's great-grandmother and namesake, pauses from her knitting to sip her rum drink. I watch as her gaze drifts over to the baby and her face eases into a soft grin of winsome pleasure. I wonder what memories the old woman is pulling from the treasure trove in her mind as she gazes on the child. More than eighty Christmases . . .

I wonder, too, if memories aren't a part of the magic

Prologue

of Christmas. Not the shiny, new excitement of children. Rather, the muted memories that stir during this season to bring alive Christmases past—the smiles of departed loved ones, the voiceless carols sung in our hearts, and the exclamations of welcome, joy, and love. These treasured memories—captured moments from times long gone—envelope us in that matchless spirit of Christmas one season after the other, year after year, until we ourselves fade and become part of the memories. I stare at my daughter and know that through her, I will live on.

I have journeyed the hard path of Scrooge to reach this insight. My heart was once so cold it chilled every room I entered. No smile could soften me. My face was so foreboding people didn't approach and children crossed the street when I approached. Christmas was just another day to endure. The New Year wasn't something to be anticipated, but rather something to dread. I confess, some fearsome nights I didn't want to see the dawn break the darkness.

These memories still have the power to chill me. I can feel their weight settle in my heart. I shake my head to free myself from their icy grip.

My dog, Thor, raises his head, and then climbs from his place by the fire to stand by me. He nudges my thigh with his nose. I look down to see his dark eyes watching me, so

Prologue

intently that I stop thinking and focus on him. Thor is my service dog, attuned to my every mood. Even while he was resting, he was monitoring my breathing, my body language. He sensed the anxiety that swept over me. I have PTSD and Thor knows all the danger signals, and how to deflect me before I slip into the abyss. I smile reassuringly and lay my hand on his broad head, finding comfort in his closeness. Thor is not a dog to be ignored. Part-Great Dane and part-Labrador, he's a whopping 120 pounds of devotion. *I'm okay*, I tell him with my eyes. Comprehending, Thor sits at my feet.

I stroke Thor's head as he leans against me and register the change in the music. Now Frank Sinatra is singing "I'll Be Home for Christmas," a song that always tugs at my heart and sends my mind drifting back to my Christmas homecoming five years ago. I let my gaze travel to the imposing eight-foot white fir tree dominating the far corner of the room. It stands tall and proud, as I do looking at it. I cut down this tree myself, drove it home strapped to the roof of my car as proud as any hunter would be of his trophy elk, and I basked in Harper's praises when she saw it. It's a looker, for sure. Harper claims I've set a high standard for every year to come. That's okay. I'm up to the challenge. Not because I'm six feet two inches tall and have the power to chop down a tree twice my

Prologue

size. But because I know in my heart I will track down one special tree and cut it down every year that I'm able to swing an ax in honor of that one tree that miraculous Christmas. It was a small, spindly tree, but it had the heart of a redwood.

It was the Christmas tree that changed everything.