

PRAISE FOR PATTI CALLAHAN

ONCE UPON A WARDROBE

“The stories of C. S. Lewis have long been a comfort and a beacon to me, lighting the way in my darkest hours. Reading Patti Callahan’s *Once Upon a Wardrobe*, I felt just as I did upon first discovering the wonders of Narnia: joy, hope, and the sustaining knowledge that grace can be found in the pages of a beloved story. This remarkably moving book deserves to be embraced and cherished as the classic it will undoubtedly become.”

—Jennifer Robson, internationally bestselling author of *The Gown*

“*Once Upon a Wardrobe* is a tender, enchanting tribute to the power of story and the myriad ways it can both break and heal our hearts. It is the story of a dying boy and a loving sister and the path a treasured story takes from one heart to the other. Perfect and timely and beautiful and poignant, it is everything the world needs right now.”

—Ariel Lawhon, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *I Was Anastasia* and *Code Name Hélène*

“Beautiful, tender, and poignant, *Once Upon a Wardrobe* is a rare treasure. Written with elegant prose, warmth, and a clear passion for her subject, Patti Callahan has crafted a love letter to beloved Narnia, and to the power of story to inspire, connect, and heal. Truly magical.”

—Hazel Gaynor, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Callahan (*Becoming Mrs. Lewis*) once again visits the life and works of C. S. Lewis in this enlightening novel of logic and imagination, faith, and reason . . . this enchanting novel of faith and hope is a must-read for fans of C. S. Lewis. Readers will be eager to return to the world of *The Chronicles of Narnia* with new insights.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

“Enchanting and luminous, filled with the love of family, this is a story for anyone whose life has ever been changed by a book. Megs and George will stretch your heart, perhaps fracture it, then shine light through the cracks and send your spirit soaring. It is impossible not to be swept away by Patti Callahan’s exploration of what lies beneath C. S. Lewis’s beloved land of Narnia. This is storytelling at its finest, deepest, and most profound. A triumph.”

—Lisa Wingate, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
Before We Were Yours and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“I so loved this story. Every page is filled with magic and wonder, with insight and wisdom. I am in awe of Patti Callahan’s talent.”

—Debbie Macomber, *New York Times* bestselling author

“From the very first page of Patti Callahan’s new book, *Once Upon a Wardrobe*, I was transported, as if I was finally stepping through C. S. Lewis’s famous wardrobe, something I’ve wanted to do since I first read the Narnia books. In this powerful, enchanting tale for all ages, readers uncover the inspiration for Lewis’s famous books, while at the same time discovering the way in which stories—and myths—weave through our existences, subtly transforming us in immeasurable ways. Stunning.”

—Marie Benedict, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*

“Exquisitely heartfelt, *Once Upon a Wardrobe* is a love letter to the magic of stories. I call it the Callahan Effect—from the first page to the last, Patti Callahan’s wise and beautiful prose draws you in and doesn’t let you go.”

—Sarah Addison Allen, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *First Frost* and *Lost Lake*

“*Once Upon a Wardrobe* is a poignant meditation on the lengths we will go to for our loved ones as well as a fascinating glimpse into the early life of C. S. Lewis. Patti Callahan’s beautiful, life-affirming novel is a reminder that literature lives inside us, and that when we read someone else’s story, we understand so much more about our own. A gorgeous, compelling book.”

—Janet Skeslien Charles, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Paris Library*

“When it comes to a classic like the great C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we all want to hear the story behind the story, just as Patti Callahan’s young, ailing George Devonshire does in the gorgeously wrought *Once Upon a Wardrobe*. And in the book, we get just that: a peek behind the curtain of a story that has enchanted generations. But the masterful Callahan—who has already shown us a more intimate, human side of C. S. Lewis in *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* (2019)—gives us much more, too; she delivers a great gust of enchantment, a draft of emotion, and a zephyr of spiritual insight that will sweep through you the way snowflakes rush through the wintry postwar Oxford countryside. Callahan starts with a simple enough question: where did Narnia come from? But the answer she delivers in *Once Upon a Wardrobe*—a tale full of forests and castles, hope and despair, first love and first loss—will leap from the page straight into your heart. With a touch of fairy tale magic, *Once Upon a Wardrobe* will take you behind the legend and deep into the English and Irish countryside, where you’ll encounter not only the inspirations for one of the 20th century’s most beloved works but also a tale of heartache, hope, and discovery that will forever change the Narnia you thought you knew. Callahan’s poignant, luminous *Once Upon a Wardrobe* honors the legacy of C. S. Lewis’s Narnia by giving us a new chapter, one born from the kind of real magic that is only possible when we open our hearts and let the lamplight in.”

—Kristin Harmel, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Forest of Vanishing Stars*

BECOMING MRS. LEWIS

“Patti Callahan seems to have found the story she was born to tell in this tale of unlikely friendship turned true love between Joy Davidman and C. S. Lewis that tests the bounds of faith and radically alters both of their lives. Their connection comes to life in Callahan’s expert hands, revealing a connection so persuasive and affecting we wonder if there’s another like it in history. Luminous and penetrating.”

—Paula McLain, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Paris Wife and *When the Stars Go Dark*

“I thought I knew Joy Davidman, the oft mentioned but little examined wife of C. S. Lewis, but in *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, Patti Callahan breathes life into this fascinating woman whose hunger for knowledge leads her to buck tradition at every turn. In a beautifully crafted account, Patti unveils Joy as a passionate and courageous—yet very human—seeker of answers to the meaning of life and the depths of faith. *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is an unlikely love story that will touch heart, mind, and soul.”

—Diane Chamberlain, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Dream Daughter*

“Layered with personal reflection, poignant life events, and the Davidman-Lewis journey toward respect and love, *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* may very well become a literary classic of its own.”

—*Hope by the Book*, Gold Star Review

“Spanning more than a decade, this slow-burning love story will be especially satisfying to writers and C. S. Lewis fans, as there are many references to his literary canon and his famous stories of Narnia. Callahan’s prose is heartfelt and full of grace.”

—*BookPage*

“Callahan crafts a masterpiece that details the friendship and ultimate romance between the real Davidman and Lewis . . . Fans of Karen White and Mary Alice Monroe will enjoy this book. Callahan’s writing is riveting and her characters spring to life to create a magical and literary experience that won’t be soon forgotten.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

“Readers familiar with the life and work of C. S. Lewis will relish learning about the woman who inspired some of his most famous books. Others will find the slow burn of the romance between the two mesmerizing. All fans of women’s fiction, particularly works with religious themes, will appreciate reading about this vibrant and intelligent woman.”

—*Booklist*

“Callahan (*The Bookshop at Water’s End*) vividly enters the life of a woman searching for both God and romantic love in this pleasing historical novel about writer and poet Joy Davidman . . . Making full use of historical documentation, Callahan has created an incredible portrait of a complex woman.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“In *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, Patti Callahan Henry breathes wondrous fresh life into one of the greatest literary love stories of all time: the unlikely romance between English writer C. S. Lewis and the much younger American divorcée, Joy Davidman. Callahan chronicles their complex and unconventional relationship with a sure voice, deep insight into character, and eye for period detail. The result is a deeply moving story about love and loss that is transformative and magical.”

—Pam Jenoff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Orphan’s Tale*

“Patti Callahan’s prose reads like poetry as she deftly unearths a lost love story that begs to be remembered and retold. I was swept along, filled with hope, and entirely beguiled, not only by the life lived behind the veil of C. S. Lewis’s books but also by the woman who won his heart. A literary treasure from first page to last.”

—Lisa Wingate, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Before We Were Yours and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“*Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is at once profoundly evocative, revealing an intimate view of a woman whose love and story had never been fully told . . . until now. Patti Callahan brings to life the elusive Joy Davidman and illuminates the achingly touching romance between Joy and C. S. Lewis. This is the book Patti Callahan was born to write. *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is a tour de force and the must-read of the season!”

—Mary Alice Monroe, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Beach House Reunion*

“Patti Callahan has written my favorite book of the year. *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* deftly explores the life and work of Joy Davidman, a bold and brilliant woman who is long overdue her time in the spotlight. Carefully researched. Beautifully written. Deeply romantic. Fiercely intelligent. It is both a meditation on marriage and a whopping grand adventure. Touching, tender, and triumphant, this is a love story for the ages.”

—Ariel Lawhon, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *I Was Anastasia* and *Code Name Hélène*

“Patti Callahan took a character on the periphery, one who has historically taken a back seat to her male counterpart, and given her a fierce, passionate voice. For those fans of Lewis curious about the woman who inspired *A Grief Observed*, this book offers a convincing, fascinating glimpse into the private lives of two very remarkable individuals.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“*Becoming Mrs. Lewis* illuminates the raw humanity of seeking faith in a distrustful world. We’ve heard C. S. Lewis’s narrative. Here, Callahan keenly demystifies poet Joy Davidman’s story and, in the telling, shows us the power of a greater love. I was wonderstruck by this novel.”

—Sarah McCoy, *New York Times* and international bestselling
author of *Marilla of Green Gables* and *The Baker’s Daughter*

“This finely observed accounting of writer Joy Davidman’s life deeply moved me. Patti Callahan somehow inhabits Davidman, taking her readers inside the writer’s hungry mind and heart. We keenly feel Davidman’s struggle to become her own person at a time (the 1950s) when women had few options. When Davidman breaks free of a crushing marriage and makes the upstream swim to claim her fullest life, we cheer. An astonishing work of biographical fiction.”

—Lynn Cullen, bestselling author of *Mrs. Poe*

“With an artist’s touch, Patti has woven flesh and bone onto an unlikely love story and given us a glimpse into a beautiful and storied romance. I read this through an increasing sense of awe and admiration. By the final page, I realized Patti had crafted an intimate and daring literary achievement.”

—Charles Martin, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of
Long Way Gone and *The Mountain Between Us*

“This book is a work of art. Intelligent. Witty and charming. *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is a stunning foray into the wilds of faith—from doubt and discovery to the great adventure of living it out. Patti Callahan’s invitation into Joy and Jack’s love story is as brilliant as the lives they led. I’m left as spellbound as the first time I met Aslan . . . with these characters now just as dear.”

—Kristy Cambron, author of *The Ringmaster’s Wife* and the *Lost Castle* series

“In *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, Callahan peels back the curtain and allows a glimpse into Joy Davidman’s extraordinary life and her love and marriage with C. S. Lewis. With captivating prose, Callahan carries the reader across the ocean from New York to Oxford and into the private heart of this tender love story.”

—Katherine Reay, bestselling author of *Dear Mr. Knightley*

“In this unforgettable story of love and passion, piercing intellect and the power of the written word, Joy Davidman has come to claim her own resurrection, and the results are astonishing. Patti Henry has achieved a bold literary magic: *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* heals the cracks in the firmament of our hearts.”

—Signe Pike, author of *The Lost Queen* and *The Forgotten Kingdom*

“It’s all here: Bill’s betrayals. Joy’s boundless hope. Davy and Douglas, energetic but vulnerable. The faithful Oxford don used by God. Jack and Joy, arguing over a kiss. In a novel awash with authenticity, we learn their story through the voice of Mrs. C. S. Lewis. I suspect the man himself would say of Patti Callahan, ‘She’s a corking good writer.’”

—Carolyn Curtis, coeditor of *Women and C. S. Lewis: What His Life and Literature Reveal for Today’s Culture* (Lion Hudson, Oxford)

SURVIVING SAVANNAH

“Fans of Christina Baker Kline and Kate Quinn will love this beautiful, richly detailed novel about a lost bit of American maritime history. In a seamless blending of fact and fiction, Patti Callahan has created an atmospheric, compelling story of survival, tragedy, the enduring power of myth and memory, and the moments that change one’s life.”

—Kristin Hannah, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Great Alone* and *The Nightingale*

“In *Surviving Savannah*, Patti Callahan masterfully weaves a little-known historical tragedy, an enigmatic mystery, and a searing family saga into a mesmerizing tale that will captivate readers until the last page and beyond.”

—Pam Jenoff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Girls of Paris*

“The astonishing story of the ‘Titanic of the South’ is brought to vivid life . . . This tale of survival, love, and loss, as well as Callahan’s epic portrayals of a trio of strong, passionate women, gripped me from the very first page. Simply masterful.”

—Fiona Davis, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lions of Fifth Avenue*

“Through the interwoven tales of three courageous women, *Surviving Savannah* grips the reader in a spellbinding novel full of mystery, tragedy, sacrifice, and resilience. Layering painstaking research with evocative prose, Callahan has penned an utterly transportive read while illuminating a heart-wrenching yet largely forgotten slice of American history. Superb.”

—Kristina McMorris, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Sold on a Monday*

“Hidden history rises from the watery depths in all its glittering glory but also in its intimate, human detail. Meticulously researched, beautifully written, underpinned by timeless themes of personal trauma and its aftereffects, *Surviving Savannah* is a journey readers and book clubs will treasure.”

—Lisa Wingate, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
Before We Were Yours and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“A luminous novel about bravery, connection, and resilience that resurrects a forgotten 19th-century shipwreck and interlaces it with a page-turning contemporary narrative. With lush historical detail and a graceful pen, Callahan raises questions about fate, faith, and human purpose that are timeless. *Surviving Savannah* has the luster of a secret that’s been pulled from the depths of the sea.”

—Signe Pike, bestselling author of *The Lost Queen* and *The Forgotten Kingdom*

“In Patti Callahan’s fiercely hopeful *Surviving Savannah*, the past and the present intertwine with ringing authenticity. Disaster and crisis become a powerful testing ground, as Callahan’s expertly drawn characters are forced to discover how to live past tragedy, and what matters most in the aftermath. This is exactly the kind of story we need right now.”

—Paula McClain, bestselling author of *The Paris Wife* and *When the Stars Go Dark*

THE BOOKSHOP AT WATER’S END

“With an eloquent and effective narrative, a realistic continuing theme of unbreakable relationship bonds, and a fantastic multilayered story line of secrets, regrets, and a good dose of teenage drama, this is a solid summer read . . . [a] low-country treasure of new beginnings and an old mystery.”

—*Library Journal*

“A look at what family really means, and how the past affects the present in so many ways. The writing is superb.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“A great summer read about finding yourself and returning home.”

—PopSugar

“Henry creates a world that feels rich and real—readers can practically hear the rushing river, see the ocean waves, and smell the hydrangea bushes . . . [an] atmospheric look at friendship, forgiveness, and second chances.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“This is a great beach read of the Dorothea Benton Frank and Anne River Siddons variety.”

—*Booklist*

"*The Bookshop at Water's End* carries us along the graceful curves and outwardly serene story line of two childhood friends returning to their summer riverside home. But like the river she writes about, Patti's plot roils with strong undercurrents of murky secrets, tragedy, and the pulsing tides of self-discovery. No one writes about the power of family and friends like Patti Callahan Henry. *The Bookshop at Water's End* is a must-read for your summer!"

—Mary Alice Monroe, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Beach House for Rent*

"I adore Patti Callahan Henry's new novel. *The Bookshop at Water's End* is a juicy summer read about family secrets, forgotten friendships, and the power of books to change our lives."

—Jane Green, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Sunshine Sisters*

"Patti Callahan Henry's stories are always woven with magic and mystery, and *The Bookshop at Water's End* knots these elements into a deeply satisfying and heartfelt tale of loss and betrayal, friendship and forgiveness. The sun is shining, the tide is turning, summer and Patti Henry's latest masterpiece beckon. Resistance is futile!"

—Mary Kay Andrews, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Weekenders*

"From the very first page, Patti Callahan Henry draws you in like the tide, revealing long simmering secrets that will test family and friendships and explores the question: do we tell our stories or do our stories tell us? In lush, lyrical prose, Henry explores the power of forgiveness, especially in ourselves. Every page was a treat."

—Laura Lane McNeal, bestselling author of *Dollbaby*

"Patti Callahan Henry has written the best novel of her career with *The Bookshop at Water's End*. I absolutely adored it and predict it will be one of the most loved books of the year. In fact, it's so good I wish I'd written it myself!"

—Dorothea Benton Frank, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *Same Beach, Next Year*

ONCE UPON A
WARDROBE

OTHER BOOKS BY PATTI CALLAHAN

Surviving Savannah
The Perfect Love Song
The Favorite Daughter
Becoming Mrs. Lewis
The Bookshop at Water's End
The Idea of Love
The Stories We Tell
And Then I Found You
Coming Up for Air
Driftwood Summer
The Art of Keeping Secrets
Between the Tides
When Light Breaks
Where the River Runs
Losing the Moon

ONCE UPON A
WARDROBE



PATTI CALLAHAN



HARPER MUSE

Once Upon a Wardrobe

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Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

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Götterdämmerung was written by Richard Wagner and translated by Frederick Jameson. Published by Schirmer in 1899.

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” was written by Robert Robinson in 1758.

This book is a work of fiction. All incidents, dialogue, letters, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author’s imagination and not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those personas are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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ISBN 978-1-4002-3347-2 (signed edition)

ISBN 978-1-4002-3297-0 (Canadian international edition)

ISBN 978-1-4002-3283-3 (international edition)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Henry, Patti Callahan, author.

Title: Once upon a wardrobe / Patti Callahan.

Description: Nashville : Harper Muse, [2021] | Summary: “From the bestselling author of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* comes another beautiful story inspired by C.

S. Lewis’s ability to change the world and captivate hearts—including those of a terminally ill boy and his logic-driven sister”— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021007763 (print) | LCCN 2021007764 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780785251729 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780785251767 (epub) | ISBN 9780785251781

Subjects: LCSH: Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), 1898-1963--Fiction. | GSAFD: Biographical fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.E578 O53 2021 (print) | LCC PS3608.E578 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021007763>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021007764>

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

*With the greatest love
for
Bridgette Kea Rock
No matter your age, may you never, ever
grow too old for fairy tales.
Mhamó*

Sometimes fairy stories may say best what's to be said.

C. S. LEWIS

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ONCE UPON A
WARDROBE

ONE

GEORGE MEETS A LION

DECEMBER 1950

WORCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND

George Henry Devonshire is only eight years old and he already knows the truth. They don't have to tell him: the heart he was born with isn't strong enough, and they've done all they can. And by *they*, he means the doctors and nurses, his parents, and his older sister, Megs. If they could save him, if they could give their own life for him, they would. He knows that too. But they can't.

The December snow outside his bedroom window piles up like wave upon wave of white. George sits up in bed, propped against the forever-plumped-by-his-mum pillows. Next to him is a dark oak table with pill bottles and a glass of water and a gone-cold cup of tea that his mum left behind. Among all of that clutter is a book, just published, called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis.

It has a lion on the cover, and George often looks to this lion as if it might hold the key to all he desires to know.

There is so very much he wants to know.

George once thought that if he lived long enough to be a grown-up, he'd have all the answers. Now he believes adults don't know what's what any more than he does.

But the man who wrote this book—this storybook that transports George out of his bedroom and into Narnia—this man *knows* something. What that *something* might be is a mystery.

“Long ago and far away” often begins the best stories, but this author began his book with just four names—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—and a magic wardrobe.

George is waiting for his Megs to come home for the weekend from university so he can tell her about this remarkable book, about this white land where it is always winter but never Christmas, where animals can talk and the back of a wardrobe opens to another world. He loves Megs more than all the words he has to describe the feeling.

Across George's room is his own ordinary wooden wardrobe. He slides from the bedcovers and slips his feet into his fuzzy lamb's-wool slippers. His breath catches as it always does when he jolts the weak muscle that is his heart. He waits as his heartbeat catches up to his plan and then shuffles across the floor. He places both hands on the thick handles and opens the heavy doors.

There isn't a looking glass on the outside of this wardrobe like there is in the book, just carvings of trees and birds.

ONCE UPON A WARDROBE

The doors creak and George spies his few pieces of clothing hanging there. (A boy who lives mostly in bed doesn't need very many shirts and pants.) He sees the family's wool coats and clothes that don't fit into his parents' overstuffed closet. He knows there is no secret back to this wardrobe, and he can't walk through it to find a snowy forest and a lamppost and a faun that will take him on a great adventure.

What he can do, is sit inside this space and close his eyes and take himself to that imaginary world, where he can have his own adventures, where he can escape the very real world, where his body won't get old, and where his mum doesn't cry in the kitchen. She thinks he can't hear her, but he can.

He pushes aside the coats and shirts and dresses, then slips inside. He's a small boy, not as big as an eight-year-old boy should be, but big enough to need to fold his legs up to his chest as he scoots to the very back of the wardrobe, never pulling the door all the way shut, just as Lucy in the book has taught him one should *never* close a wardrobe door while inside.

Darkness envelops him, and it feels quite fine to be surrounded by the aroma of his mum's rose perfume, along with mothballs (just as in the book) and a faint woody scent hinting of a forest. As he leans into it, he feels the solid back of the wardrobe and lets out a long breath. He closes his eyes and conjures the image of a talking beaver inviting him for tea in a dam made of sticks.

George smiles.

He isn't as scared as his family thinks he is. Nothing hurts, and he doesn't expect it to hurt even when his heart stops beating. He's just tired, and sleep isn't so bad.

He's read enough books (for what else is there to do in bed?) to know Narnia isn't real, or not real in the way that grown-ups call real. (But then, what do they know?) The professor who wrote about this magical place, however, *is* real, and he lives only a train ride away in Oxford, where Megs attends school. This man would know the answers to George's questions.

Where did this land of the lion, a white witch, and fauns and beavers and castles come from?

How did Aslan—as true as any living thing the boy has ever known—come to bound onto the pages of a book?

George feels sleep ease up on him as quiet as a lion on the prowl, and he tumbles into it, his hands wrapped around a mane of fur (really a rabbit coat of his mum's). The ice-cold world of a snowy forest surrounds him in a story written behind his eyelids, sketched onto his mind, emblazoned on his dreams.

TWO

MEGS FALLS INTO A STORY

There was once, and is even now, a city on the banks of the River Cherwell, a city as abundant with timeless tales as any city in the world. The slow river begins its journey in Hellidon and meets its destiny in the Thames at Oxford, a city of stone towers and gleaming spires where this story and many others begin. Some stories imagined in this ancient place rise above the others; they ascend from the towers, from the quiet libraries and single rooms, from the museums and the cobblestone streets. Some of those stories become legends.

Myths.

Tales that are as much a part of us as our bones.

But I, Margaret Louise Devonshire, called Megs by all who know me, honestly don't care about that. My heart belongs to numbers and equations, my head to thoughts of solving the greatest mysteries of physics.

It is the first Friday in December, and I ride the train

from the Oxford to Foregate station in Worcester, only a mile from my house along the London Road. I've been leaving university on the weekends more often than my fellow students at Somerville College, one of the only colleges at Oxford to have women students, but none of them have a little brother like George, and they seem more than happy to be free of their homes and towns and cities. I call them my fellow students and not my friends, because so far, that's all they are. Maybe because I leave Oxford the minute there is a moment of free time while the others gather in pubs drinking pints, debating politics, playing draughts, and flirting with each other as if that is the easiest thing in the world.

I wouldn't dare tell any of them the truth. I miss everything about my Worcester: the way it straddles the silver snake of the River Severn; the clangs of its Royal Worcester porcelain factory; Worcester Bridge arching over the river, its stone glimmering in the sun; the heath-covered hills; and Worcester Cathedral, sitting proudly in the middle of it all, its spires straight to heaven.

Not that I'm sad to be at university—I'm not! I have worked all my life to get here. All my remembered life, I've aimed my arrow straight at the bull's-eye of Oxford. I'm seventeen, the first woman in my family to go to college, and I'm proud to have received a scholarship for my marks. It seems a bit unfair that I would get such a scholarship and residence rooms fully furnished, with a bedroom and a little sitting room, for something that comes so easily to me, something I love so much.

ONCE UPON A WARDROBE

But of course not as much as I love George.

Home is our Devonshire house, a stone cottage surrounded by the hand-hewn fences of aged alder. Between the low wooden gate and the front door, a wild garden of rambling purple fumitory and thick moonwort fern rests hidden beneath snow. The window boxes Dad once made Mum for her birthday hang from the two side windows, sad and empty in the winter barrenness.

Last autumn, as the earth moved toward rest, Mum worked in the garden with a fervor I hadn't seen in years, and I believe I know why: she can't keep George alive, but she can keep the flowers and vegetables growing under her care.

Today when I arrive at the house, where I'd lived all my life until I departed for Oxford, the chimney smoke curls upward from a cap at the far-right end of the cottage. I walk carefully along the stone pathway that is covered with snow and glinting with swords of sunlight. I hesitate before placing my hand on the knob of our blue-painted front door.

No matter how I feel, I must appear cheerful for George.

I open the door, and a rush of heat flows toward me with a fireplace scent so reminiscent of my early childhood that my knees almost buckle.

But I can't fold.

I must be strong.

I shut the front door, slip off my jacket and mittens, set them on the bench, and kick off my wellies. I move slowly

through the house I know as well as anything in my life. I can walk through it quick as lightning with my eyes fast shut and never hit an edge of counter, a kitchen table, or Dad's large leather chair. In a single minute and blindfolded, I could find my bedroom and crawl beneath its worn-thin sheets with a warm water bottle and be ten years old again.

I reach the stone-walled kitchen to find it empty. The kettle sits on the blue countertop next to an empty teacup. On the small dark wooden table, a mystery novel by Dorothy L. Sayers is facedown, the spine of it cracked. Mum is halfway through a Lord Peter Wimsey story. I like thinking about how the author also went to Somerville, how her book connects us through my mum.

I take two rights to George's bedroom. He has the room with the largest windows so he can see outside when the weakness of his heart keeps him from rising. At times he loses his breath so desperately that his lips turn a strange shade of blue. This window is his door to the world.

When I reach his room, I see that his bed holds only squashed pillows and rumpled covers.

My heartbeat thunders inside my ears. Has there been a rush to hospital and no one had time to tell me? It has happened before.

Mum's voice brings her to the doorway. She hugs me as tight as a vise. "You're home!"

"Where's George?"

I point to his empty bed. Mum's gaze leaves mine to scan the room. She startles, calls out his name. I do the

same. He doesn't answer. Together we rush through the small house, which takes no more time than it does to call his name thrice more.

Mum flings open the front door and pokes her head out. "I see only your footprints in the snow," she says, and I hear relief in her words.

I rush back to George's room and look under his bed. Then I notice the wardrobe door is slightly ajar.

"Mum, look!" I call out as I yank open the door. There's George, his knees drawn up to his chest, his blue eyes looking straight at us.

"Megs!" He scurries out. I hug him as tightly as I can without fearing I will break the little bones in his chest and shoulders.

"Georgie Porgie."

I lift him and he throws his arms around my neck. He carries the aroma of the rose sachets in the closet and I breathe it in. Slight and frail, he clings to me. And I to him. I place him gently in bed, and he holds to my neck until I laugh and kiss his cheek. I draw the covers to his chin while Mum watches with a look of pure relief.

I sit on the edge of George's bed and it slants toward me. "I received your letter. It was so beautiful the way you told me the story about Dad and the sheep he chased through the garden. When did you learn to write so well?"

George grins, and that hair of his is so blond it appears like cotton. Twilight rests against the windows as if it wants to join us in the bedroom, and I flick on his bedside light.

“George,” I say quietly, “why were you hiding in there?”

“I’m not hiding, I’m dreaming,” he says, looking out the window as if he can see something we can’t. “Imagining.”

Mum looks at me and nods her head for me to follow her to the kitchen.

“I’ll be right back.” I kiss George on his cheek, and he closes his eyes.

Mum sets the kettle to the stove’s fire and watches it in silence for a few heartbeats, until she turns to me with tears in her eyes. “It’s because of that book that he goes and hides in the wardrobe. He reads that story over and over. He wants to read nothing else. Not even his favorites, *Peter Rabbit* and *Squirrel Nutkin*. Now it’s all about Narnia and the lion and the four children who are living apart from their parents during the war. It’s about magic and witches and talking animals. It’s all he wants to talk about.”

“Have you read it?”

“No, I haven’t yet. Aunt Dottie dropped it off days ago. It’s a new book for children by that author who teaches at your university.”

“C. S. Lewis, yes,” I say. “One of his other books, *The Screwtape Letters*, was all the chatter. There’re more books to come from him, I’ve heard.”

“Well, he best hurry. I doubt your brother will be . . .” Tears gather in her eyes, and she brushes them away with the back of her hand.

“Mum, don’t say such things. Please.”

“It’s true.”

“You don’t know that.”

The teakettle screams, and Mum pours boiling water into the cup over the tea leaves nestled in the silver strainer and watches the steam rise. “Go on now. Take your cuppa and visit with your brother.”

She pulls her worn gray sweater tighter around her and buttons it near the neck as if she’s holding herself together with the Shetland wool of her father’s old farm lambs. I kiss her red cheek and she takes a linen handkerchief and wipes her eyes, then blows her nose into it with a resonating sound. We both laugh.

“Go on now,” she says.

His room is warm. During the day it’s the sunniest part of the house—intolerable for a few weeks every summer and favored in winter. It’s shaped like a perfect square (and I know a perfect square) with plaster walls painted an ivory color. The single bed is handmade by our Grandfather Devonshire, fashioned of oak with four posters squiring up like the tower at Magdalen. The hand-hewn oak floors are covered with a sheep’s-wool rug, fluffy in the places not often trod and flattened where our feet walk again and again. The blanket on his bed is striped, alternating blue and green, pulled high over the crisp white linen sheets that Mum irons smooth. The wardrobe across from the bed and between the windows, once belonging to Mum’s sister, Dottie, has the trees and birds of a forest glade carved into its wooden doors. I think how each of these things is a part of our family, each made or passed

down through a Devonshire or MacAllister line that reaches us now.

George's face is placid, and he rests on his pillow lightly, as if he hasn't enough weight to dent the down feathers inside. His eyes are closed, and I watch him sleep. His easy breaths go in and out.

"George," I whisper.

He opens his eyes, and his grin is wide. "I knew you would come home if I asked. I told Mum so."

"Why wouldn't I?" I take his hand.

"Mum says you are too busy with school. Mathematics exams are very hard, she says."

"They are, but I'm right here."

"I need you to do something for me." He sounds like an old man, or if not old, then just like Dad.

"Anything." I drop into the hard, wooden chair next to his bed.

"Have you ever seen him?" he asks.

"Seen who?"

"The man who wrote about Narnia. The man who wrote the book."

"C. S. Lewis. Yes, I do see him quite often. He walks quickly with his pipe and his walking stick along High Street and Parks Road, as if he's always late for something."

"I need you to ask him a question."

"George, I don't really know him. I've just seen him about. He teaches at Magdalen, and they don't allow

women students there. I'm at Somerville. They are a mile and worlds apart."

"It's the same. It's Oxford University."

I can't argue that point. And I'm not one for arguing as it is. "What do you want me to ask him?"

"Where did Narnia come from?"

"I don't understand."

"Have you read it?" He asks as if his question is the answer.

I shake my head. "It's a book for children. I'm consumed with physics and the way numbers hold together the universe. I'm learning about Einstein's theories and . . . I haven't had time to read some children's book."

"You're rarely wrong, sister, but you are now. It's not a children's book. It might look like it on the cover, but it's a book for everyone. Please, Megs. I need to know if Narnia is *real*."

"Of course it's not real. It's a story, like *Squirrel Nutkin* and that book you like about the girl who dropped into a hole in the ground."

"Alice," he says. "This is different. I know you think the whole world is held together by some math formula." His voice has an unaccustomed annoyance in it. "But I've thought about this a lot, and I think the world is held together by stories, not all those equations you stare at." He's rarely angry, and this might not even be anger but something sparks up like a quick flame.

“My, my, I see.” I feel my eyebrows lifting. “You’ve definitely given this some serious thought.”

“Please. Just ask Professor Lewis, Megs. This book of his is different. It’s as real as Dad’s apple tree outside, as real as Mum’s flowers, surely as real as this house. I need to know where it came from.”

George doesn’t have to say any more, because I realize the answer he wants means life and death to him. If my little brother needs to know where Narnia came from, I will find out.

“I will ask him. I promise.”

From that moment, the weekend slips through my fingers like I’m trying to hold on to morning fog. I stay with George, and I study until my eyes burn. I flop around the house in an old wool sweater and fuzzy slippers. I think sometimes of the others at university who are having a chat in groups, and I feel so disconnected from them. It’s not that I don’t want to wear the latest fashion of pleated skirts and cute cardigans and have a smart exchange with a handsome boy in a waistcoat, but I just wasn’t made that way. It’s all so uncomfortable. I don’t understand how girls get their hair in sleek ponytails or wear it in bouffant while my dark curls spring wild in the wind about my round face. Their skin is smooth and porcelain while the freckles on my cheeks and nose will not be covered with powder. They call me cute; I’ve heard them. But not beautiful, never that.

Mathematics doesn’t care what I look like or what I wear, and that’s what I’ve been focused on all weekend. On

ONCE UPON A WARDROBE

Sunday, right before I prepare to leave, I sit down and open the book that has consumed my little brother, that has him hiding in the wardrobe and telling me about fauns and beavers and winters where Christmas never comes.

“I can read to you before I go to the train station,” I tell him. “Would you like that?”

He smiles. “Yes.”

“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy . . .”

I mean to read for just a few minutes, to show him I’m not such a prig about math, that I can read a fairy tale as well as anyone else. A few minutes, I said.

Just a few.

But when I look up hours later, having missed the train, and the final pages resonant in the room with my tears blurring the last lines, I understand my brother. I understand it all.

We must, absolutely must, find out where Narnia came from.