

ACCLAIM FOR PATTI CALLAHAN

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*

"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 divorcee, 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*

"*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, AUTHOR OF *I WAS ANASTASIA*

“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. KNIGHTLY*

"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*

The Bookshop at Water's Edge

"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*

BECOMING
MRS. LEWIS

OTHER BOOKS BY PATTI CALLAHAN

The Bookshop at Water's End

The Idea of Love

The Stories We Tell

And Then I Found You

Coming Up for Air

The Perfect Love Song

Driftwood Summer

The Art of Keeping Secrets

Between the Tides

When Light Breaks

Where the River Runs

Losing the Moon

Friend Request (with Barbi Callahan Burris)

BECOMING MRS. LEWIS

A Novel

The improbable love story of
Joy Davidman and C. S. Lewis

PATTI CALLAHAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Becoming Mrs. Lewis 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.

Becoming Mrs. Lewis

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To Joy and Jack
With great love

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” . . . is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN, “ON FAIRY-STORIES”

PROLOGUE

“You would not have called to me
unless I had been calling to you.”

ASLAN, *THE SILVER CHAIR*, C. S. LEWIS

1926

Bronx, New York

From the very beginning it was the Great Lion who brought us together. I see that now. The fierce and tender beast drew us to each other, slowly, inexorably, across time, beyond an ocean, and against the obdurate bulwarks of our lives. He wouldn't make it easy for us—that's not his way.

It was the summer of 1926. My little brother, Howie, was seven years old and I was eleven. I knelt next to his bed and gently shook his shoulder.

“Let's go,” I whispered. “They're asleep now.”

That day I'd come home with my report card, and among the long column of As there was the indelible stamp of a single B denting the cotton paper.

“Father.” I'd tapped his shoulder, and he'd glanced away from the papers he was grading, his red pencil marking students' work. “Here's my report card.”

His eyes scanned the card, the glasses perched on the end of his nose an echo of the photos of his Ukranian ancestors. He'd arrived in America as a child, and at Ellis Island his name was changed from Yosef to Joseph. He stood now to face me and lifted his hand. I could

have backed away; I knew what came next in a family where assimilation and achievement were the priorities.

His open palm flew across the space between us—a space brimful with my shimmering expectation of acceptance and praise—and slapped my left cheek with the clap of skin on skin, a sound I knew well. My face jolted to the right. The sting lasted as it always did, long enough to stand for the verbal lashing that came after. “There is no place for slipshod work in this family.”

No, there was no place for it *at all*. By the time I was eleven I was a sophomore in high school. I must try harder, be better, abide all disgrace until I found a way to succeed and prove my worth.

But at night Howie and I had our secrets. In the darkness of his bedroom he rose, his little sneakers tangling in the sheet. He smiled at me. “I’ve already got my shoes on. I’m ready.”

I suppressed a laugh and took his hand. We stood stone-still and listened for any breaths but our own. Nothing.

“Let’s go,” I said, and he laid his small hand in mine: a trust.

We crept from the brownstone and onto the empty Bronx streets, the wet garbage odor of the city as pungent as the inside of the subway. The sidewalks dark rivers, the streetlights small moons, and the looming buildings protection from the outside world. The city was silent and deceptively safe in the midnight hours. Howie and I were on a quest to visit other animals caged and forced to act civil in a world they didn’t understand: the residents of the Bronx Zoo.

Within minutes we arrived at the Fordham Road gate and paused, as we always did, to stare silently at the Rockefeller Fountain—three tiers of carved marble children sitting in seashells, mermaids supporting them on raised arms or sturdy heads, the great snake trailing up the center pillar, his mouth open to devour. The water slipped down with a rainfall-din that subdued our footfalls and whispers. We reached the small hole in the far side of the fence and slipped through.

We cherished our secret journeys to the midnight zoo—the parrot house with the multicolored creatures inside; the hippo, Peter the Great;

a flying fox; the reptile house slithering with creatures both unnatural and frightening. Sneaking out was both our reward for enduring family life and our invisible rebellion. The Bronx River flowed right through the zoo's land; the snake of dark water seemed another living animal, brought from the outside to divide the acreage in half and then escape, as the water knew its way out.

And then there was the lions' den, a dark caged and forested area. I was drawn there as if those beasts belonged to me, or I to them.

"Sultan." My voice was resonant in the night. "Boudin Maid."

The pair of Barbary lions ambled forward, placing their great paws on the earth, muscles dangerous and rippling beneath their fur as they approached the bars. A great grace surrounded them, as if they had come to understand their fate and accept it with roaring dignity. Their manes were deep and tangled as a forest. I fell into the endless universe of their large amber eyes as they allowed, even invited, me to reach through the iron and wind my fingers into their fur. They'd been tamed beyond their wild nature, and I felt a kinship with them that caused a trembling in my chest.

They indulged me with a return gaze, their warm weight pressed into my palm, and I knew that capture had damaged their souls.

"I'm sorry," I whispered every time. "We were meant to be free."

PART I

AMERICA

To defeat the darkness out there, you
must defeat the darkness in yourself.

ASLAN, *THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER*, C. S. LEWIS

CHAPTER 1

Begin again, must I begin again
Who have begun so many loves in fire

“SONNET I,” JOY DAVIDMAN

1946

Ossining, New York

There are countless ways to fall in love, and I'd begun my ash-destined affairs in myriad manners. This time, it was marriage.

The world, it changes in an instant. I've seen it over and over, the way in which people forge through the days believing they have it all figured out, protected inside a safe life. Yet there is no figuring life out, or not in any way that protects us from the tragedies of the heart. I should have known this by now; I should have been prepared.

“Joy.” Bill's voice through the telephone line came so shaky I thought he might have been in a car wreck or worse. “I'm coming undone again and I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go.”

“Bill.” I hugged the black plastic phone against my ear and shoulder, the thick cord dangling, as I bounced our baby son, Douglas, against my chest. “Take a deep breath. You're fine. It's just the old fear. You're not in the war. You're safe.”

“I'm *not* fine, Joy. I can't take it anymore.” Panic broke his voice into fragments, but I understood. I could talk him off this ledge as I had other nights. He might get drunk before it was all over, but I could calm him.

“Come home, Poogle. Come on home.” I used the nickname we had for each other and our children, like a birdcall.

"I'm not coming home, Joy. I'm not sure I ever will."

"Bill!" I thought he might have hung up, but then I heard his labored breathing, in and out as if someone were squeezing the life out of him. And then the long, shrill, disconnected buzz vibrated like a tuning fork in my ear and down to my heart, where my own fear sat coiled and ready to strike.

"No!" I shouted into the empty line.

I knew Bill's office number by heart and I called him back again and again, but it rang endlessly while I mumbled a mantra: "Answer answer answer." As if I had any control from where I stood in our kitchen, my back pressed against the lime-green linoleum counter. Finally I gave up. There was nothing left for me to do. I couldn't leave our babies and go look for him. He'd taken the car and I didn't have help. I had no idea where he might be other than a bar, and in New York City there were hundreds.

Isolated, I had only myself to blame. I was the one who'd pushed for a move from the city to this banished and awful place far from my literary friends and publishing contacts. I'd begun to believe that I'd never been a poet, or a novelist, a friend or lover, never existed as anything other than wife and mother. Moving here had been my meager attempt to whisk Bill away from an affair with a blonde in Manhattan. Desperation fuels one to believe idiocy is insight.

Was he with another woman and merely feigning a breakdown? This didn't seem too farfetched, and yet even his lunacy had its limits.

Or maybe it didn't.

Our house in the Hudson Valley at the far edge of the suburb of Ossining, New York, was a small wooden abode we called Maple Lodge. It had a sloping roof and creaked with every movement our little family made: Bill; Davy, a toddler who was much like a runaway atom bomb; and Douglas, a baby. It often felt as if the foundation itself were coming undone with our restlessness. I was thirty-one years old, surrounded by books, two cats, and two sons, and I felt as ancient as the house itself.

I missed my friends, the hustle and bustle of the city, the publishing parties and literary gossip. I missed my neighbors. I missed myself.

Night surrounded my sons and me, darkness pressing in on the windowpanes with an ominous weight. Douglas, with his mass of brown curls and apple cheeks, dozed with a warm bottle of milk dangling from his mouth while Davy dragged toy trucks across the hardwood floors, oblivious to the scratches they dug.

Panic coursed through me as I roamed the house, waiting for word from Bill. I cursed. I ranted. I banged my fist into the soft cushions of our tattered couch. Once I'd fed and bathed the boys, I rang my parents and a couple of friends—they hadn't heard from him. How long would he be gone? What if we ran out of food? We were miles from the store.

"Calm down," I told myself over and over. "He's had breakdowns before." This was true, and the specter of another always hung over our home. I hadn't been there for his worst one, after a stint in the Spanish Civil War before we met, when he'd attempted what I was frightened of now—suicide. The leftover traumas of war rattling and snaking through his psyche had become too much to bear.

As if I could cure the panic from a distance, I imagined Bill as I met him—the passionate young man who sauntered into the League of American Writers with his lanky frame and the wide smile hooded by a thick moustache. I'd immediately been drawn to his bravery and idealism, a man who'd volunteered and fought where needed in a faraway and torn country. Later I fell deeper in love with the same charming man I heard playing the guitar at music haunts in Greenwich Village.

Our passion overwhelmed me, stunned me in its immediacy as our bodies and minds found each other. Although he was married when we met, he had reassured me: "It was never anything real. It's nothing like you and me." We married at the MacDowell artists colony three days after his divorce was final—symbolizing our bond and dedication to our craft. Two writers. One marriage. One life. Now it was that very passion and idealism that tore at him, unhinging his mind and driving him back to the bottle.

Near midnight I stood over the crib of our baby, my heart hammering in my chest. There was nothing, not *one* thing I could do to save my husband. My bravado crumbled; my ego crashed.

I took in what was quite possibly the first humble breath of my life and dropped to my knees with such force that the hardwood floor sent a jolt of pain up my legs. I bowed my head, tears running into the corners of my mouth as I prayed for help.

I was praying! To God?

I didn't believe in God. I was an atheist.

But there I was on my knees.

In a crack of my soul, during the untethered fear while calling for help, the sneaky Lion saw his chance, and God came in; he entered the fissures of my heart as if he'd been waiting a long time to find an opening. Warmth fell over me; a river of peace passed through me. For the first time in all my life, I felt fully known and loved. There was a solid sense that he was with me, had always been with me.

The revelation lasted not long, less than a minute, but also forever; time didn't exist as a moment-to-moment metronome, but as eternity. I lost the borders between my body and the air, between my heart and my soul, between fear and peace. Everything in me thrummed with loving presence.

My heart slowed and the tears stopped. I bent forward and rested my wet cheek on the floor. "Why have you waited so long? Why have I?" I rested in the silence and then asked, "Now what?"

He didn't answer. It wasn't like that—there wasn't a voice, but I did find the strength to stand, to gaze at my children with gratitude, to wait for what might come next.

God didn't fix anything in that moment, but that wasn't the point of it all. Still I didn't know where Bill was, and still I was scared for his life, but Someone, my Creator it seemed, was there *with* me in all of it. This Someone was as real as my sons in their beds, as the storm battering the window frames, as my knees on the hardwood floors.

Finally, after wandering the streets and drinking himself into a

stupor, Bill stumbled into a cab that brought him back to us just before dawn. When he walked through the front door, I held his face in my hands, smelled the rancid liquor, and told him that I loved him and that I now knew there was a God who loved us both, and I promised him that we would find our way together.

As the years passed, our coffee table became littered with history and philosophy books, with religious texts and pamphlets, but still we didn't know how to make sense of an experience I knew had been as real as my heartbeat. If there was a God, and I was straight sure that there was, how did he appear in the world? How was I to approach him, if at all? Or was the experience nothing more than a flicker of understanding that didn't change anything? This wasn't a religious conversion at all; it was merely an understanding that something greater existed. I wanted to know more. And more.

One spring afternoon, after we'd moved to a rambling farmhouse in Staatsburg, New York, a three-year-old 1946 *Atlantic Monthly* magazine was facedown on the kitchen table and being used as a coaster for Bill's coffee mug. I slid the mug to the side and flipped through the magazine as our sons napped. The pages flopped open to an article by a Beloit College professor named Chad Walsh. The piece was titled "Apostle to the Skeptics" and was an in-depth study of an Oxford fellow in England, a man named C. S. Lewis who was a converted atheist. Of course I'd heard of the author, had even read his *Pilgrim's Regress* and *The Great Divorce*—both of them holding a whispered truth I was merely beginning to hear. I began to peruse the article, and it was only Douglas calling my name that startled me from the story of this author and teacher who'd reached American readers with his clear and lucid writing, his logic and intellectualism.

Soon I'd read everything Lewis had written—more than a dozen books, including a thin novel of such searing satire that I found myself

drawn again and again to its wisdom hidden in story: *The Screwtape Letters*.

“Bill.” I held up Lewis’s book I was rereading, *The Great Divorce*, over dinner one night as the boys twirled their spaghetti. “Here is a man who might help us with some of our questions.”

“Could be,” he mumbled, lighting a cigarette before dinner was over, leaning back in his chair to stare at me through his rimless spectacles. “Although, Poogle, I’m not sure anyone has the answers *we* need.”

Bill was cold hard correct—believing in a god hadn’t been as simple as all that. Every philosophy and religion had a take on the deity I hadn’t been able to grasp. I was set to give up the search, shove the shattering God-experience into my big box of mistakes. That is, until I contacted Professor Walsh, the writer of the article, and said, “Tell me about C. S. Lewis.”

Professor Walsh had visited Lewis in Oxford and spent time with him. He was turning his articles into a book with the same title and he replied to me. “Write to Mr. Lewis,” he suggested. “He’s an avid letter writer and loves debate.”

There Bill and I were—three years after my blinding night of humbleness, three years of reading and study, of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and debate, of joining the Presbyterian church—when an idea was born: we would write a letter to C. S. Lewis, a letter full of our questions, our ponderings, and our doubts about the Christ he apparently believed in.

CHAPTER 2

Open your door, lest the belated heart
Die in the bitter night; open your door

“SONNET XLIV,” JOY DAVIDMAN

1950

Didn't most everything begin with words? *In the beginning was the word*—even the Bible touted that truth. So it was with my friendship with Lewis.

I descended from my second-story office in our farmhouse into the frigid January day to grab the mail. Two separate trains of thought ran along the tracks of my mind: What would I cook the family for dinner? And how would my second novel, *Weeping Bay*, be received into the world in a few months?

Frosted grass crunched under my boots as I strode to the mailbox and opened it. As I flipped through the pile, my heart beat in double time. On top of the pile of bills, correspondence, and a *Presbyterian Life* magazine was a letter from Oxford, England. I held the white envelope with the airmail stamp of a young King George in profile, his crown hovering over his head, in my hand. In slanted, tight cursive handwriting, the return address stated C. S. Lewis across the top left corner.

He'd finally written a reply. I ran my gloved finger across his name, and hope rose like an early spring flower in my chest. I needed his advice—my life felt unhinged from the new beliefs I'd thought would save me, and C. S. Lewis knew the Truth. Or I hoped he did.

I slammed shut the metal box, icicles crackling to the ground, and

slipped the mail into my coat pocket to navigate the icy walkway. My sons' quarrelling voices made me glance at our white farmhouse and the porch that stretched across the front—an oasis before entering. Green shutters, like eye shadow on a pale woman, opened to reveal the soul of the house, once pure but now clouded with anger and frustration.

The front door was open, and four-year-old Douglas came running out with Davy, age six, chasing close behind.

"It's mine. Give it back." Davy, only an inch taller than his little brother, brown hair tangled from the day's wrestling and playing, yelled and pushed at Douglas until they both caught sight of me and stopped short, as if I'd appeared out of nowhere.

"Mommy." Douglas ran to me, wrapping his arms around my soft hips and burying his face in the folds of my coat. "Davy kicked me in the shin," he wailed. "Then he pushed me on the ground and sat on me. He sat on me too hard."

Oh, how God loved to make a variety of boys.

I leaned down and brushed back Douglas's hair to kiss his round cheek. In moments like this my heart throbbed with love for the boys Bill and I had made. Davy's lithe body and frenetic energy were from Bill, but Douglas's sensitivity to mean-spiritedness was mine. He'd not yet learned to cover it as I had.

"This is all nonsense." I rustled Davy's hair and took Douglas's hand in mine. "Let's go inside and make hot chocolate."

"Yes," Davy said with gusto and ran for the house.

All the while the letter burned in my pocket. *Wait*, I told myself. *Wait*. Expectancy always the thrill before having.

Davy flew through the front door, but not before riling Topsy, who now barked as if to warn us of a monstrous intruder.

"Be quiet, you fluffy mongrel," I called out, "or you'll make me sorry I ever rescued you." I stepped over a pile of toy trucks in the foyer with Topsy fast at my heels. By this time in our lives we'd gathered a menagerie of animals—four cats, two dogs, a bird, and now Davy wanted a snake.

Bill was in his refurbished attic office, typing as fast as his fingers knew how, working on his second novel to pay the bills, which were piling as high as the snow would soon be. The shouting and barking and bedlam must have stirred him from his typewriter, for suddenly there he stood at the bottom of the stairwell.

Douglas cowered, and I reached for his hand. "Don't worry," I said softly. "Daddy won't yell. He's feeling better."

Bill's hands were limp at his side in a posture of defeat. At six foot three inches, my husband often gave me the impression of a reedy tree. His thick, dark hair was swept to the left side like an undulating wave that had collapsed. He was sober now, and his verbal lashings had subsided. AA was doing its job with the Twelve Steps, spiritual sayings, and group accountability.

He pointed at the spilled basket of library books beside the door, then pushed up on his rimless glasses. "You could pick all of that up, you know."

"I know, sweetie. I will."

I darted a glance at him. His blue button-down shirt was wrinkled and misbuttoned by one. His blue jeans were loose on him; he'd lost weight over the past months of stress. I, meanwhile, had gained—so much for life being fair.

"I was trying to write, Joy. To get something done in a house so full of disarray I can scarcely focus."

"Dogs. Kids." I tried to smile at him. "What a combination." I walked into the kitchen. I wanted to defuse any anger—the argument that could ensue would be a repeat of a thousand other quarrels, and I wasn't in the mood. I had a letter, a glimmer of hope in my pocket.

Davy climbed onto a chair and sat at the splintered wooden table and folded his hands to wait. I shook off my coat and draped it on a hook by the door, placing the mail on the kitchen table. Except for the letter. I wanted to read it first. Wanted something to be just mine if only for a small while. I slipped off my gloves and shoved them into the pockets to conceal it. With bare hands I dug into the dirty dishes piled in the

sink—another reminder of my inadequacies as a housekeeper—and found the saucepan, crusted with tomato soup from the night before.

This house had once been the fulfillment of a dream. When Bill's *Nightmare Alley* was released and Tyrone Powers starred in the movie, we'd found ourselves flush with cash for the first time in our lives. It was just enough money to buy this patch of farm upstate. We didn't know that dreams coming true weren't always the best thing. That wasn't what the stories told.

I turned to Davy, my voice full of manufactured cheer. "We might get snow today. Wouldn't that be great fun?"

"Yes," he said, swinging his legs back and forth to bang on the underside of the table.

Bill strode into the kitchen and stood by quietly, watching me clean the crusted pot.

"More bills," he said, rifling through the mail. "Fantastic."

I felt his eyes upon me and knew they weren't radiating with love. Love dwindled, but each day I gauged what remained. Companionship? Admiration? Security? At the moment it felt like rage. I lifted the clean pot and wiped it with a green dish towel from the side of the sink, then turned to him with a smile. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

"Sure." He sank into a chair next to Davy. "Mommy is going to warm us."

I opened the old Coolerator—more white coffin than fridge—and stared at the lonely shelves. Wilted lettuce, an open can of last night's tomato soup, milk, eggs, and a pan of ground beef that had gone the dark, foreboding brown of rancid meat. I needed a trip to the market, which meant another afternoon of writing would be lost. My mood curled over like the spoiled meat, and I hated my selfishness that cared more for the page, the writing, than for my family's meals. I didn't know how to change, but oh, I was trying.

I watched as the milk came to a slow boil in the pot; then I poured the chocolate flakes into the white froth, transfixed. Outside, the first snowflake fluttered into view, then melted as it settled on the windowpane;

it was a natural wonder and it lifted my heart. The bird feeder hung from a low branch, and a cardinal paused there and turned its black eye on me. Every simple thing radiated for a brief moment with extraordinary beauty, a daily grace.

I poured the melted goodness into three mugs just as Douglas came barreling into the kitchen.

“Did you forget about me?” he asked, his hands overhead like he wanted to fly.

“No, my big boy, I did not forget about you.”

We gathered around that table, my three boys each holding a mug of hot chocolate and I a cup of tea. I wished for whipped cream to top it off for them. Why did the everyday-ness of my life sometimes feel constricting, when the everyday-ness was *everything*?

I had other family, my parents were still alive, but I had no immediate desire to visit them. My brother worked in the city as a psychotherapist, yet I rarely saw him. Aside from our new Presbyterian church community, *this* was my family.

There on our acreage in upstate New York, I felt isolated from the world, yet I listened to the news: Truman was president, the atomic bomb was still all the talk—what had we unleashed in splitting that atom? Apocalyptic chatter everywhere. In the literary world, Faulkner had just won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

“Thanks, Mommy.” Davy’s voice brought me back.

I smiled at him, at his chocolate moustache, and then glanced at Bill. He leaned back in his chair and stretched. He made such a handsome picture, the “perfect mythical husband” I’d once called him during our great falling-in-love. I sometimes wondered how I appeared to him now, but my survival instincts didn’t leave room for vanity. My brown hair, long and thick, stayed in a loose and tangled bun at the base of my neck. If I was pretty at all, it was in an old-fashioned way, I knew that. Small at only five foot two, with large brown eyes, I wasn’t the va-va-voom kind of beautiful that men whistled at. It was more of a pleasing beauty that could be enhanced if I tried, although lately I hadn’t. But Bill? He

was dashing, which he loved to hear, his Virginia Southern plantation ancestry adoring that particular word.

He tossed one leg over the other and gave that lopsided smile, the one Douglas had inherited, at me. "I'm going to the seven thirty AA meeting tonight. Are you coming?"

"Not this time. I think I'll stay home with the boys and finish mending their winter clothes."

Under the table I clenched my hands, waiting for the rebuke, which didn't come. I exhaled in relief. Bill stood and stretched with a roar that made Davy laugh before he walked to the entranceway of the kitchen. "I'm going to work now," he said. "Or at least try one more time."

"Okay." I nodded with a smile, but oh, how I ached to return to my own work. The editor of the magazine on the kitchen table had asked me for a series of articles on the Ten Commandments, and I was scarcely making headway. But Bill was the man of the house, and I, as he and society reminded me, was the homemaker.

The little boys ran off to the playroom adjoining the kitchen, bantering in a language all their own. I hesitated, but then called out, "Bill, C. S. Lewis wrote back to us."

"Well, it's about time." He stopped midstep out the doorway. "What has it been? Six months? When you're done reading it, toss it on my desk."

"I haven't opened it yet, but I know you don't have much interest in any of that anymore."

"Any of what?"

"God."

"Of course I do, Joy. I just don't obsess over answers like you do. Hell, I'm not as obsessive about *anything* as you are." He paused as if weighing the heavy words and then tossed out, "You don't even know what he wrote. He might request no more contact. He's a busy man."

I deflated inside, felt the dream of something I hadn't yet even seen or known collapse. "Bill, I can't let my experience mean nothing. It can't

be discarded as some flicker in time. God was there; I know it. What does that mean?"

"I sure don't know. But do whatever you want, Poogle. Write to him or not. I must get back to work."

In my office, I shivered with the chill. If only our house were as full of love as it was books—now more than two thousand of them piled on shelves and tables and, when needed, on the floor. The house was drafty and again the coal had burned low. I would send Davy to bring more inside. Weeks before, we'd had to let the housekeeper go. I would write anything I could for the money just to get her back.

Things had to change and soon.

I held the letter in my hand and, pulling my sweater closer around me, settled into a threadbare lounge chair. I wanted my husband to understand the longing inside me, a yearning for the unseen world hidden inside the evident world. Lewis was seventeen years older than I—the experience and the searching well behind him. I wrote him seeking answers that would satisfy both my heart and my intellect.

I ran my fingers along the rise and fall of his words. The ink, obviously from a blue fountain pen, bled tiny lines from each character into the veins of the cotton paper. I lifted it to my nose and inhaled nothing but the aroma of cold air and dust. I slipped my finger under the sealed flap, eager to read every word, yet oddly I also wanted the expectancy to last—waiting and longing are often the cheap fuel of desire.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Gresham,

it started.

Thank you for your long and elaborate letter.

I smiled. Long and elaborate indeed.
My eyes quickly scanned to the bottom of the page to be sure.

Yours, C. S. Lewis

He had written to us.
Of all the hundreds of letters he received, he had written to me.