

IN STORES MARCH 9, 2021

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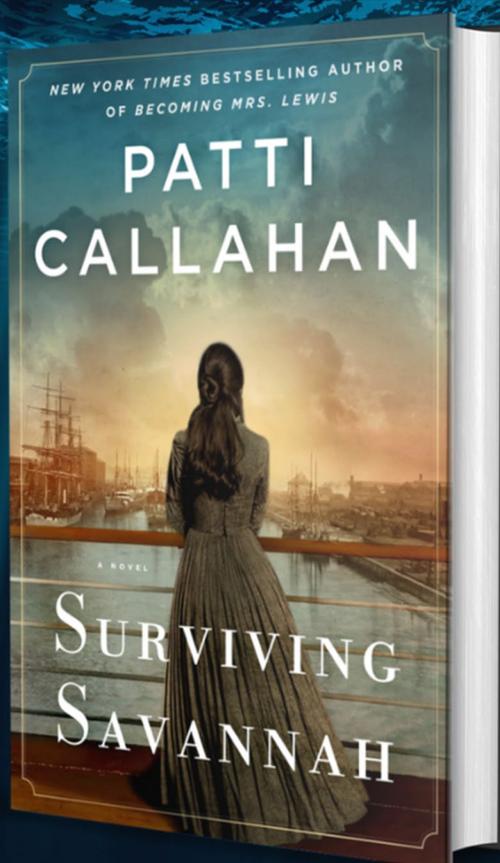
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Everly

Present day

I was born in water.

For all of my thirty-two years, my mom, Harriet Winthrop, had told the story over and over to anyone who'd listen. I could recite her words verbatim; I'd been told them since my memory began. A tale worth telling, she would say when I rolled my eyes as she launched into the story.

"There I was, my darling, only in the beginning of labor. I decided to take a long, warm bath before your daddy drove me to the hospital." Here Mom would laugh and shake her head, pat her hair in place. "The pain was so mild, I thought sure I had hours to go with you tucked warm inside me."

No matter how many times my young face would cloud with doubt, Mom would continue in her singsong voice.

"But I was so wrong. And you came swimming out while your father hollered for your sister, only two years old, to call 911 and then . . ." She always paused here, and I held my breath even though I knew what came next.

"And then . . . your father caught you."

Everyone who knew our family had suffered through this story, which had been embellished over time. There was the other part of the tale where Father had wanted to name me Selkie, but Mom would have none of that silliness. Her children were named after their ancestors.

This story became part of my mythology, my born-and-bred Savannah family lore.

The Winthrop family, we are very big on legends, lore and stories.

But it was my grandfather-Papa, to me and my sister, Allyn-who told the best stories. He regaled us with fantastical tales of a land beneath the water. There lived mermaids and the Kraken; there sailed the great pirates, and the lowly fishermen who found talking fish that offered wishes. There reigned gods and goddesses who ruled the waters with a vengeance, smiting all humans who dared to believe they had more power than the sea itself.

The tales of shipwrecks, of vessels that lay on the bottom of the sea, were the ones that inspired our young minds to dream of breathing underwater and finding treasure. At six and eight years old, we loved stories as much as the hot fudge sundaes we were allowed to have on Saturday nights.

In the evenings, Mom cleaned the kitchen after dinner and then sat on the porch with a cut-glass tumbler filled with the clear liquid we weren't allowed to drink. Meanwhile, we joined Papa in the mahogany-paneled library. Each as blond as the other, me with blue eyes and Allyn with brown, we crossed our legs on the plush carpet and lifted our chins to gaze up at him as he settled in the large leather chair and narrated his stories.

Behind him, a limestone fireplace big enough for us both to crawl into gaped wide, and on cold nights such as the one blazing in my memory, a fire roared and consumed the dried logs from a back garden oak that had been felled by lightning years before.

Above the fireplace hung an oil painting of a lustrous steamship with its sails spread wide and its wheels churning the water into whipped foam, the sky clear and bluer than the sea as human figures on the deck regarded the vast sea. The Steamship Pulaski, 1838, stated a small brass plate on the gilded frame.

Shipwreck tales were Papa's favorite-in particular the shipwreck of the Pulaski. Papa chose that legend again as we sat in our matching red fleece pajamas. We'd taken a hot bath, scrubbed our skin to pink and brushed our teeth-all the prerequisites for a nighttime story.

He began reciting the words we'd almost memorized.

"You see, before she took all those lives, she was a beauty, elegance her specialty."

"She looked like a beautiful woman dressed in white robes," Allyn said, meaning the sails.

"Yes," Papa said. "Everything was right with the world on a breezy summer night, off the coast of North Carolina, and then everything changed."

"Everything," I said in a reverential whisper. This was always when our hearts sped up-when everything changed.

"The wooden steamship Pulaski with her double paddle wheels and twin masts sat low in the water for her fourth voyage. She plowed through the restless waves of the Atlantic Ocean." Papa held out his arms as if they were sails. "Her sleek bow pointed north." He dropped his chin and sent his gaze toward the fireplace. "Her destination was Baltimore where she'd been built. Her passengers slept soundly or walked the deck with summer's expectations ahead of them. First Mate Hibbert was in the wheelhouse overlooking the serene scene, his pride solid beneath his starched blue uniform."

Papa settled back in his chair, lit his pipe slowly, knowing we were leaning into the story just as we were pressing into his legs.

"It was late, eleven at night, and one woman remained on the promenade deck, strolling and then reclining on a settee, and from the wheelhouse, First Mate Hibbert smiled at the sight. The wind picked up, and clouds covered the sky like a diaphanous curtain, blurring the moon and obliterating the stars. Peace reigned, and for this he was grateful.

Yet . . ."

"Below," I said.

"Unseen," Allyn said.

Papa laughed and bent his head toward us. "Yet below, unseen, in the belly of the fine steamboat, a boiler emptied and the second engineer poured cold water into its copper belly. Steam was needed to power this ship and sweep it across the ocean into Baltimore. And while the passengers, all flowers of the South, slept in their cabins in the middle of the night . . ." His voice lowered as we held our breath and then fell for it every time, the quiet and then Papa standing and hollering, "BOOM!"

We squealed and grabbed on to his legs; he laughed as he sat down, his weight molding the leather to his shape.

"It blew up," I said.

"Caught on fire," Allyn almost hollered.

"When the engineer poured water into the boiler, its hidden strength erupted with the violence of a lit cannonball. A fierce explosion fragmented the peace—a concussion to the night, a violence to the wooden steamboat. Hull planks popped, lamps were extinguished, children wailed and women screamed. Chamber pots rattled to spill their contents across the floor, and berths rolled to block the exits from cabins. First Mate Hibbert was thrown from the wheelhouse to the wooden deck. China shattered and fire flashed. Steam filled the galleys. The passengers awakened, all of them, and the fight for their lives began."

"Then what?" I asked every single time because the answer changed every single time.

"Then the story gets really good." Papa's eyes twinkled and he leaned down, smelling of tobacco and mints. "Because now comes the story of how they survived."

The beginning of the tale was always the same, but his stories of the ship's passengers' survival changed with his moods—each different but as vivid as the next. Some survived by riding a whale to shore; others swam underwater and grew gills.

Occasionally, passengers were rescued by great flying birds that swooped down and carried them home. This time, he used his deepest voice. "When the Kraken heard the explosion from the very bottom of the sea, he rose to the sound and found people thrashing in the water-men, women and children."

"Did he eat them?" Allyn was the most afraid of the wild Norse octopus-creature who terrorized sailors.

Papa shook his head as if in despair. "He swooped them up into each of his twenty squishy arms. The little suckers on the inside of his tentacles kept them high above the waters. They screamed in fear and panic because they knew a Kraken was the most evil creature of the sea."

"But not this time," I said. "Right? Not this time."

I needed the evil to become good. I needed the dark to become light. I needed the stories to end in triumph or what was the point? I hated the stories where the sad ending left me feeling an ache in the middle of my tummy, the same place where I felt the emptiness left by losing my father the year before. I wanted-no, I needed-the stories to make sense, for the world to be restored at the end.

"Yes," Papa said. "The Kraken was there to save them. And one woman . . ."

"Lilly Forsyth," I interrupted, eager for more about the woman who according to Papa had survived in a thousand different ways. The story always came back to Lilly Forsyth; she was the heroine in every tale, the woman who had all the adventures while the ship sank to the bottom of the sea.

"Tell us what happened to her." Allyn pulled at Papa's pant leg.

"The Kraken carried her to shore and offered her the treasures of the sea if she would come with him to the far ends of India."

"He took her!" I squealed. "That's what happened to her. She went to India."

At that moment Mom wandered into the library, her bottle-bleach-blonde hair flying and her hands carrying a drink. "Dad, I heard you holler. I take it the Pulaski has blown up once again?"

He held his hands up in surrender and tobacco flew from his pipe. "I didn't blow anything up. I'm just telling how it was."

"Dad, you scare them, and then they can't sleep. I'm the one who suffers when they come crawling into my bed and wake me in the middle of the night."

Papa brushed the tobacco from his pants. "It's good for them to have a large imagination. They're smart enough to know what's real and what's not."

"Dad, they are only six and eight."

"The perfect age to learn about the wildest stories that make us who we are."

Every story Papa told brought my imagination to life, vivid and real. And also, yes, he was right-I knew the difference between real and imaginary. A bird couldn't carry a child to safety, and the Kraken didn't swim the Carolina shores. Father wasn't coming back, even in a dream. But these were the most beautiful things I knew: Papa's stories.

I looked up at Mom standing in the library's doorway, her eyes as sad as they'd been since Father left the world. Mom loved the stories as much as we did; I could feel it in her gaze, but she was tired of feeling things, even the goodness of a story.

"Don't be sad, Mommy. Papa's stories don't scare me one bit." I looked back to Papa as I asked him, "What really happened to Lilly?"

His face became mysterious and closed. "That's a story for another day."

"Papa!"

"The secrets are lost to the waves. Only the sea knows, my child, and she keeps her secrets well." He paused and puffed his pipe with a secret smile. "And maybe one day she will tell you."

Everly

Present day

I know this: we're made of stories, legends and myths just as we are made of water, atoms and flesh. Once you know it, you can't un-know it; you can't pretend that everything that happened before you were born doesn't have something to do with who you are today. Still, everything can change in an instant, a flash, a blink of an eye. A story can shift completely with the screech of a car tire, the flash of fire or the words of someone you love. It can all happen as Papa had once said: "And then everything changed."

And yet the truth sometimes slipped from me and I forgot for moments and months at a time. The day Oliver asked for my help, I'd come to believe that a day was just something to get through without anxiety winning the hour.

The tall floor-to-ceiling windows of my classroom allowed the midday sunlight to fall so brightly that it formed a spotlight on the dust mites, giving them a place to dance. The building with its ancient bones was one of my very favorites in all of Savannah. Which said a lot because there were buildings in this city I loved so much I'd stand in front of a wrecking ball to protect them. The fact that I was able to teach history in this fortress was more than I'd hoped for during the long years of postgraduate work. But there I was: Dr. Everly Winthrop, professor of history. This was the only school I'd applied to teach at, Savannah College of Art and Design-SCAD for those who loved her.

The students gathered their backpacks and ever-dinging cell phones and began to filter out of the room, calling to one another, planning study groups or a night on the town. They had long hair, dreadlocks, spiked hair, pink hair. They were full of life and a vibrancy I not only missed in myself but thought long gone.

From the corner of my vision, I saw a man leaning against the doorframe as casual as if he were posing for a photo shoot. I took him for another student preparing some excuse why he'd missed this or that or the other. I'd heard it all.

From the scarred wooden desk, I gathered the essays my students had dropped next to the art history textbook with the bright cover of Van Gogh, but the man remained and I felt his presence as if he tapped me on the shoulder with his gaze. I turned with the full expectation of reminding him of my office hours.

My breath first told me it was Oliver as it caught in my chest and didn't move. I'd known that one day I'd see him again-it was inevitable-but I'd imagined it happening much later, long after I'd prepared myself with the correct words and penitent apologies. But here he was. He hadn't changed much since I saw him over a year ago-his sly grin, his dark hair wafting back as if there were a breeze, and eyes so brown they seemed made of earth. But, like me, the unseen parts of his life had been completely altered, I knew.

"Hello, Oliver." I held the pile of paper-clipped essays in front of me like ineffectual armor. The overhead light from the hallway bounced off a neon painting of a woman with a snake around her waist. "How in the world did you get in here?"

He took a step closer but did not enter the room. He shrugged with that grin that usually got him what he wanted. "I followed a student in."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you." His voice was void of Savannah's accent, the lilt and sway of it-he was a California boy. He straightened in the doorframe and rolled back his shoulders.

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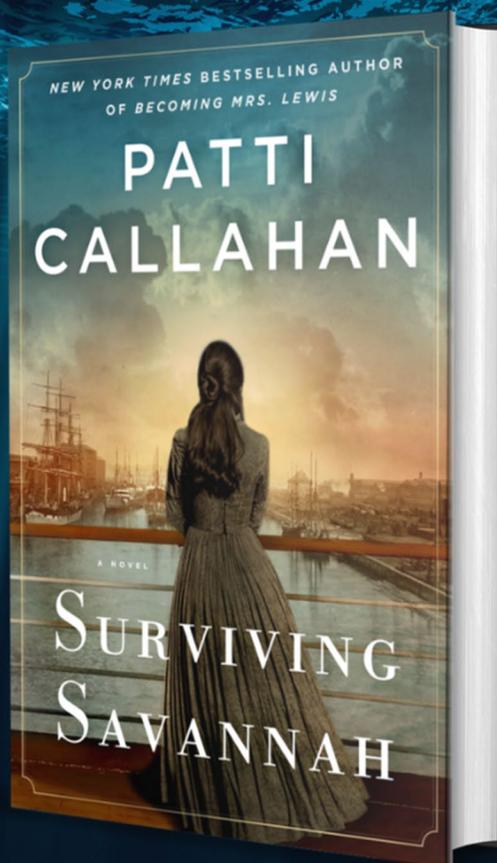
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