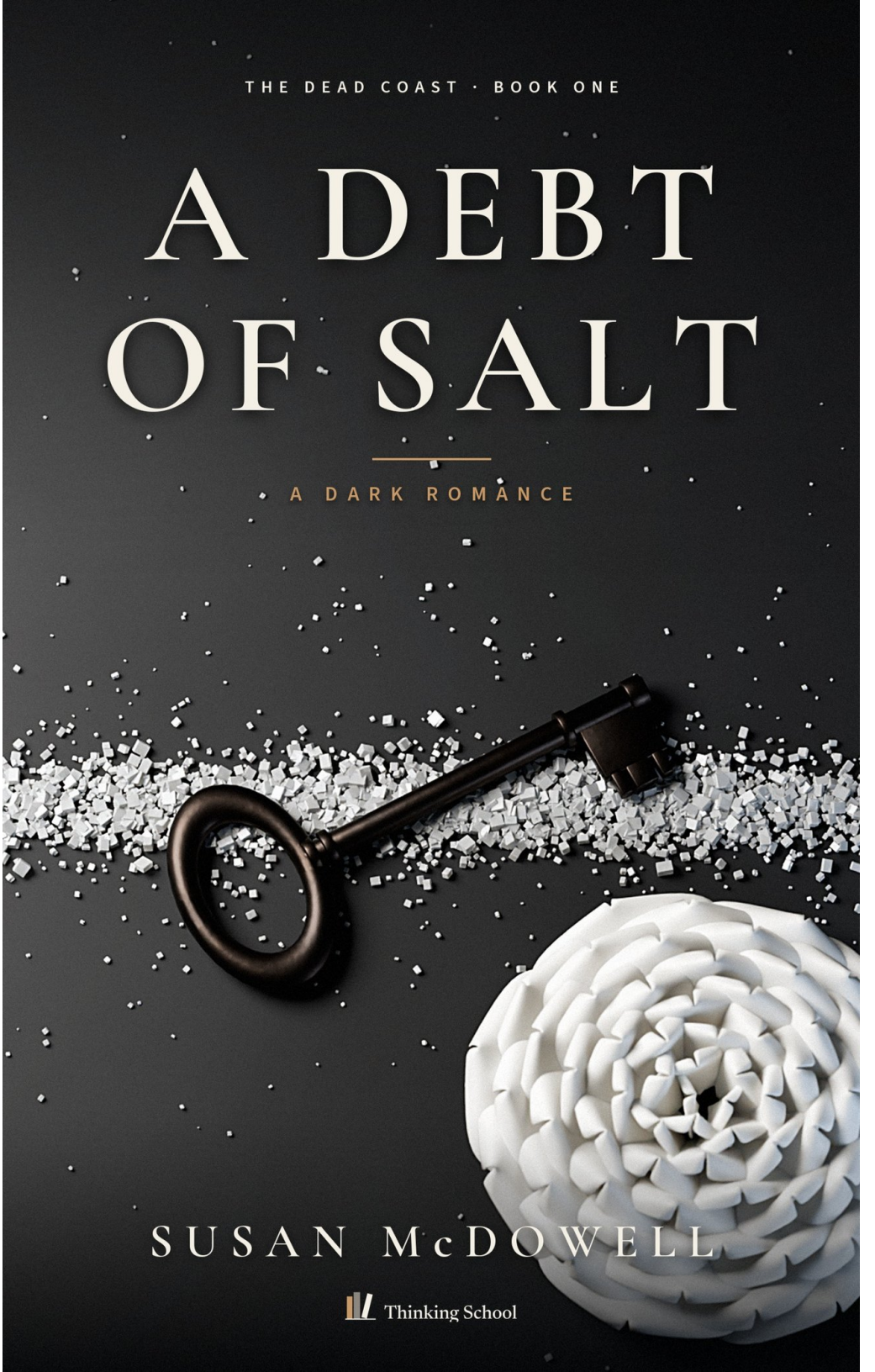
THE DEAD COAST · BOOK ONE

# A DEBT OF SALT

A DARK ROMANCE



SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School

# A DEBT OF SALT



## BEFORE YOU READ

A Debt of Salt is a dark romance written for adult readers. The love story ends happily. The road there is not gentle.

This book contains: captivity and coercion by a criminal organisation; on-page violence, including an assault on the heroine and a scene of deliberate punishment; organised crime, smuggling and drug trafficking; the death of a parent and the past death of a mother held against her will; drowning and near-drowning; grief; a morally grey hero who lies by omission; open-door intimate scenes between consenting adults; and strong language.

If any of that is not for you today, please look after yourself first.

A

# DEBT *of* SALT



THE DEAD COAST · BOOK ONE

SUSAN McDOWELL

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Susan McDowell is a pen name.

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First edition.

Thinking School

*For everyone who was told it was for their own good.*

*Cando penso que te fuches,*
*negra sombra que me asombras...*

When I think that you have gone,
black shadow that astounds me...

ROSALÍA DE CASTRO, *Follas novas* (1880)

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PART ONE

# The Debt

*March*

# I

NOA

## *The Man in My Father's Chair*

MY FATHER HAD been dead nine days when I found out what he owed.

I was in the cold room at the time, counting octopus. Forty-pound cases, frozen in Vigo, stacked six high on pallets my father had wrapped himself, because nobody at Varela & Sons Seafood wrapped a pallet the way Xoán Varela wrapped a pallet. It was 5:40 on a Friday morning in March. I had a clipboard, a pencil on a string, and two sweaters under his freezer coat, which still smelled like him: brine, Ducados, the Old Spice I bought him every Christmas because he refused to learn the name of anything else.

Thirty-one cases. The book said thirty-four.

I counted again. Counting is what I do. Some people pray, some people drink, some people run until their knees give out. I reconcile. Give me two columns that disagree and for as long as it takes to make them agree, I am not a person whose father dropped dead on a Wednesday. I am a function.

Thirty-one.

"Three cases of octopus," I told the pallet. "That's a hundred and twenty pounds of pulpo, Pop. Where'd you put it?"

The pallet declined to comment. The compressor hummed. Out on Ferry Street the first bakery trucks were going by, and somewhere above the Ironbound a plane was dragging itself up out of Newark Liberty toward a place where it was already lunchtime.

That was when I smelled the coffee.

Not the Bunn in the break room, which made something my Tío Moncho called *agua de fregar*. This was the moka pot. My father's moka pot, the dented six-cup Bialetti that lived on the hot plate in his office and that nobody else was permitted to touch, a rule he enforced with the solemnity of a man guarding a relic.

Tío Moncho didn't come in until seven. The drivers came at six-thirty. I had locked the street door behind me.

I put the clipboard down. On the shelf by the cold-room door, in a coffee can, we kept the oyster knives. I took the one with the red handle, because it was mine, because I'd been shucking with it since I was eleven, and because a three-inch blade is short enough to look ridiculous and I wanted, in whatever came next, to have underestimated myself on purpose.

Then I walked down the corridor to my father's office and opened the door.

There was a man in his chair.

I want to be precise about this, because precision is the only thing I have ever been able to offer anyone. He wasn't going through the desk. He wasn't at the safe. He was sitting in my father's cracked green leather chair with one ankle on the opposite knee, a demitasse in his hand—my father's, the white one with the chipped saucer—and he was looking at the wall of photographs as if he had all the time in the world and had decided to spend some of it on us.

He was thirty-something. Dark hair, cut short, going early to gray at one temple, like a thumbprint. Black wool coat, open. No tie. He had the kind of stillness I'd only ever seen in two types of people: surgeons, and

the men who came to my office after an audit to learn how many years they were looking at.

And his hands. I noticed his hands because I notice the wrong things. They were not the hands that went with the coat. They were scarred white across the knuckles and the backs, dozens of small cuts healed over other cuts, as if he'd spent years reaching into something that bit.

"You're in my father's chair," I said.

He turned his head. His eyes were a gray that had some green in it, the color of the water off the Jersey shore in February. He looked at my face, then at the oyster knife, then at my face again, and something happened at the corner of his mouth that did not qualify as a smile.

"Señorita Varela," he said. The accent was Spain. Not Madrid. Further up and further west; there was rain in it. "I am sorry for your loss."

"Great. Thank you. Get out of the chair."

He stood. He did it without hurry, and he kept standing for a while; he was considerably taller than my father's office had been built for. He set the demitasse on the desk. On the saucer. On the side with the chip turned away, the way my father always set it.

*He made coffee as if he knew the kitchen.* I filed that. I didn't know what column it went in yet.

"There are two men outside your loading door," he said. "One of them is eating something from the Portuguese bakery and will get crumbs on your floor. They will not come in unless I ask. I tell you so that you do not go out that way and frighten yourself."

"I locked the street door."

"Yes."

"So you're telling me you broke in, and you brought friends, and I should be reassured because one of them has a pastry."

"I am telling you where everyone is." He tipped his head a degree. "You like to know where things are. You were counting when I arrived. You counted the same pallet three times."

My skin did something cold under the two sweaters. "You were watching me."

"I was waiting for you to finish. It seemed rude to interrupt." He glanced at the knife again. "That is for oysters."

"It's for whatever I point it at."

"Then point it better. You hold it like a pen."

"I'm an accountant," I said. "I hold everything like a pen."

That time it did qualify. Barely, and gone at once, as if it had surprised him and he'd had it removed.

"I know what you are," he said. "Noa Varela Castro. Twenty-seven. Rutgers. Certified public accountant, certified fraud examiner. Four years at Hale Brennan in forensic services, where you find money that other people have hidden. You are said to be very good. You found eleven million dollars inside a chain of car washes." He paused. "Your father was proud of the car washes. He wrote of it to my uncle. Twice."

The office was nine feet by eleven. I had measured it as a child, for no reason, in sneaker lengths. It had never felt smaller.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Brais Lobeira."

He said it the way you'd set down something heavy. And the thing is, I knew it. Not him. The name. It came with the smell of my mother's hair and a kitchen in which adults stopped talking when I walked in. *Os Lobeira.* A word my father used maybe four times in my life, always quietly, always in Galician, the language he kept for things he didn't want his American daughter to carry.

"From Arnela," I said.

"From Arnela."

"My father's village."

"And your mother's."

"Don't," I said, and the knife came up half an inch on its own. "You don't get to bring her into this building."

He looked at me for a long moment, and whatever he saw, he gave me the courtesy of looking away from it first. He reached into his coat. I did not flinch; I am telling you that because I was proud of it. What he

took out was a sheet of paper folded in three, and he laid it on my father's blotter and turned it to face me with two scarred fingers.

"Read it," he said. "Then I will tell you what it means, and you will tell me I am lying, and then you will read it again. I have time."

I read it.

It was a ledger page. A photocopy, but I knew the original would be green-ruled, because I knew the hand. My father made his sevens the European way, with the bar through the stem, and his fours open at the top, and so do I, because he taught me my numbers at this desk with a box of rubber bands and a bag of clams. The page ran from January 2017 to February of this year. Dates. Amounts in euros. A column of initials. A running balance at the right that grew, and grew, and at the bottom of the page had been underlined twice.

€4,312,560.00.

"For twenty-two years," Brais Lobeira said, "your father received money from my family and made it clean. Through this company. Through three others whose names you will find when you look. He was careful and he was honest, in the way that such a man can be honest, and for this my father trusted him, and after my father, I trusted him." He touched the underlined figure. "This is what is missing."

"No."

"Yes."

"My father sold octopus."

"He sold a great deal of octopus."

"He drove a 2011 Corolla. He darned his socks. He darned *my* socks. You are standing in the office of a man who reused tea bags and you want me to believe he stole four million euros."

"I do not want you to believe anything. I want you to read it again."

I read it again. I read it the way I'd read ten thousand pages like it, the way you read a face for the lie, and the terrible thing, the thing that put the first crack in the floor, was that it was a good ledger. It was clean. It balanced. It was the work of a careful man who knew exactly what he was doing and had done it for a long time.

I had spent four years taking apart people who kept books like this. I had been very smug about it at Thanksgiving.

"I'll want the originals," I heard myself say. My voice had gone to the place it goes in depositions. "Bank records. Both sides. A photocopy of one page is not a debt, Mr. Lobeira, it's an allegation."

"You will have them."

"And if it's real, it was his. He's dead. Send your invoice to the estate and get in line behind the funeral home."

"*A débeda non morre*," he said.

I knew enough for that. *The debt does not die.*

"In my village," he said, "when a man drowns owing, his boat pays. If there is no boat, his house. If there is no house—" He stopped. He looked, briefly, at the wall of photographs: my father on the dock in Arnela at nineteen with a fish as long as his arm; my first communion; the grand opening, 1998, my mother laughing at something outside the frame with her hand over her mouth. "There are seven old men who sit at a table. They voted nine days ago, the night the news came. They are not sentimental. Your father has a daughter, and a cousin who runs his floor, and twelve families who eat from this warehouse. That is the estate, as they count it."

The compressor cycled off. In the quiet I could hear my own pulse, and I counted it, because it was there. Eighty-eight. Ninety.

"Are you threatening Tío Moncho?" I said. "He's sixty-eight years old. He has a pacemaker and a parakeet."

"I am telling you what was voted. I did not say I would carry it out."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is why I came myself."

He picked up the demitasse, found it empty, and set it down again. For the first time he seemed to choose his words.

"I do not think your father stole from me. I think the money is gone, and that he knew where, and that he died before he could say. Those are different things, and the men at the table do not care about the difference,

and one of them would prefer that nobody ever look. I care. So I am going to offer you something, and you will not like it, and you will say yes."

"You don't know me."

"You counted the pallet three times." He took a black pen from inside his coat, uncapped it, and put it on the blotter beside the ledger page, parallel to the edge. "You cannot leave a number wrong. That is all I need to know about you this morning."

I hated him. I want that on the record, itemized, with the date. I hated him for the chair and the cup and the *said to be very good*, and I hated him most for being right in my father's office in my father's coat's smell.

Out by the loading door, somebody laughed, low, and somebody else shushed him.

"Señorita Varela." Brais Lobeira glanced at the moka pot. There was, I saw, exactly one more cup in it. He poured it into the white demitasse and held it out to me across my father's desk, handle first, like a man offering a knife the polite way.

"You have until you finish this," he said, "to hear my terms."

# 2

BRAIS

## *Terms*

SHE DRANK IT standing up.

I had thought she would refuse the cup. I had thought, if I am honest, that she would throw it; the daughter of Xoán Varela had his jaw and his way of going quiet before a storm, and I have had hotter things than coffee thrown at me by people with less reason. Instead she took it by the saucer, looked at what was in it, and drank it in three swallows like medicine. Then she put the cup down on the side with the chip turned away.

So. She had seen that too.

"Talk," she said.

I have sat across from customs men and Colombians and my own father. I know what fear looks like when it is trying to pass for something else. Hers was passing for arithmetic. Her eyes kept going to things and I could see her lips almost move: the photographs, eleven; the drawers of the filing cabinet, four; the two steps between her and the door. She was not planning to run; she was taking inventory. It was, I understood, how she kept the walls up.

I had been in that office before. Nine days before, on the Wednesday. I did not tell her that.

I did not tell her that I knew where the coffee was because her father had made me a cup with hands that were already the wrong color. That I knew the chair because I had pulled him out of it. That the green linoleum by the filing cabinet, where she was standing in his freezer coat with a knife for oysters, was where I had knelt for eleven minutes counting out loud in a language he was too far gone to hear.

I looked at the floor once. Then I did not look at it again.

"There is a time limit," I said. "The Table gave the debt a date. The night of San Xoán, the twenty-third of June. On that night accounts are closed in Arnela; it is older than my family. Until then, nothing is done. After—" I opened my hand. "After, it is done the old way, and I will not be able to stop it, because by then I will have had my chance and failed."

"The old way."

"The warehouse. The house on Monroe Street. Your father's cousin signs over what he has. And you would be asked questions by men who believe you know the answers." I let her have that for a moment. "They are not gentle when they believe things."

She did not go pale. She went still, which was worse, and more useful.

"And the alternative?"

"You come to Arnela. Today. You bring what you need to do your work and nothing else. I give you every book my family has kept for forty years—the ones the tax office sees, and the ones it does not. You find where four million three hundred thousand euros went. When you find it, the debt is closed, in front of the Table, and you go home, and no one from my coast comes to this street again while I am alive."

"And if I don't find it?"

"You will."

"That's not an answer, that's a compliment. If I don't."

I had asked myself this on the plane. I had not liked what I came up with, and I gave it to her anyway, because the one rule I meant to keep with her was already forming in me and I did not yet have words for it.

"Then on San Xoán I pay it," I said.

Her eyebrows went up. They were very straight, very dark; they did most of the work in her face. "You. Personally. Four point three million."

"Yes."

"Out of the goodness of your heart."

"I do not have one of those. Ask anyone." I shrugged. "It would cost me a great deal more than money, and I would rather not. So you will understand that when I say I need you to find it, I am not being polite."

She thought, and I watched her do it. There are people who think the way water runs, fast and downhill; and there are people who think the way a net is mended, knot by knot, testing each one. She was the second kind. My brother had been the second kind.

"Why me?" she said. "You have people. You must have a whole floor of people. You don't cross an ocean for a bookkeeper."

"I had a bookkeeper. He is in a drawer at Soares & Sons Funeral Home."

It was a brutal thing to say and I said it flat, to see what she would do. She breathed in through her nose. Then she nodded, once, as if I had quoted a price that was high but not unfair.

"I have people," I said, more quietly. "Every one of them was hired by my father or my uncle. One of them moved this money or helped it move. I need eyes that owe nothing to anyone on my coast. I need someone who reads Xoán Varela's hand as if it were her own. And I need her where no one can reach her but me."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you will live in my house."

"No."

"You will live in my house," I said, "because it is the only building in Galicia where I can promise you a locked door. You do not leave the grounds without me or one of my men. You do not use a telephone I have not given you. You tell no one here where you are going. To the cousin you say Spain, family matters, the estate; it is even true."

"That's not a job. That's a kidnapping with a desk."

"It is collateral," I said. "With a desk."

"Oh, well. As long as there's a word for it."

I should say that I did not find her funny. I found very little funny; the habit had gone out of me years ago, along with some others. What I felt, when she said that, was closer to what you feel on the rocks when a wave you had counted as small turns out to have something behind it. A shift of the weight. A need to look again.

She put the oyster knife down on the desk. I noticed that she put it down within reach.

"I have conditions," she said.

"You are not in a position to have conditions."

"And yet." She pulled open the top right-hand drawer of her father's desk without looking, the way you reach for a light switch in the house you grew up in, and took out a pad. Carbon forms, the old kind, three sheets to a set: white, yellow, pink. VARELA & SONS SEAFOOD across the top in blue, a little fish, a telephone number with an area code that no longer existed. She clicked my pen. *My* pen.

"One," she said, writing. "Payroll. Twelve employees, paid weekly, through June twenty-third and for ninety days after, whatever happens. From your pocket, not the company's, since apparently I can't trust what's in the company's."

"Agreed."

She looked up, for she had expected a fight.

"I have no quarrel with men who drive trucks," I said. "Two."

"Two. Ramón Varela. Tío Moncho. Nobody talks to him, nobody visits, nobody sits in a car across the street from his house looking Mediterranean. He thinks my father was a saint and he gets to keep thinking it."

"Agreed."

"Three. Everything. When I say every book, I mean every book. I don't mean the ones somebody decides I should see. If I open a cabinet and it's locked, you unlock it. If I ask a question, you answer it. I can't find a hole in a set of books if people are standing in front of the hole."