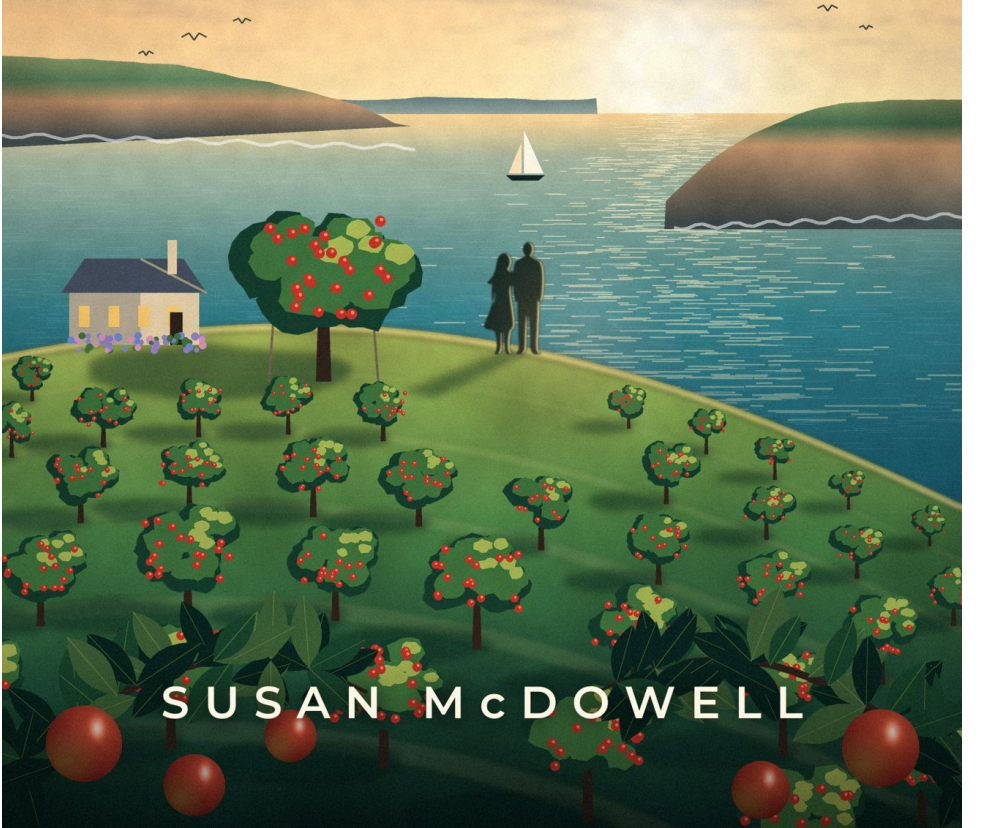
A SECOND HARVEST ROMANCE

Meet Me at Fifty

They promised to meet again at fifty.
Neither will admit they remember.



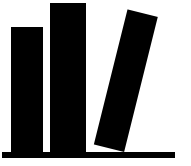
SUSAN McDOWELL

Meet Me at Fifty

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A SECOND HARVEST ROMANCE

Susan McDowell



Thinking School

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For everyone who thought
it was too late to ask.

La sidra no se guarda.

Cider doesn't keep.

WHAT THEY SAY IN PORTIELLA

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PART ONE

The Fire

June

1

HEATHER

The Official Number

THE OFFICIAL REASON I was standing on a Spanish beach at midnight, sweating through a blouse I'd been wearing since Detroit, was cider.

I want to be clear about that, because the village of Portiella was not clear about it at all. Portiella had taken one look at me coming down the stone steps from the road, dragging nothing, because my suitcase was enjoying an extended layover in Madrid, and Portiella had drawn its own conclusions.

I'd made a promise on that beach once. I was twenty-one. It was about this exact night, and the year I turned fifty. I was not there to keep it. I had a contract.

"¡Jéder!"

It came from somewhere near the bonfire. A woman's voice, delighted, carrying over the bagpipes. Yes, bagpipes. Northern Spain has them, and nobody warns you.

"¡Jéder! ¡La americana!"

Nobody had called me that in twenty-nine years. In Michigan I am Heather, or Ms. Calloway, or for one long stretch Mrs. Reese, and at my old cidery I was *Heth*, which my ex-husband thought was cute and which sounds like a noise you make clearing a drain. But in the summer of 1997 an entire Asturian village tried to say my name, hit the *th* like a wall, and settled on *Jéder*, with a sound at the front like someone warming their hands.

The woman who'd shouted was pushing through the crowd with a plastic cup in each fist. Short. Red glasses. A white streak in black hair that she had clearly decided was a feature.

"Sol?" I said.

"Twenty-nine years and she says *Sol?* like I am a ghost." Marisol Otero kissed me on both cheeks, hard, the way you'd stamp a passport. In 1997 she'd been the pharmacist's daughter who taught me every Spanish word my textbook left out. "You are the same. You are exactly the same."

"I'm fifty."

"I am fifty-two. We are both the same. Drink."

The cup held an inch of cider, cloudy and sharp. You're supposed to drink it in one swallow, while it's still alive from the pour. I'd known that longer than I'd known how to drive stick.

I drank it in one swallow.

Here is what I'd planned for my first night back in Portiella. One: arrive at four in the afternoon. Two: check in to the room my client had booked above the cider bar. Three: shower, sleep, and meet said client at nine the next morning, in a clean shirt, with my pH meter and my professional face. Four: at no point attend a bonfire.

Here is what happened. A baggage handlers' slowdown in Madrid. Then a taxi that couldn't get into the village, because the one street was closed for the fiesta. The driver let me out at the top of the steps and pointed down at the orange glow and said, "Everyone is there."

Everyone was.

The beach at Portiella is a half-moon of sand between two arms of rock, with the fishing boats pulled up at one end and the village stacked on the hill behind it like spectators. On the night of San Xuan they build a fire on that sand the size of a two-car garage. The *foguera.* It burns all night. People dance around it and eat sardines and, at midnight, write down whatever they want to be rid of and throw the paper into the flames.

I knew all that too. I'd been to exactly one San Xuan fire in my life.

That's the official number.

"You came for the fire," Sol said. She was looking at me the way she used to look at prescriptions. "Tonight. This year. Jéder. How old did you say you are?"

"I came for work." I held up my phone as if it were a badge. "I have a contract. With Nel Valdés, at the cider house. He's expecting me. Is he here?"

Something happened to Sol's face. It was the look of a woman who has been handed a present and is deciding how slowly to unwrap it.

"Nel hired you."

"I'm a consultant. Cellar problems. Stuck fermentations, spoilage, that kind of thing. People call me the—" I stopped. People call me the Cider Doctor, and I've never once enjoyed

saying it out loud. "He emailed in April. We did two video calls. He picked the start date."

"Nel picked the twenty-third of June."

"He said after the fiesta everyone would be in a good mood."

"And you said yes to this date."

"It was a Tuesday. I had no opinion about it."

Sol took my empty cup, stacked it inside hers, and said, in the voice of someone who has spent thirty years listening to customers lie about their symptoms, "Claro."

That was when the hot flash arrived.

I'd like to tell you it was the fire. I was fifteen feet from an inferno, in June, in a polyester-blend travel blouse; the fire would have been a perfectly respectable explanation. But I've had thirteen months to learn the difference. This one started where they always start, behind my breastbone, like a pilot light catching, and then rolled up my neck and over my scalp until I could feel my own pulse in my eyebrows.

I am, medically speaking, *post*. I resent the word. It makes me sound like something that already happened.

"Sofoco," Sol said, with real sympathy, and fanned me with a sardine-stained paper plate. "I have a cream. Come to the pharmacy tomorrow. For now, take off the jacket and go stand by the water."

"I'm fine."

"You are the color of a pepper."

I took off the jacket. I tied it around my waist like a teenager at a field trip, and I turned toward the water, and that was how I came to be facing the far side of the fire when the crowd shifted.

There's a thing they do with cider here. The bottle goes up over your head at the full stretch of one arm, and the glass goes down by your opposite hip, tilted, and you pour without looking, a thin gold line falling four or five feet through the air to break against the inside rim of the glass. It wakes the cider up. It's also, when someone good does it, one of the more beautiful things a human being can do with a beverage.

The man on the far side of the fire was good.

He stood with his back half to me, pouring for a line of people the way you'd deal cards, not looking at the bottle or the glass or anything at all. Tall for here. Heavier through the shoulders than he used to be. His hair had gone the gray of barn wood, and he had a short beard that was grayer still, and he wore a white shirt with the sleeves shoved up, and I knew him the way you know your own handwriting on an old envelope.

Don't, I thought, which was not a complete instruction, and my body ignored it.

He handed off a glass. He raised the bottle again. The arm went up, sure as a flagpole, and the cider started down, and he glanced across the fire, at nothing, the way you do.

And saw me.

The gold line kept falling. It just stopped landing in the glass.

It landed, I am sorry to report, on the shoes of a priest.

There was a shout. There was laughter, a lot of it, the specific joy of a village watching its best pourer miss. He didn't seem to hear. He lowered the bottle. He was looking at me through the heat-shimmer over the fire, and his face did three things, fast, one after another, like weather coming in off the water.

The first one I'll keep to myself.

The second was something like fury.

The third was nothing at all, a door closing, and that one I recognized, because I own the same door.

"Ay, madre," Sol breathed, thrilled. "He never misses. Never. Not since—"

"Sol. Which one is Nel?"

"You should sit down."

"I should find my client."

But he was already coming around the fire. People got out of his way without seeming to notice they were doing it. Up close he was more gray and more lined and exactly, appallingly, himself: the heavy eyebrows, the nose that had been broken by a boom when he was sixteen, the mouth that used to twitch at one corner right before he said something he'd been saving up.

It didn't twitch.

He stopped an arm's length away. He smelled like woodsmoke and apples, which was unfair of him.

I had, I'll admit, pictured this. In the versions I pictured, I was wearing lipstick and had recently slept, and he was the one who had to hunt for words.

"Hello, Pelayo," I said. My voice came out fine. I've done sales calls with a fever. "It's been a while."

He looked at me for a long moment. The fire popped. Somewhere behind us a child was shrieking with happiness.

"Heather," he said.

Not *Jéder*. Heather, with the *th* right where it belonged, soft, his tongue against his teeth. He was the only person in Portiella who'd ever managed it. He'd practiced in the orchard, that summer, when he thought I couldn't hear, saying it to the trees.

I had not known, until that second, that I'd been braced for him to get it wrong.

"You came," he said. His English had gotten better and his voice had gotten lower and he said it flatly, as a fact he was checking. Then his eyes went to the fire, and back to me, and I watched him do the math. I watched him count.

So he remembered.

Fine. So did I. That and five euros would get you a bottle of cider.

"I came for work," I said. "I'm here on a contract. I start tomorrow."

"A contract."

"At your cider house, as it happens. Which I assumed you knew. I was told you were delighted."

"I was told nothing."

"Well." I cleaned my glasses on the hem of my blouse. They were on a beaded chain around my neck, a gift from my daughter, who'd called it *ironic*. "That sounds like something you should take up with your management."

"I am the management."

"Papá!"

A young man had come jogging up the sand, flushed and beaming, with a plate of sardines in one hand. Mid-twenties. Lanky. He had his father's eyebrows and someone else's smile, a wide easy one, and he was looking at me as if I were a check that had cleared.

"You found her! This is perfect, I was going to do it in the morning, but this is better." He shifted the sardines and stuck out his hand. "Nel Valdés. We spoke on video. Señora Calloway, welcome, it is an honor, I have read everything you have written

about ropiness in wild ferments. Twice." He turned to his father, glowing. "Papá, this is the consultant I told you about."

"You told me," Pelayo said, "about a man named H. Calloway."

"I never said a man."

"You said *the doctor*."

"The Cider Doctor. It is her brand." Nel beamed at us both. "She is the best in North America. She is going to save the llagar."

Pelayo's eyes hadn't left my face.

"Is she," he said.

All around us, people had started tearing paper. It was midnight. Someone pressed a pencil stub and a square of butcher's wrap into my hand, and Sol, at my elbow, said, "Write it, Jéder. What you want to leave behind. Then you burn it and you jump the coals, and it's gone."

I wrote two words. It didn't take long. I've known what they were for years.

I walked to the edge of the fire with everyone else. I watched Sol's paper go in, and Nel's, and a hundred others, curling and catching. Across the flames, Pelayo wasn't writing anything. He was standing with the bottle hanging from his hand, watching me.

I folded my paper in half, and in half again, and put it in my pocket.

It was, by a wide margin, not the worst San Xuan of my life.

Give it time, I thought.

2

PELAYO

A Man Can Stand at a Fire

My father used to say that a man who spills cider is either drunk or in love, and that the cure for both is work.

I was not drunk.

I apologized to Don Benigno for his shoes. He said God had seen worse and so had the shoes. I poured for another hour, because there was a line and because my hands needed something to do, and I did not miss again, and I did not look across the fire again either. I did not need to. I knew where she was the way you know where the sea is in the dark.

She had cut her hair. It used to hang down her back in a braid as thick as a mooring rope. Now it stopped at her jaw, and it was the color of straw with silver through it, and she had glasses on a chain like a schoolteacher. She was heavier, and softer, and she stood differently, with her weight on her heels, as if she expected someone to push.

She was red in the face and furious and wearing her jacket tied around her waist.

I would have known her at the bottom of a well.

I will say this once, so it is said. I have gone down to the fire every San Xuan of my life. I am from here; it is what we do. For the years I was married I went with my wife, and we danced, and we were happy, and I thought about nothing but the sardines. After Marta died I went alone and stood with Selmo and the old men and went home early.

But this year I had turned fifty in December. And this year I had shaved before I went down.

I was not waiting. A man can stand at a fire.

Then I looked up from a glass and Heather Calloway was on the other side of it, and for the length of one breath, no more, I was twenty-one years old and my whole chest opened like a barn door.

She remembered. She came.

One breath. Then: *I came for work.*

"She is incredible, no?" Nel was walking backward up the beach in front of me, which he has done since he was four and which has cost him two teeth. "Did you see how she drank? One swallow, straight down. An American! Papá, she knew to leave the last bit and rinse the rim. Who taught her that?"

"Watch the boat."

He stepped around the bow of the *Xana* without looking. "And she knows you. She said *Pelayo*. How does she know you?"

"She was here one summer. A long time ago. Before you."

"Here in Portiella?"

"She worked a harvest for your grandfather."

Nel stopped walking. Behind him the fire had burned down enough that the children were starting to jump the edges, their mothers shouting.

"H. Calloway worked *our* harvest," he said slowly. "And she did not tell me. And you did not tell me."

"I did not know your H. Calloway had a face."

"This is destiny."

"This is nine thousand euros."

That was a guess, but I saw it land. He put his chin up, the way his mother used to, a half second before an argument she intended to win.

"It is my nine thousand. From England, from the vintage I worked. I can spend it how I want."

"On a foreigner with a machine that tells you what your tongue already knows?"

"On someone who fixed forty cellars in six years. I read the reports, Papá, they are public. We failed the tasting panel in May. Eleven barrels are sick and we do not know why, and you will not talk about it, you just go down there at night and stand." He took a breath. He had practiced this; I could hear the places where he had practiced. "Güelu had the llagar, and then you had it, and I am the next. I am allowed to try to save my own inheritance. She starts tomorrow. Ninety days. It is signed, and half is paid, and it is not refundable."

He looked so much like Marta that I had to look at the water.

Here is what my son did not know, standing on the sand with his chin up and his savings spent.

There was nothing to save.

I had sold it in April.