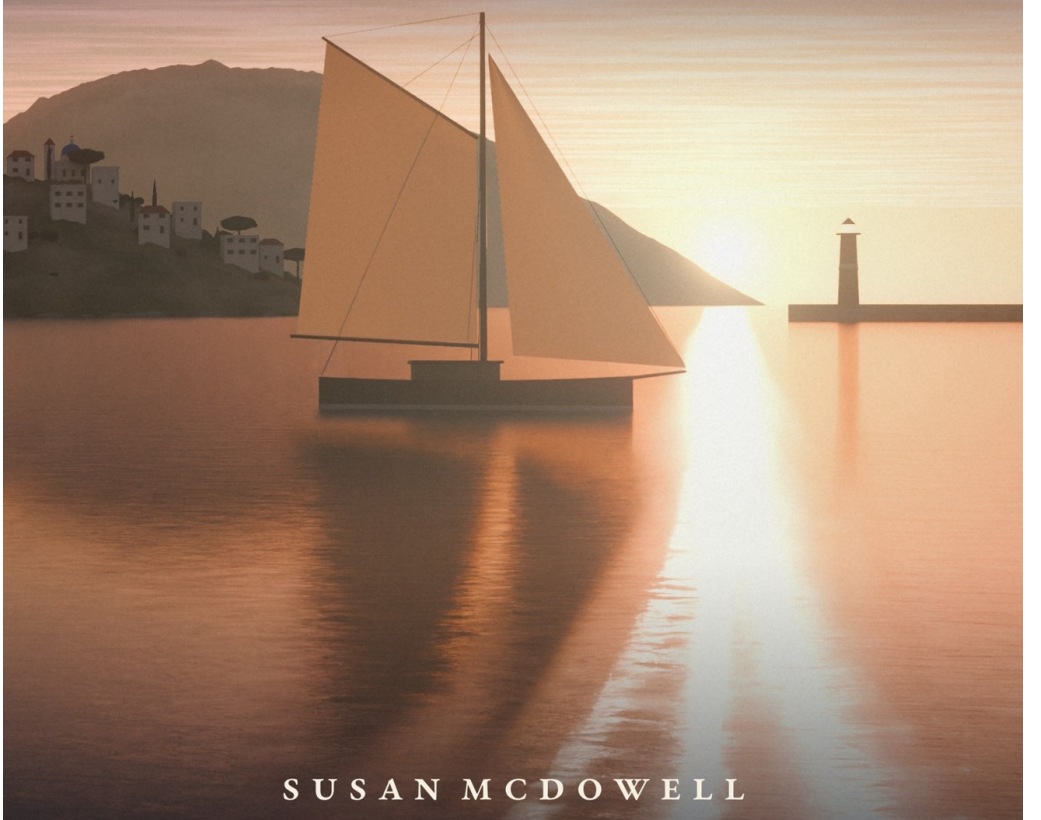
CALA ALBADA · BOOK ONE

The Half That Stays

A SLOW-BURN SUMMER ROMANCE

One boatyard. Two owners. One summer to decide who stays.



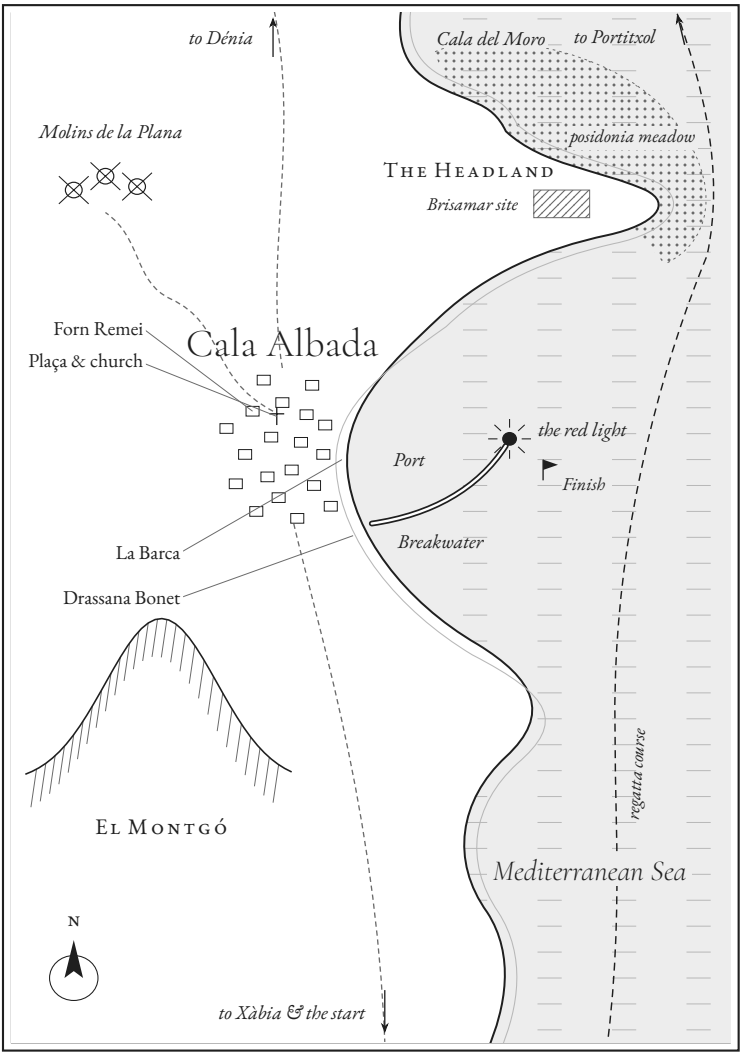
SUSAN MCDOWELL

The Half That Stays



Cala Albada

AND THE MARINA ALTA



CALA ALBADA · BOOK ONE

The Half *That Stays*



A Slow-Burn Summer Romance

SUSAN MCDOWELL



THINKING SCHOOL

The Half That Stays
A Slow-Burn Summer Romance

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Susan McDowell is a pen name.

Set in EB Garamond and Cormorant Garamond.

For everyone who keeps an exit clause,
and for the people who give them a reason to tear it up.

La mar sempre torna.

The sea always comes back.

TILE BESIDE A BLUE DOOR, CALA ALBADA

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PART ONE

The Deal



June

1

TESSA

THE TAXI DRIVER took the last bend above Cala Albada like a man who had personally offended the mountain, and I learned three things in quick succession.

One: the Mediterranean, seen from a cliff road at four in the afternoon, is not blue. It is about eleven blues stacked on top of each other, and the bottom one glows.

Two: I get carsick on hairpins. I had suspected this since the outskirts of Dénia. By the time we passed a sign that said CALA ALBADA, 2 KM, with a bullet hole through the second A, it was no longer a suspicion. It was a load-bearing fact.

Three: my Spanish, which I had been practicing on an app for nine days with the intensity of a person studying for a bar exam, did not include the phrase *please stop the car before I ruin your upholstery*.

"Está bien?" the driver asked, glancing in the mirror.

"*Muy* bien," I said, very brightly, which is what I do when things are not bien at all. "*Fantástico*."

He did not look convinced. He also did not slow down.

I pressed my forehead to the window and made a list, because lists are how I keep my insides on the inside.

Things to do in Cala Albada:

1. Sign whatever the notary needs signed.

2. See the boatyard. Be polite to it.

3. Sell my half.

4. Go home. Find a job. Become a person with health insurance again.

It was a good list. Clean lines, no sentiment. I'd written a version of it on the plane, in the margin of the in-flight magazine, next to an article about the ten best paellas in Valencia. I'd underlined *sell* twice.

The village appeared all at once, the way villages do in films: a scatter of white houses tumbling down to a crescent of water, a church with a blue-tiled dome, fishing boats nodding in a little harbor, a breakwater with a red lighthouse at the end like a lipstick someone had dropped. Above it all, a huge pale mountain leaned over the bay with its elbows on the table.

"El Montgó," the driver said, pointing, as if introducing a relative.

"It's beautiful," I said, and meant it, and then said, "*Por favor*, I'm going to be sick," and meant that more.

He let me out at the port. I stood on the quay with my roller suitcase and my laptop bag and my dignity, all three of them a little dented, and breathed salt air until the world stopped tilting.

It smelled of diesel and frying fish and something green and sharp I couldn't place. Gulls argued over a pile of nets. Two old men on a bench watched me with the open interest of people who have been watching the same harbor for sixty years and are grateful for new content.

"*Hola*," I said.

"*Hola*," they said, in unison, and went back to watching.

The notary's email had said: *The Bonet boatyard is at the eastern end of the port. Notary Pons will expect you at 18:00 at his office in the Plaça Major. Please accept again our condolences.*

Condolences. For a grandmother I had met exactly once, when I was four, and remembered only as a smell of oranges and a voice that called me *poppet*. My mother didn't talk about her. My mother didn't talk about Spain at all, except to say, when I asked, *I left for a reason, Tessa*, in the tone she used for closing drawers.

And then, two weeks ago, a lawyer's letter. *Margaret Hale Bonet, deceased.* A boatyard. A house. Half of each.

Half. The universe has a sense of humor, and it's the kind your uncle has.

I walked east. The port curved around to a long concrete slipway and two big sheds with corrugated roofs, faded blue doors, and a hand-painted sign that said DRASSANA BONET — ESCOLA DE VELA in letters that had been white once. A dinghy park full of small sailboats on trolleys. A lemon tree in a walled courtyard, heavy with fruit, so bright it looked fake. And beyond it a narrow two-story house, whitewashed, with blue shutters and a balcony crowded with geraniums.

My house. Half my house.

Somewhere inside the nearest shed, someone was sanding something. The rasp came in long, patient strokes.

I wheeled my suitcase toward the sound. It was dim inside and smelled of sawdust and varnish and the sea. Boats on stands, a workbench as long as a bus, tools hung on the wall in neat outlines

like a crime scene for hammers. Near the back, a man knelt beside the hull of a dinghy, sanding the transom.

He was in a gray T-shirt that had been through things. His forearms were dusted with wood, and there was a long smear of amber varnish down one side of his neck, as if he'd tried to wipe his face with the wrong hand. Dark hair, too long, pushed back. The kind of shoulders you get from lifting real objects rather than gym equipment.

He didn't look up.

"Hi—*hola*," I said. "Sorry. *Perdón*. I'm looking for the—I'm Tessa Quinn. The granddaughter. Of Maggie. Margaret Bonet." I gestured at my suitcase as if it would vouch for me. "Is the manager here? Or—someone? I need to get into the house, and I have an appointment with the notary at six, and I was hoping someone could help me with this, because the stairs look very—" I looked at the outside staircase, which went up the side of the house at an angle that suggested its architect had been paid by the degree. "Vertical."

The sanding stopped.

He sat back on his heels and looked at me. He had a stillness about him, a way of looking that took its time. His eyes were a darker brown than I expected and very steady, and they went from my face to my suitcase to the laptop bag to my sneakers—white, new, a terrible decision—and back.

"The yard is closed," he said. English, accented, low.

"Oh. Right. Of course, because of—I'm so sorry. Were you—did you work for her?"

Something moved in his jaw. "Something like that."

"Great. I mean, not great. Sorry." I was talking faster. I could hear myself doing it. "Would you mind giving me a hand with the bag? I'll tip. I have euros." I had forty euros. I was prepared to part with five.

He stood. He was taller than I'd thought, and he took his time about that too. He wiped his hands on a rag, slowly, looking at me the whole while like I was weather coming in over the mountain.

Then he picked up my suitcase—forty-one pounds of shoes and denial—as if it were a loaf of bread, walked past me into the sunlight, and carried it up the vertical staircase without breaking stride.

I followed, panting slightly. At the top, he set it down beside a blue door. Beside the door, set into the whitewash, was a single painted tile, blue on white: a little boat, and around it, in curling letters, *La mar sempre torna*.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He looked at it for a moment. "The sea always comes back."

"That's nice."

"It's a warning," he said.

I laughed, because I thought he was joking. He wasn't smiling. I fished in my bag for my wallet and held out a five-euro note.

He looked at it. He looked at me. And for the first time, one corner of his mouth moved—not a smile, exactly. The ghost of one, passing through on its way somewhere else.

"Keep it," he said. "You'll need it."

He went back down the stairs. Halfway, without turning around, he added: "The door sticks. Lift it, then push."

I lifted. I pushed. It opened.

When I turned to say thank you, he was gone, and the rasp of the sanding had started again below, long and patient, as if I had never interrupted it.

The house was cool and dim and full of her.

I hadn't been ready for that. I'd been ready for an asset. Square meters, a roof, possible damp. I had not been ready for a pair of reading glasses folded on a stack of sailing magazines, or a cardigan over the back of a chair, or a kitchen where the coffee pot was still on the stove, washed and upside down, waiting for a morning that didn't come.

The walls were crowded: watercolors of the bay, framed photographs of boats, a barometer, a ship's clock that had stopped at twenty to three. Over the sofa hung a long wooden half-model of a sailboat hull, mounted on a polished board—just one side of it, sliced lengthwise down the middle, so that the boat seemed to be emerging from the wall. Someone had carved it with a lot of love. Under it, a brass plate: MARGARIDA, 1979.

And on the sideboard, in a silver frame, there was a photograph of me.

Me at my high school graduation, in a cap and gown, squinting. I had never sent it to her. I'd never sent her anything. My mother must have—no. My mother wouldn't have.

I stood there with my hand over my mouth for longer than I'd like to admit.

Then I washed my face, put on a clean shirt, checked my lipstick, and went to see a notary about selling the place.

Notary Pons was a small round man with a beautiful fountain pen and an air of tremendous sorrow, as if every document he'd ever notarized had disappointed him personally. His office smelled of paper and old leather. A fan turned slowly overhead.

"Señorita Quinn," he said, rising, shaking my hand with both of his. "My deepest condolences. Doña Margarita was a—" he searched for the word in English and found it with visible pride, "—*a force*."

"Thank you. I didn't really know her," I said, which came out more honestly than I meant it to.

"Ah." He gave me a look over his glasses that made me feel about nine. "Please. Sit. We wait for the other party."

"The other party?"

The door opened behind me.

I knew before I turned. You'd think it would be the sound, or the smell of varnish, but it was something simpler: the room got quieter, the way a room does when someone who doesn't waste words walks into it.

He'd changed his shirt. White, sleeves rolled. He'd also, I noted with a hot and immediate humiliation, washed the varnish off his neck.

"Señor Ferrer," said the notary warmly. "Please. Sit."

He sat in the other chair. He nodded at me. "Señorita Quinn."

"You," I said.

"Me," he agreed.

"You let me *tip* you."

"I didn't take it."

"You let me *try*."

"You were very determined." He looked at the notary. "*Podem començar*?"

The notary, who had clearly understood every word and was enjoying himself for the first time in decades, cleared his throat and opened a folder.

What followed was a lot of Spanish, some Valencian, and a few heroic bursts of English. The gist, translated by Pons and confirmed, grudgingly, by the man to my left:

Margaret Hale Bonet had left her estate—the house, the boatyard, the sailing school, its boats, its equipment, and its debts—in two equal parts. One half to her granddaughter, Teresa Margaret Quinn. (*Teresa?* No one had called me Teresa in my entire life. My mother had crossed it out of everything.) The other half to Mateo Ferrer Llorca, "who has been a son to me and a partner to this yard for nine years."

Mateo. I tried the name in my head. It suited him better than *dockhand*, which wasn't saying much.

"There is also a debt," Pons said apologetically, "of one hundred and forty thousand euros, secured on the property."

"Of course there is," I said.

"And," said Pons, "there are two letters."

He took them from the folder. Two cream envelopes, one with my name in a loopy, confident hand, one with his. He gave mine to me and held out the other to Mateo.

Mateo looked at his envelope. Then he took it and put it in his shirt pocket without opening it, as if it were something that might go off.

I opened mine.

It was short. That surprised me. I'd somehow expected pages.

My darling Tessa,

If you are reading this, I've finally stopped being stubborn, which I'm told was overdue.

I am sorry we didn't know each other. That is a long story, and not all of it is mine to tell. I have left you half of everything I love. The other half goes to Mateo, who will pretend to be unpleasant to you. Don't believe him; he's a soft touch with a bad haircut.

You'll want to sell. I know you will, because you're mine, and I would have too. Before you do, do me one favor: stay long enough to see the sun come up over the bay. Once. That's all.

I've left you each half, because neither of you is whole yet.

With all my love—and I did love you, every day—

Your Gran, Maggie

I folded the letter along its creases. I put it back in the envelope. I put the envelope in my bag and zipped the bag shut, with great precision, because my hands needed a job.

When I looked up, Mateo was watching me. Not unkindly. Just watching, the way he'd watched me in the shed, like he was reading the sky.

"She said you'd be unpleasant to me," I said.

"She said you'd want to sell."

"I do."

"I know."

Pons cleared his throat again. "There is one more practical matter. The house has two apartments. The upper one was Doña Margarita's. The lower one—" he tipped his pen toward Mateo, "—is occupied."

I turned slowly in my chair.

"You *live* there?"

"For nine years," said Mateo.

"Downstairs."

"Downstairs."

"Under my—under *half* my—"

"Under your half." He stood, and the chair scraped. "The door sticks," he reminded me. "Lift, then push."

And he walked out of the notary's office into the gold evening light, leaving me with a fountain pen, a sorrowful notary, a debt of one hundred and forty thousand euros, and a roommate.

2

MATEO

I KNEW WHO SHE WAS the second she said *hi—hola*.

Maggie had kept her on the sideboard for eleven years. A girl in a black gown squinting at the sun as if it owed her money. I'd dusted that frame more times than I'd dusted my own furniture. So when the same face walked into my shed in white sneakers, smelling of airplane, and asked me to carry her bag for five euros, I should have said it straight away. *I'm Mateo. I'm the other half. I'm sorry about your grandmother.*

I didn't. I don't have a good reason. Maybe I wanted to see what she'd be like when she thought nobody important was watching.

She was polite. She talked fast. She said *sorry* six times in two minutes. She looked at the staircase the way you look at a job that's been priced too low.

And she looked at the yard—at the sheds, the slipway, the boats on their trolleys—the way a surveyor looks at a building. Measuring. Already putting numbers on it.

So, no. I didn't feel too bad.

After the notary, I went to the breakwater and sat on the warm concrete with my legs over the edge and the letter in my pocket.

I didn't open it.

Maggie had told me, near the end, that she'd written one. "Don't read it at the funeral," she'd said, in the hospital in Dénia, with the tubes in her arms and her hair, which she'd always kept short and fierce, flat on the pillow. "You'll cry and pretend it's the wind. Nobody believes the wind, Mateo."

She'd made me promise other things too. To keep the school open for the summer. To fix the gutter on the north shed. To give Tessa the box when she was ready.

"How will I know?" I'd asked.

"You'll know," she'd said, which was Maggie's answer to everything she didn't want to explain. Then she'd fallen asleep, and two days later she was gone, and I'd been doing the next thing ever since. Fix the gutter. Answer the bookings. Sand the transom. The next thing, and the next. It's how you get through.

The sea was flat and pink. Out past the red light, Rafa's boat was coming in, low with the evening catch, gulls stitched behind it. I watched it the whole way into the harbor. I didn't open the letter.

When I got back to the house, there was light upstairs.

I stood in the courtyard under the lemon tree and looked at it—the yellow square of her window, which had been dark for three weeks—and something in my chest did a thing I didn't approve of.

Then she started singing.