

*Susan Lee McGeown*

*(Letter #1) In Jossue's Possession*



*~ Con la grandeza vienen los deberes ~*

18 Marzo 1897

Villa Estancia

Zapata County

San Ygnacio, Texas

To: Tomas Grandeza de Villa

*I do not know how long my messenger will take to locate you and deliver this letter, yet I have every confidence that you will be found. My power is far reaching and you cannot hide from your heritage anymore than you can run from your familial responsibilities, my son.*

*Enough with this drama, Tomas! And all over a woman! Haven't I taught you better than this? Can your eyes not see the opportunistic streak this young woman displays like the dark spots on a rattler? Nothing you have about you is more appealing than your name, your heritage, your birthright, and your wealth. And nothing she has to offer you cannot be found in a dozen different women – at a much lower cost!*

*You are a de Villa! From the moment of your birth we have worked tirelessly to prepare you for your calling so that you would continue to lead this family towards future greatness. Your training has been from the finest tutors. Our family legacy stretches back over hundreds of years and our future greatness is as limitless as the sky! The monarchs of Spain have lauded our ancestors. Our family now holds great power and influence in the government of this republic, known as the state of Texas. Do I not command the distinction of Mayor of San Ygnacio and serve as Texas State Representative for Zapata County? Our name has always spoken of wealth, power, and respect. Your middle name*

*Susan Lee McGeown*

*means 'greatness'! Those less fortunate than we will stop at nothing to take what is rightfully ours. Is any of this news to your ears? Have I not told you this time and time again?*

*Tomas, even as a young boy your stubbornness knew no bounds and caused you ceaseless trouble. Have you not yet realized that with maturity comes the ability to discern wise choices from wishful desires? I must tell you honestly that though the world sees you as a man, you still behave like a petulant child: arms crossed, face in a pout, feet stomping, and your mouth demanding what you cannot have. Grow up, Tomas.*

*Villa Estancia needs you. Not only is it your right, it is your responsibility. Your mother cries daily over your empty chair at the table. Your sister forgets the sound of your voice. And now your father must demand that you forget this foolishness and see to your birthright.*

*"With greatness comes duty." That is the de Villa creed. Your middle name bears the stamp of our superiority. Come home immediately and assume the responsibilities you were born to.*

Your father,

Juan Borrego da Villa

*Lo que en los libros no está, la vida te enseñará.  
(That which isn't in books, life will teach you.)*<sup>1</sup>

April, 1912

New York City

## Chapter One

Does death have a smell? It was an odd thought that came into her mind as Liliana Alvaro made her way into the tenement building she considered home. The darkness of the front hallway intermixed with the sharp smell of urine was always the first odor that greeted her. Climbing the stairs, and there were many, the heavy smell of boiled cabbage from the O'Connor's apartment (and sometimes a loud shout or two) was followed by the smooth smell of chicken soup (but only if Mr. Rosen had managed to sell a suit that week) and the powerful smell of garlic from the Martinelli's. It used to be the mouth-watering aroma of spicy black beans and rice that would quicken her tired feet on the last steps, but that was now a faded memory.

The Alvaro apartment was on the top floor of a four floor, cold-water tenement on the corner of Bayard and Mulberry Streets. The top floor because it was the cheapest. Cold water because they could never afford to put coins in the gas heater. Entering directly into the kitchen, Liliana took the time to hang up her shawl. "Lily!" At the sound of her name, Liliana allowed herself the first smile of the day. Kneeling down she opened her arms to the burst of love and enthusiasm that came wrapped in the tiny, five-year-old package otherwise known as her sister, Maravilla.

"¿Cómo está hoy mi hermanita?" Liliana murmured quietly in her ear enjoying the tickle of her soft dark curls against her cheek. *How is my little sister today?* She inhaled what was probably the only welcoming smell in their apartment – Maravilla's warm, soft child aroma.

"Okay," Maravilla said in careful English, glancing toward the one bedroom the apartment had. "Mamá's had another bad day."

Liliana hesitated for a brief moments; loathe to leave the peace of Maravilla's embrace. She followed her sister's glance. The bedroom door was open just a small crack. There was no noise.

Does death have a smell?

"Have you eaten?" Liliana asked Maravilla, buying herself a few more brief moments of escape.

"Yes, a little," Maravilla said. "I brought Mamá water three times but she did not want to drink much. I ate the bread and beans that you left from last night but Mamá would not eat any at all." Liliana was not surprised. Mamá had stopped eating well over two weeks ago. Only water would she allow past her lips and then only at Liliana's insistence.

Standing, Liliana smoothed out the tangled blanket on the cot that was wedged between the stove and the wall. Her brother's bedroom was also their tiny kitchen. "Do you know where Jossue is?" Jossue was their wild, nine-year-old brother who at any given moment could cause more worry than a rambunctious five-year-old sister and a dying mother combined.

"I do not know. He left early this morning and has not been home since." Maravilla's voice held not a trace of concern for their brother, not because she did not care but simply because this was always the way of things with Jossue. Liliana gave Maravilla a pat on the head and sighed deeply. Jossue provided as much for the home as Liliana did, perhaps even more so - although most definitely not as respectably. Jossue, often the primary provider of essential things like food and much needed medicine, used methods that were best left unexplored. Hence, Maravilla's lack of worry about how he got things and a simple confidence that Jossue was not only a faithful provider, but would always return safely as well.

With no more reason to wait, Liliana took Maravilla's hand in hers and slowly walked into the apartment's only bedroom. Taking a deep breath before she stepped into the room, the smell of sickness, dirtied linen, and an unwashed body still could not be avoided.

And death.

No matter how many times she prepared herself, each time Liliana looked at Mamá she was unprepared for the shock of what she saw. The sickness that was claiming her mother's life was doing it slowly and agonizingly. Each day robbed a few more precious moments of alertness that had been there the day before, each day she got thinner and smaller and weaker. Soon she would be nothing but a spirit and then the spirit would fly away.

*"Preciosa madre, he vuelto,"* Liliana whispered to Mamá as she kneeled on the floor beside the bed. *Precious mother, I am home.*

Mamá did not respond. Liliana took a rag from the bowl of water by the bedside, wrung it out and lovingly sponged her forehead, face, and neck. She knew from experience that Mamá heard much of what was going on around her but often did not always have the strength to respond immediately. She fell into the pattern of their existence, sponging clean her mother's body while she talked of her day at work in the factory. Laughter filled stories over spicy rice and beans had been replaced by quiet comforting words over soapy water and sickness. Maravilla curled up on the bed near Mamá and tenderly stroked her mother's hair while Liliana spoke.

"Mr. Gilmore got in a fight last night and had his two front teeth knocked out," Liliana began. She always tried to tell the most colorful, funniest, and lightest events of her day. Not that there were ever very many of those, but truth was no longer as important as distraction. Who needed to bring home sorrowful tales of truth? Their house was too full of those already. Fantasy was always so much more appealing than reality.

Mr. Gilmore was the overseer and not particularly liked by anyone in the factory. Or possibly the whole city, Liliana surmised. "He speaks with a terrible lisp now, between the fat lip and the missing teeth! And old Mrs. Parsons, she's hard of hearing anyway, just could not understand him no matter how loud he

shouted and screamed. Finally, she said to him, 'Mr. Gilmore, might I suggest you just write everything down?'

"We laughed and laughed when he went stomping off because I'm quite sure he cannot write or read. Of course, neither can old Mrs. Parsons, but he doesn't know that! It turned out to be the best day in a long time because he stayed away the rest of the afternoon and left us to ourselves to get the pieces done."

At fifteen, Liliana had been working at the clothing factory for over six years. Initially, she'd started out as a rag girl, collecting scraps, hauling garbage, keeping supplies handy and running errands as needed. Rag girls were also responsible for cleaning the massive spinning machines; tiny fingers and arms could reach into much smaller spaces than grown up hands ever could. She had only gotten the job because Mamá worked at the factory sewing the endless piles of material. They had been very fortunate, for jobs that paid a regular wage were not easily found. Once you had a job you had to keep on your toes to hold on to it: don't ever be sick, never be late, never complain, always try to do more than the worker next to you ... When Mamá had begun to get sick, Liliana had for a time done both her own job and then stayed late to finish her mother's work. Pain had made Mamá slower and slower. Since everyone was paid by the piece, their dire financial circumstances became precarious. Finally, Mr. Gilmore had given them the news they had been dreading; Mamá was fired. The only good news was that Liliana had been offered Mamá's position - at a substantially reduced wage, however. Everyone knew that inexperienced workers got paid less than experienced, of course.

It was standing in front of Mr. Gilmore that day over two years ago, listening to him go on and on about the poor quality of his workers, the constant frustration of job quotas not met, and the trials and tribulations of dealing with apathetic employees, that Liliana first realized that Mamá was going to die. Mamá had always had a spark about her. *Un fuego apasionado*, Papá had called it with a twinkle in his eye and pride in his voice. *A passionate fire*. No one ever got the best of her with words, insulted her, or disrespected her or her children. Ever. Even later, though Mamá may have been poor, a widow, and illiterate, she had always been a person with great dignity. Were you to forget that, she was quite capable of defending her dignity with sharp words and a pointed finger.

But Mamá had just stood there that day, while Mr. Gilmore insulted her, fired her, and then offered Liliana only slightly more pay than she had earned as a rag girl to do a sewer's job. And Mamá had said, "Thank you, Mr. Gilmore. You are too kind." Liliana finally knew the truth of things. Mamá was going to die and, if possible, soon their circumstances - Liliana's, Maravilla's and Jossue's - were going to get worse. Many times over these past two years when Liliana had wanted to use sharp words, she had remembered Mamá that day and held her tongue. "Thank you, sir, you are too kind," while thinking of the best way to cause terrible pain and possibly leaving a scar. Sometimes maintaining your dignity was not as important as keeping the peace ... and your job.

Since then though, Liliana had tried hard to run as far away as possible from the truth about Mamá. So what that she was not able to work? Liliana would do what needed to be done. So what that the money Liliana earned working twelve-hour days would not be sufficient to pay for rent and food? Jossue would certainly manage to bring home the rest. So what that Mamá would not be able to cook or clean or care for her three children? Maravilla was young but extremely capable and willing to follow directions.

Only a fool believed that you could steer your life's direction and claim only happiness! Liliana was no fool. But while she would never go to school, never again enjoy the magic of listening to her father's reading, never experience the wonderful smells of Mamá's spicy rice and beans, and never be part of a

complete family ... surely – surely – things could not get any worse! There had to be a point when you reached the very bottom, right? The sheer impossibility of a future without Mamá was something that Liliana refused to consider. The horror of Papá's death still haunted her dreams. She could not add another nightmare! By force of will she would keep this life from getting any worse.

What more could this family do to survive? Could Lily sew any more pieces? Could Jossue steal any more food? Was Maravilla supposed to go out and find a job and leave Mamá home alone all day? Could this family possibly afford to lose anyone else?

With Papá, life had been so much better. Not because they were anywhere near wealthy, but because there had been laughter and hope and a feeling that together they could do what needed to be done. Liliana rarely let herself remember that time because the ache of missing Papá was still great even after six long years. Liliana had been Papá's *princesa pequeña*. Papá's *little princess*. With vivid clarity she could remember his booming laugh, his wonderful smell of starched shirts and hair oil, and the feeling of being treasured. At their old house, Liliana would wait at the window, watching for him to come home. As soon as he turned the corner, Liliana had been allowed to run down their front steps and up the street to meet him. If Papá's briefcase was not too heavy, Liliana would carry it. Sometimes he would bring her a fresh bag of roasted peanuts from a street vendor, and once he had brought her a small bouquet of flowers from a florist near his office. Mamá used to tease and say, "I get the first kiss hello!" but Liliana always managed to get there first. Then Mamá would pretend to pout and Papá would have to hug and kiss and tickle her until she started to giggle. Once Jossue came, Papá would say, "Good thing I didn't have another princess! One is all a strong man could handle!" And Liliana would smile because she was glad she was Papá's only little princess.

When the influenza had taken him, Mamá had tried so hard to fill his space, and for a time they had managed ... but no one could really fill the hole that Papá's death left. So many hard, terrible things had happened. So many things lost, never to be recovered. Papá had represented safety, security, and a smile at tomorrow. He had been their champion, their knight in shining armor, their protector from the outside world. Liliana had been attending school – oh, how she had loved going! – for over a year when he had gotten so terribly sick. Those grand dreams of reading and learning and discovering all the wonderful things Papá had spoken of had been buried right along with Papá. Liliana had cried oceans of tears over the loss of her beloved Papá ... and the loss of a future glimpsed but gone forever.

Mamá had struggled to get a job and spent many, many days looking while Liliana stayed home and watched Jossue who wasn't yet five. When Mamá finally got a job she left each morning in the darkness and came home each night in the darkness. Tired but determined. Worn but not defeated. Terrified but not cowering.

One day a man had knocked at the door while Mamá had been at work. Although Liliana and Jossue had yelled and shouted the man and his friends had taken all of their things and put them outside on the curb. When Mamá had come home that day, Liliana and Jossue were sitting on the sofa on the curb in the cold crying and crying. In the end, they had to leave with only what they could carry - which hadn't been much. Mamá had explained to Liliana and Jossue as they walked that night that there was a lady named Señora Rey who had worked with Papá. Maybe if they were, very polite and very quiet and very nice she would let them stay for a while at her apartment. Tired and cold and scared, Mamá had spent a long time talking to Señora Rey asking if she would let them sleep on her floor.

Finally, Señora Rey had let them in to her apartment. "You can stay a few nights but not for long. My landlord is strict and I can't risk being out on the streets at my age."

It was at Señora Rey's that Liliana heard about the new baby for the first time. "When is the baby due?" Señora Rey had asked and Mamá had touched her stomach and said, "In a little over four month's time." They had stayed at Señora Rey's for a few weeks until Mamá had found the place on Bayard Street. During the whole time, Señora Rey had never smiled. Not once. And the only thing she had ever said to Liliana had been, "Tell your mother her nighttime tears are keeping me awake. If she must cry, she must do it silently."

This family had barely survived Papá's death. Mamá could not possibly die, too! Life could not be so cruel. So impossible! *It could not be.* For if one adult could barely fill a space meant for two, how could a child manage to fill a space twice that size?

At night, as tired as she was, Liliana often lay awake trying to figure out ... how to survive. What did it mean when each night no solution came and many hours of sleep were lost? What does a person who is desperate unto death do when she can find no way out? Mamá ate less and less so that there would be more food to share. How could that be right or fair? How could Liliana put even a bite of food into her mouth knowing these things? Mamá, too weak to get out of bed, was still a force that could not be deterred. *Un fuego apasionado. A passionate fire.* A passionate fire that was almost all burned out. The inevitable terror of an impossible future yawned out before her.

"What else happened today, Lily?" Maravilla asked bringing Liliana out of her morbid thoughts. Gazing into Maravilla's shining dark eyes, Liliana felt a wave of love and protectiveness wash over her.

Liliana smiled. What was it like for Maravilla cooped up all day in this apartment caring for Mamá with little food and certainly no happy distractions? Liliana at least had her memories. Of Papá's booming laugh and Mamá's lovely singing voice. Of afternoons at the park and the taste of molasses dipped popcorn. Of a beautiful big place to live with bright windows and a garden and two whole floors to live on. Of being Papá's *pequeña princesa*. Maravilla did not even have that.

"I saw the beautiful lady today! She rode in her gold carriage, too."

Maravilla thought for a moment. "I've been thinking about her since the last time you saw her, Lily. Do you think her carriage is truly gold?"

"Well, the decorations looked gold enough to me!"

"Did the red man ride on top this time or was it the blue man today?"

"Red today. With a big tall black top hat, too."

Liliana finished cleaning Mamá and began the process of putting fresh linen on the bed while trying not to make her mother uncomfortable. "I could not see her clothes today, but she had on a glorious hat of purple that had feathers of green and yellow that were so long they trailed out of the carriage window and blew in the breeze."

Maravilla had a dreamy look on her face as she imagined the magnificent spectacle. "Did she see you? Did she wave today?" she finally sighed.

"Well," Liliana said, "she nodded and smiled as she passed me." Of course there had been no lady in a purple hat today or ever, but sometimes Liliana just did not have enough real stories to tell. She had run out of stories of princesses and castles and fairies and magic wishes long ago. The beautiful, rich, lady in the gold carriage pulled by four pure white horses and a driver dressed in red (or sometimes blue) livery always was a great story to fall back on. With each telling the details grew and grew, becoming more fabulous and more detailed. Suddenly Liliana was aware of Mamá's eyes on her: tender, loving, and



knowing. *"Madre, Te amo. Es bueno verte despierta,"* Liliana whispered to her. *Mother, I love you. It is good to see you awake.*

"Speak English, Liliana," were her Mamá's first words to her. Since she had been a small girl, Spanish was spoken only for the most endearing moments with English firmly encouraged. "You are an American, Liliana," she had heard more times than she could count. "Speak the language of the country."

Liliana gave her Mamá a loving smile and kiss while she brushed a stray strand of hair from her pale forehead. "How are you, my Mother?"

"I dreamed of heaven today," Mamá said and Liliana was certain that her heart missed a full beat. "It is so beautiful. There are people there, waiting for me, eager for me to arrive."

Liliana looked up into the face of her sister and somehow managed a bright smile. "And tell me, just when was the last time you even spoke with Maria Martinelli, let alone played with her?"

Maravilla shrugged. "I waved to her from the window yesterday." There were rules that said that all apartments had to have three windows but that didn't mean that the windows had to look outside. Which was why they had *two* windows making up the wall between their small kitchen and living room. But how fortunate they were, though, that they had a window in their small apartment that looked outside! Some had only an opening to an air shaft. But their apartment had a real window that showed sunlight and rain and snow. And if you hung out far enough and watched carefully enough and if a friend knew to look down the dark alley and up at just the right angle, you could wave to them. Maria, Maravilla's friend, knew to look.

"Run down and knock at Maria's door and see if she can play. I will stay with Mamá for a while. Go run and laugh for a bit." Maravilla hesitated, but the desire in her eyes could not be hidden. "Go," Liliana insisted.

With a quick kiss to Mamá's cheek and a "Love you, Mother!" Maravilla dashed down the hallway, finishing her exit with a loud slam of the door.

"She is only five but she knows I am dying, Liliana," Mamá's quiet voice spoke softly from the bed. "We have talked of it, she and I. I am more concerned about you than her."

Liliana busied herself with putting the soiled linen in the hallway and getting the comb from the small table by the bed. Were there a way she could escape or an excuse she could make she would have made every effort to leave the room, but she was well and truly trapped. In sending Maravilla away, however briefly, she had insured her presence for a time. Mamá may be dying, but she was still aware enough to know that much.

"We must discuss what needs to be done." This was not the first time Mamá had tried to have a serious discussion with Liliana about her death. Many times over these past weeks and months she had tried to discuss the perilous situation they all faced. The results were that Maravilla had listened, Jossue had run wild, and Liliana had ... avoided and pretended. Pretended that everything was not as bad as it seemed, that everything would get better, that all this sorrow would disappear.

"Mamá, you will get well, I know it."

"You do not know it, my love, you wish it," came the soft voice. "All the wishing and all the praying and all the dreaming will not change the hardships that God wills, Liliana. I fear for you more than the other two. Maravilla can accept and have peace, Jossue can accept and act, but you are so strong that you no



longer bend. I am so afraid that you will simply break. It is not strength that you need, *mi amor – my love*. That is not what will see you through this life. Trust me, I know.”

Mamá sighed, a sound that communicated hopes and dreams that were not to be realized. “I wish you had Maravilla’s faith, but perhaps that is because of her innocence and youth ... If you remember nothing else, my Liliana, please remember what your Papá and I treasured most ...” Tired, fading brown eyes looked into Liliana’s tear-filled frightened ones. Moments passed as mother and daughter stared at each other communicating their emotions in ways other than words. A coughing fit overtook Mamá, shaking her with more force than she seemed capable of surviving. Long moments passed and Liliana began to think that Mamá had drifted off to sleep.

“I will not live out the week, Liliana,” Mamá finally said although her eyes remained closed. “Say that.”

Liliana looked away from Mamá and out the doorway, through their tiny kitchen to the small sitting room. Sometimes, when the sun was in just the right spot, it would make a beam of light shine in their tiny window and make lovely patterns on the wall. She had sat one time on the floor of the sitting room and watched the pattern of the beam as it traveled across the wall. She had warmed her hand in it and had made Maravilla laugh when she’d made funny shadow puppets. There was no sunbeam today.

“Say it, Liliana ...”

Where was that sunbeam? Instead of a sunbeam she had the smell of death. The terror was replaced with fury. It grew inside the center of her chest, making taking a breath seem impossible. With each beat of Liliana’s heart, the fury seemed to grow. The fury made her feel stronger, harder than the terror that made her chase away into her mind to pretend thoughts. It was the uncontrollable fury at life and the world and these circumstances that made her spit out through stiff lips, “You will not live out the week, Mother.”

“Good. You needed to say that. I am not afraid of death, *mi hija hermosa*.” *My lovely daughter*. “My only fear is for the three of you.” Mamá gave a long pause again as she fought exhaustion. Liliana sat there with the words still choking her. *You will not live out the week, Mother*.

Liliana’s mind felt like a butterfly, frightened and trapped in a net, trying frantically to find the way out. Mentally she tried to travel somewhere else to avoid Mamá’s words, but they were now her own. You will not live out the week, Mother.

Mamá was trying to speak when Liliana opened her tear-filled eyes to look at her. Escape was impossible. “At one point I thought of taking the three of you to a church or an orphanage before I became so ill, but ... the thought of being away from you ...” Mamá sighed and smiled, “I was too selfish. And you were all too stubborn. You would not have gone. I have tried my best here to prepare for this. Maravilla knows things ... She has done what you have avoided doing and sat and listened to all I had to tell her. She is young, but she is filled with God’s spirit. She is strong. But there are things that you must do now, Liliana. You must go and ask for help. I have prayed and God has assured me that you will be cared for. Do not be too proud, Liliana. I have heard that there are people who will help ... orphan children. Good people. Church people ... You and Jossue and Maravilla ... will not be able to keep on like this once I am gone. Trinity Church ...” Mamá closed her eyes, her face pale as death and her lips tinged with blue. Liliana dribbled some drops of water onto Mamá’s lips.

Anger again reared its ugly head and Liliana felt unable to breathe. Go for help? Ask for help? Don’t be too proud? Pride had nothing to do with having or not having help! Help was a false illusion that

your mind tried to trick you with. Making you believe that God cared or people cared or life would not hurt anymore than it already did! Why would anyone help them now? No one had been willing to help them five years ago when Papá had died! Or when all their possessions were piled on the street by the curb! Or when Mamá had given birth to Maravilla and then within mere hours rose from her birthing bed to stumble off to work and sew her quota of pieces! Not a soul had offered to help once Mamá fell too ill to work ... or leave the apartment ... or simply rise from her bed. Wouldn't the help have come already if it truly existed? Was some magical being going to appear once Mamá died to finally grant their every wish? Everyone Liliana knew had just as many trials and tribulations! There was no one with the capacity or even the desire to help them. No. One.

The anger joined with bitterness. And Church? Faith?! God?? Do not speak of such things to Liliana! One time a very long time ago – a lifetime ago – she had been foolish and young like Maravilla; believing in a kind and loving God and the strength and magic of prayers. She remembered stories Papá read from his very own Bible. For as long as she believed she had been Papá's *princesa*, she had believed in God. But with Papá's death had come questions. Questions that had no answers once you were no longer a foolish child but a grown-up-too-soon young adult. Who could desire a God who allowed such terrible things to happen? Loneliness?! Sickness?! Death?! Hunger?! Poverty?! Fear?! There was no place that one could go to escape these things. Liliana had prayed a long time ago and Papá had still died. Mamá and Maravilla had prayed. And prayed, and prayed some more. They were welcome to it. It gave them peace and imagined hope, which was just fine with Liliana. But she had decided long ago that praying and believing were not something she could embrace or believe. Or even want to. Perhaps it was when they put Papá's body in the ground. Or during those many nights lying in bed listening to Mamá's muffled sobs. And it was long before Mamá had gotten sick. By then her praying and believing had been replaced with sarcasm and anger ... with a tiny bit of dreaming thrown in.

"We are not alone, Liliana," Mamá continued, her face drawn with pain and her eyes closed in exhaustion. "God is sorrowing right along with us through this. He is not to blame! He has not abandoned us! He walks with us through the difficult times, guiding us, loving us, protecting us. Promise me that you will not turn your back on Him. You must run towards Him as I do! I want to go home. I yearn to go home to heaven to be with My Lord. I will be with your Papá once again and we will laugh and smile and hold hands ... I will sing to him again." A frail hand clasped Liliana's wrist. "This life has held far more joys than sorrows. To know a love such as your father and I had ... however brief ... what a delight ... Are you listening to me, my daughter?"

Mamá's nails dug into Liliana's skin. "No darkness so great ... Liliana. *Busca la luz.*" *Watch for the light.* It was Mama's favorite phrase. "There is no darkness so great that it can extinguish the light of even one tiny flame." She had said it a thousand times before. When things were terrifying. Or impossible. Or hopeless. "God is light. God is hope. God is love. God is greater than your greatest problem. Never stray from the light."

There were no words. Choked with tears, fighting against the terror and welcoming the fury, Liliana's throat could barely allow breath. She looked mutely at her mother. The gaping wound of Papá's death yawned wide and deep. Mamá's keening wails that night of his death tore through her memory. There was no place to escape this reality. The smell of death filled her nose, the vision of her mother's wasted body filled her eyes, and her mother's words of brutal truth filled her ears, "I will not live out the week." There was no one to call for help and no arms to offer comfort: no Papá, no God, and soon no Mamá.

*"Prométeme mi hija. Promise me, my daughter."*

Liliana looked up at the chipped paint peeling from the ceiling and worked at swallowing the lump in her throat. "If I promise you," she whispered as the tears seeped out of her eyes and trickled down her face and throat, "you will have done all that you wish to do and you will leave us..."

"You are my daughter. *Mi amor.*" *My love.* "You are half of me and half of your father. I can never leave you because you are a part of me ... Never.

"And ..." Mamá said and she fluttered her thin fingers wanting to touch Liliana. Liliana took Mamá's chilled hand in her warm one. "You must ..." Mamá's voice drifted off into a sigh.

"What, Mother? What must I do?"

"You must let them take my body, without fuss or guilt ... can't afford ..." Mamá's hand gripped Liliana's in desperation. "Tell me now! I must hear you say you will! Now! I must hear!"

"Hush, Mamá. Yes, ... I will ... call the ... cart," Liliana spoke barely above a whisper, holding tightly to her mother's hand. "Hush now, Mamá. Rest." Liliana closed her eyes and frantically sought a place to escape in her mind. The cart. The cart that took the bodies of those too poor to pay for their own burial. The cart that traveled the one way trip to Pauper's Field. She breathed deeply and could not escape the smell of death and sickness that would take long moments in the outside air to be cleaned from her lungs. She desperately tried to think of something, anything, that would help her travel to someplace other than where she was. All she could hear was Mamá's whispery, dry voice saying, "I will not live out the week."

Suddenly Mamá began to cough and cough and Liliana worked to trickle a few drops of tepid water into her mouth. When the coughing fit ceased and her chin had been wiped dry, Mamá was fast asleep.

Liliana gathered up the soiled linen and began the arduous task of boiling the water, filling the kitchen sink, scrubbing the sheets, rinsing them, wringing them out and then hanging them to dry from the clothesline attached right outside the window. She felt one hundred years old. Older than Mrs. Parsons at the factory, older than Grandmother Martinelli who sat all day by the window in a chair covered with a colorful quilt, older than ... death. She slid down the wall in the dark parlor where no sunbeam dared to show, drew her knees up and dropped her head and cried like a baby for a life that was no life at all.

"Liliana, Lily!" She was startled into wakefulness, confused as to where she was and who was calling her. She struggled into a sitting position and oriented herself, realizing she was lying on the floor in the dark parlor. What time was it? And then a wave of terror swept through her. *Mamá!*

She scrambled up clumsily from the floor, tangled in her long skirt, and rushed into the bedroom and hastily lit a candle. Mamá looked quietly asleep, peaceful. She was smiling. Was it another dream of heaven? Liliana knelt on the floor by the bedside and brushed Mamá's forehead. She was cold. Frowning, Liliana searched her mind for where she could find another blanket and then froze.

You will not live out the week, Mamá.

Gently, carefully she reached out and touched her mother's cold eyes, cheeks, nose, and smiling lips. "You will not live out the day, Mamá," Liliana said aloud to the darkness of the room. She felt the terror begin to take hold and fought to keep it at bay. What was there to fear now after all? One feared the future and its brutal unpredictability, but now the future must be survived, faced, dealt with – there was no time for fear. The unimaginable future was well and truly here at last.

The terror slowly slipped away and was gradually replaced with a determined bitterness. They were on their own now. There would be no magical help in the form of God or people or prayers. There

*Susan Lee McGeown*

were no hopes or dreams. As always, survival would continue to be a fierce, violent battle with much blood, sweat, and tears. Slowly, the bitterness filled the space that she had so recently emptied with all of her tears, and joined with a righteous anger regarding hopeless circumstances.

Standing, gazing down at her mother's body, Liliana felt the last of her childhood dreams and hopes fade away. Like it or not, she was responsible for three lives now. No time for tears. No time for fears. Anger made her stay upright and bitterness kept her eyes dry.

"I did not make any promises, Mamá," Liliana said aloud in the dark, silent room. "Not one!"



~ Con la grandeza vienen los deberes ~

26 Noviembre 1897

Villa Estancia

Zapata County

San Ygnacio, Texas

Tomas Grandeza de Villa

Dull's Ranch

North of Parida Creek

Encinal County, Texas

Tomas,

*My messenger speaks of many things: your state of mind, your situation and your circumstances. Did you really think I would not be able to locate you? Even though you have traveled more than one hundred miles away? Even though you are working as a lowly ranch hand? Even though you are living in a workman's hovel? Even though you continue to live with a servant woman and now, also, claim responsibility for a child? Your underestimation of me is stunning.*

*So the woman still exists. And now there is the added complication of a child. This tantrum you have thrown now has become a rock around your neck, has it not? Tomas, time and again I have shown you that no situation is so dire that it cannot be handled. Sometimes complications seem momentous when, in reality, they can easily be made to*

*disappear. Do not unforeseen things happen in this life? It all depends where you stand if some are tragedies and some are blessings. Often it is hard to tell one from the other.*

*You must make a decision, Tomas. Or I will make it for you. Can you clean up your mess by yourself or must I once again do it for you? You are under the mistaken impression that your life is your own and you are free to make choices without consequence. Let me assure you: you are wrong. I will do what I know is best for you, for this family, and for Villa Estancia. "With Greatness Comes Duty." I have not gotten this far in life without willingly accepting the difficult responsibilities that come with it. If you are too soft, I will once again do what must be done. As I have always done. As I always will do.*

*My messenger awaits a response from you and carries with him gold to aid you in the solution of your problem. Make a wise decision this time, Tomas. Do what must be done. Stand straight and tall. Make a wise choice. Will you take care of this woman and child or shall I do it for you?*

*Regarding Villa Estancia, you will be happy to know that it continues to thrive. We finished out the autumn months "fat and happy" once again. The purchase of the additional land east of the Carralitas property has finally been accomplished. Ranch responsibilities, already too much for one man, now become insurmountable during your absence. Your return to us is critical. In your absence your cousin Jose Antonio Vasquez has agreed to come north from Coahuila to help until your return. May God grant that your arrival home is immediate.*

*Your mother and Maravilla wait with eager arms to welcome you home. I do not think that I would be remiss in speaking of Christmas surprises they are already hard at work on. They look forward to being reunited with you for the holidays and are planning a New Year's Gala the likes of which has not been seen at Villa Estancia.*

*One way or another, Tomas, I look forward to your return by the New Year.*

*Juan Borrego da Villa*

*Susan Lee McGeown*



*Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres.*  
*(Tell me with whom you walk and I will tell you who you are.)<sup>ii</sup>*

April, 1912

New York City

## **Chapter Two**

Eyes burning, Liliana counted the sounds of the bells from church tower as they chimed five o'clock in the morning. Already the city made sounds of awakening. Where was Jossue? Liliana was used to him coming in at all hours of the night, or in some cases the wee hours of the morning, but he never didn't come home. Of all nights for him not to come home.

The only night when Mamá was dead in her bed. Cold. Stiff.

While Liliana sat in the dark hallway. Alone. Angry.

Maravilla had stayed the night at the Martinelli's. Mrs. Martinelli had opened her apartment door, taken one look at Liliana's face and had said, "Maravilla and Maria will have a sleepover tonight, yes?" Forcing a smile, the kind neighbor had said, "The girls have not had a chance for some fun and laughter in such a long while."

Liliana had wordlessly nodded her assent and walked back to the apartment. To what? Wait for Jossue? Sit with her dead Mother? Wait for a sunbeam to play with?

You will let them take my body, without fuss or guilt ...

The dark night hours had crawled by. She shed no tears sitting rigidly in the parlor trying unsuccessfully not to think of what lay in the bed not six steps away. She did not bother to make her bed on the too small couch she had slept on for so many years now. There was no tiredness inside her, only fury. Whatever crying there was to be over Mamá's death had happened already. There was too much to manage to waste time on useless tears. Think. What must be done?

Where was Jossue?

Patrolman O'Reilly walked his beat each morning. Liliana passed him without fail on her way to work in all kinds of weather. Each morning he tipped his hat, smiled kindly and said, "Morning, young lassie." But on this morning, Liliana did not behave as she usually did, which was to keep her head down and scurry on to work. No, on this morning unlike any other morning she stood like a statue on the street corner making eye contact and waiting for Patrolman O'Reilly to approach her.

He stopped three paces from her, nodded and said as always, "Morning, young lassie," but this morning his words held a puzzled tone.

"I need the cart," she managed to spit out. Fury at the world kept her upright and dry eyed.

Patrolman O'Reilly's eyes registered puzzlement for a brief moment and then understanding. "You be knowing someone who's dead, Lassie?"

"My mother."

He took one step toward her, making the beginning motions of reaching out to Liliana, and then froze in mid motion. Still with his hand raised he searched her face for ... something. He nodded, slowly. "I can get the cart for you. It makes its, er, its rounds each morning about this time." When Liliana remained silent he broke eye contact with her and quickly scanned the neighborhood. Putting two fingers in his mouth he let out a piercing whistle and then gestured to someone. In moments a young boy stood close enough to speak with Patrolman O'Reilly but not close enough to be caught. O'Reilly reached into his pocket, pulled out a coin, and flipped it to the boy. "Go fetch the pauper's cart. Tell him I'll meet him on the corner of Bayard Street and Mulberry Bend." O'Reilly watched the boy disappear and then looked at Liliana. "It might be a bit. Why don't you tell me where I can meet you?"

Liliana had no energy for words. She stood there, hands clenched at her side, eyes as dry as a burned out pot and waited for the cart that would take her mother's body away.

Perhaps it was not the final indignity, but having no coin to tip the pauper's cart man to ensure that her mother's body was treated with some level of respect as it was taken away certainly added little needed fuel to her burning emotions. "You've no coin? None?" The look of stunned disbelief, coupled with the revolting stench of unwashed body and cheap wine made Liliana take two steps back. "Think I do this job out of the kindness of my heart, girl?" The man wiped the back of his hand across his whisker-stubbed lips. He had only one rotted tooth in the bottom of his mouth.

"Aye, I know you don't do it for that reason, Sam," O'Reilly shot back. Liliana had forgotten he had been standing silently next to her these long past minutes. "But I also know you're paid a wage by the city. That's why you do it."

Sam used his one remaining tooth to chew on his upper lip. "Man can't make a living on what they pay, and you know it, O'Reilly. I's always gets a few extra coins when I do a pickup. That's the way of things," he whined.

Patrolman O'Reilly reached into his pocket and for the second time that morning used his own coin to help Liliana. Holding out his hand to the pauper's cart driver he said, "There. Let that be the end of it, Sam."

But it wasn't the end. "I needs names and such, O'Reilly. There's paperwork even for the poor and the dead." Sam reached up into the seat of the cart and pulled out a small black book. Reaching for the pencil behind his ear, he looked at Liliana and said, "I need the name of the dead, address, age, and cause and time of death."

Liliana was conscious of Patrolman O'Reilly's silent presence beside her while she gave the information requested. A small crowd had gathered on the street, curious to see whom the cart had come for. Liliana heard hushed whispers while Sam finished writing in his book, shut it with finality and looked directly at her. "Right then. Lead the way." As he spoke he reached into the back of the cart and pulled out a filthy white length of material, which he slung over his shoulder.

When Liliana didn't move, O'Reilly put his hand on Liliana's shoulder startling her. "You've got to take us, Lassie. Neither of us knows the way."

"Got any valuables you want off the body afore I wrap it up?" Sam had walked into the bedroom and immediately stripping back the covers. Her mother's body looked so terribly small and alone. What kind of a question was that to ask? There were no valuables. That's why he was here. Didn't he realize that? Furious, hate filled words rose up into her throat, almost choking her. Even Mamá's wedding ring had been sold and that had been months and months ago. Sam stared at Liliana, waiting for an answer. She shook her head, afraid what would come out if she opened her mouth.

Sam placed the dirty piece of material on the bedside by her mother's body. Within moments the body was expertly wrapped and anonymous. Sam gestured to Liliana and Patrolman O'Reilly. "You two needs to step aside. Dead bodies get a might stiff and can be a bit tricky getting out of tight places."

Again Patrolman O'Reilly put his hand on Liliana's shoulder and said softly, "Come with me, Lassie. I've got a few questions I need to ask you, as well." Liliana heard Sam grunt and then make his way out of the apartment. With her mother's body.

*You will let them take my body, without fuss or guilt ...*

Standing in the parlor, she had no memory of Patrolman O'Reilly's questions or her answers.

Alone at last, Liliana made her way to the shop. Only a bit late. Maravilla was going to spend the day at the Martinelli's, Jossue still had not returned home, and Patrolman O'Reilly was finally gone. His kindness had almost been too much to bear. Cruelty was much easier to deal with. What would she now do with Maravilla? Perhaps Mr. Gilmore would let her come to work to be a rag girl. Goodness knows they could use the money. They'd have to lie and say she was seven though...

Liliana stood in confusion upon arriving. There was someone at her machine, an unfamiliar woman working feverishly, sewing piece after piece together. Liliana glanced at Old Mrs. Parsons who made quick eye contact and then went back to her work. Each woman that Liliana had worked beside for these past two years glanced quickly at her but spoke not a word.

Mr. Gilmore approached her. "Ath you can thee, when you're late you loothe your job," Mr. Gilmore lisped from his still battered mouth.

"Mr. Gilmore," Liliana said, her heart beginning to pound in a panicked rhythm, "my mother ..."

Mr. Gilmore cut her off. "No excutheth. You're either here or you are replathed. That ith how we work here. That ith how we have alwayth worked here." He squinted his eyes at her, leaned in closer and raised his voice over the sound of the machines. Might as well make a good example while he had the opportunity it seemed. "And becauthe you didn't work a full week, you are not entitled to any pay. We don't run a charity here, ith a buithineth."

Mamá's voice echoed in Liliana's head loud and clear. *Thank you, Mr. Gilmore. You are too kind.*

Liliana looked around her at all of the women working feverishly. Not one was valued for their determination or for their faithfulness, but only for how many pieces of material they could sew faster than the next person. She turned to look at Mr. Gilmore, hatred giving her confidence. The expression on Liliana's face made Mr. Gilmore arch his eyebrows at her. She let her gaze flicker over the women that yesterday she had thought were her friends but were now simply terrified acquaintances.

Mamá's voice whispery and dry danced through her mind. *Thank you, Mr. Gilmore. You are too kind.*

Anger, immense and boiling rose up from the pit of her stomach like an explosive vomit that she could not hold back. Images flashed through her mind: her mother's body wrapped in the filthy sheet, the pauper's cart driver's hand reaching out for an expected coin, Maravilla's face filled with serious concern, the worry over Jossue ... and now. Mr. Gilmore stood before her: smug, righteous, supreme. It was too much. Too much.

No gratitude this time, only deadly fury.

With a screech, Liliana launched herself at Mr. Gilmore. Just a few days ago he had lost his front teeth, maybe, she could take out an eye ...



So, it actually could get worse.

Liliana's outburst had earned her a handcuffed visit to the Old Slip Station and talk of her being transported "for indefinite holding" to Blackwell's Island Prison. As Blackwell's included a workhouse, a poorhouse, a lunatic asylum, and was generally place to dump those convicted of "minor offenses, drunks and disorderlies" the opinion was it was the perfect place for her. Standing defeated, bruised, and with the entire front of her dress torn and gaping open, Liliana was overwhelmed with her circumstances. The terror of being helpless, imprisoned, and separated from Maravilla and Jossue pressed down on Liliana as she was transported, processed, and eventually deposited in a large holding cell. How many times had Mamá encouraged her to control her temper? *Guárdate la lengua, mi hija, no deje que te metas en problemas. Guard your tongue, my daughter, do not let it lead you into trouble.*

Within the female holding cell at Old Slip, Liliana was just another addition to the collection of the diverse personalities. First to be noticed was the oblivious drunk, arms flung wide, fast asleep on the floor, snoring lustily. Seated on a wooden bench as far away as possible from the drunk was a lady. And not just any lady, but a real lady: posh shoes, stylish hair, pristine white gloves (well, there was a smudge or two), gold earrings, and a proper hat with silk flowers. Stronger than the stench of old liquor was the attitude of supreme hauteur that rolled off the woman via looks, sounds ("Hrrmp!" "Well!" "Tsk! Tsk!"), and stiff body language. Then there was a young girl, perhaps a bit older than Liliana who had the "look of poverty" about her as Mamá used to say. Dirty and unkempt, her clothes were torn and tattered and she looked positively starved. Huddling in the corner, the girl rocked and mumbled quietly to herself.

Seating choices in the cell were either floor or bench. Lady, sitting directly in the middle of the one and only bench, lifted her chin a notch, held a lace handkerchief to her nose, and glared with an unwelcoming attitude towards Liliana.

Leaning against the wall, Liliana took stock of the damage: her lip stung where it was cut, her eye was swelling shut, her knee felt bruised, and one of only two dresses she owned was torn beyond repair. Mr. Gilmore obviously had no compunction towards fighting a woman and, having recovered from his initial shock, had managed to retaliate quite effectively before both of them had been pulled apart. Nothing had been more humiliating than to have been brought to Old Slip, hands cuffed behind her back, with her modesty significantly compromised. Waiting to be processed, Liliana hung her head in embarrassment as criminals and police alike voiced or winked their appreciation at her show.

Images repeatedly flashed in her head and overloaded her senses: her mother's lifeless body in the back of the cart, the feel of Mr. Gilmore's spittle as he shouted at her, the smell of the unwashed bodies she was presently confined with, the brush of air against her exposed chest, the hardness of the cinder-block wall against her back through the thin material of her dress ... Her life, never one to delight in or treasure, had suddenly become far worse than any nightmare she could have imagined. It was all too much for her. Too much, too much, too much ...

The cell doors were being opened and Liliana barely registered another woman being escorted into the cell. "Keep yer hands offa me! I didn't do nothin', ya hear! I was just standin' there mindin' my own business and the next thing I know I'm bein' arrested fer liftin' a wallet! Yer lyin'! Ya have no right ta be puttin' me in here! None, I tell ya!"

"You'll have every chance to be telling the judge, first thing in the morning, lassie. I promise you. Now you just settle yourself down and try to be nice and polite to all of your roommates. Just have a seat on that bench over there next to -"

Too much ... too much ... too much ...

"Miss Liliana?"

Too much ... too much ... too much ...

"MISS LILIANA? Is that you?"

Through the terrifying kaleidoscope of images, smells, feelings, and sounds Liliana heard her name and looked up into the stunned blue eyes of Patrolman O'Reilly. His bright red eyebrows were arched in surprise. "Miss Liliana? What has happened to you? What are you doing here?" Speech was no longer possible. Suddenly, standing was no longer possible either. Sliding down the prison cell wall, Liliana collapsed in a heap on the filthy floor.

It was not until gentle hands gripped her upper arm and helped her to sit up that Liliana became conscious of Patrolman O'Reilly again. "Here you go, lassie. You just be patient for a bit while I see if I can pull a few strings. With things being so overcrowded and all maybe I can get the desk sergeant to release you into my custody. I'll explain about this morning, mention your wee sister, and see what I can do ..."

Oh God! Maravilla!

The thought of Maravilla spurred Liliana to life. Gripping Patrolman O'Reilly's sleeves she managed to cry out, "Yes! My sister! I must get home to her -" She would have stood and tried to run but Patrolman O'Reilly held firmly to both her arms. Looking up into his concerned face, Liliana managed a desperate, "Please ..." as she tried to pull free.

"Let me see what I can do, Miss Liliana. You also mentioned a brother this morning," – she had?! – "and I had plans all along of seeing that things were taken care of for the three of you anyway." Standing, he looked down at Liliana and sighed wearily, "I've enough troubles on my beat without adding three orphans to the mix."

Orphan. What an awful, awful word.

"Now, you sit tight, is that understood? I'll be back as soon as I've talked to the desk sergeant and see what can be done about you."

"Ahh, Paddy, listen to yer advice! Ain't that a laugh! What would ya know of ladylike bizness, anyways?" The newest member of the cell had made herself comfortable on the bench, much to Lady's

horror who was now at the far end, skirts gathered tightly around her legs. Liliana saw flashes of leg and colorful lace-edged petticoats as Pickpocket crossed her legs provocatively, smiled broadly at Lily and winked conspiratorially. “What wit the show she’s got goin’, maybe she’s wishin’ ta be a part of my ‘ladylike bizness!’”

O’Reilly and Liliana looked first at the woman, then back to where Pickpocket had gestured with a smirk. Liliana’s bodice gaped open. O’Reilly blushed a furious shade of red, Liliana gasped and clutched at her clothing, Lady expressed her outrage with an “Oh!,” and Pickpocket roared with laughter.

With fascinated horror, Liliana watched Pickpocket examine her own shocking display and make a few minor adjustments. “Now, Paddy, nothin’ wrong with appreciatin’ what the Good Lord gave suma us, now is there?” Pickpocket stood and walked slowly and purposefully toward Patrolman O’Reilly. “Now, I’m a thinkin’ though that this here little girl doesn’t know the first thing about what ya be needin’, Paddy.” O’Reilly stood firm in the center of the cell as Pickpocket got close enough to cover his feet with the hem of her dress. “So’s I just wanted ta suggest ta ya, rather than getting’ the kid sprung, you’d be much happier wit’ my comp’ny ... if ya understand what I’m offerin’ ya.”

“You just sit tight, Ms. Liliana,” O’Reilly spoke firmly to Liliana while looking Pickpocket directly in the eye, “I’ll be back just as soon as I can.” Without another word, he turned and allowed himself to be let out of the cell.

Pickpocket was nonplussed. Turning, she glanced at Lady, but then focused her full attention on Liliana. Returning to the bench, she sat, taking time to adjust her skirts this time, pat her elaborate hairstyle, and adjust – again - the front of her dress. Ample cleavage became even more ample. Liliana got the distinct impression she fussed and fiddled mostly to annoy Lady beside her who kept making disapproving sounds every time Pickpocket ‘accidentally’ bumped her. For a long time, Pickpocket examined Liliana. Clutching her bodice closed, Liliana felt her spine straighten, lifted her chin and glared. *I have no fear of you.*

Pickpocket grinned. She was missing one tooth on the bottom right. “Name’s Ecstasy Malone and I’m pleased to meet ya. Yer a lovely bit a fluff, do ya know that? Young, fresh, wit that glorious dark hair and big eyes ... ‘n curves in all the right places. So tell me. What brings ya ta Old Slip, honey? ‘N most important, how’s it ya know da cop?”

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.meirionnydd.force9.co.uk/spanish/spanish.sayings.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.meirionnydd.force9.co.uk/spanish/spanish.sayings.htm>