

The Beginning of the End

The Beginning

The Griegos

February 1598

Santa Barbara, New Spain



With the first light of day, from the darkness of night, Santa Barbara slowly begins to show signs of life. The sound of the first movement of people is intermingled with the sounds of nature, also coming alive from its slumber.

Juan opens his eyes and rubs them, instinctively looking out the window to determine the time. The moonlight makes it hard to determine, but the sounds of a new day are familiar. He takes a deep breath, folds his hands before him and bows slightly before them, silently thanking God for another day of life. He wonders whether to roll over and sleep a little more or not. He knows today is a busy day, and while he'd love to stay in bed, he knows he should probably get up. He stretches his arms above him and at the same time points his toes down as far as he can, feeling the life start to return to his body that is still asleep, even though his mind is already awake. He rubs his hands together in front of him and performs a methodical massage, beginning with the tips of each finger, then moving down his wrists, and to the rest of his arms.

He chuckles to himself, thinking of how his grandmother had taught him to "bring his skin alive" every morning, as she liked to call it. It's still a habit for him after all these years. Sometimes he would stop after having massaged his arms and she would chide him, telling him he had to do it from head to toe to wake up properly. Not doing so, according to her, could bode ill for the day. Considering the importance of all he has to do today, and as if obeying his grandmother's wishes, he continues the process, slowly massaging his feet, legs, torso and finally ending up to the top of his head. He messes up his hair when he's done, just as she used to do to him, to finish the process.

He turns to his side and looks at his beautiful wife. At first, he can barely make out the outline of her face as his eyes adjust to the light. As he watches her, the moonlight shines through the window. A few days ago, it was full and now waning, but still bright. It illuminates her body up to her neck. Instead of getting up immediately, he remains there, watching her while she sleeps. Then something magical happens. As the moon moves, he sees the light move very slowly down her neck and then up to her chin. He is hypnotized over the next few minutes as the light rises up to her mouth and nose, finally illuminating her entire body.

As he looks at her, he thinks about their life together. He can't believe how his life has changed since meeting her. Although it seems like a lifetime, it has only been a little over

a year since they met at the harvest day celebration. He smiles, thinking of the first time he saw her. As far as he was concerned, she was the prettiest girl at the ball. He at first felt intimidated by her beauty. Although Juan had been with a few women throughout his life, for some reason or another there was never a special feeling with any of them. The longest relationship he had before hadn't even last a year. He always found something wrong with each of them, or on the contrary, they found his flaws. Somehow, he felt things could be different with this her. He really couldn't explain why, it was just a feeling he had at the time.

Maria was fairly new to town and, as such, she had many suitors who invited her to dance. Meanwhile, Juan stayed behind the scenes, observing and analyzing her reaction to each of those who approached her, seeking her attention. She was cordial, but evasive, rebuffing everyone who approached. The next day, as if he were on a mission from God, Juan set out to learn everything he possibly could about her. Where she came from, her favorite color, what she liked and what she didn't like. Only after having all that information, he approached her and asked if he could be her suitor. She looked at him as if he were crazy. He told her what he had done and detailed everything he knew about her. He even showed her the information he had collected. She laughed seeing what he had done and accepted his proposal. The rest is history.

They got married a little over a year ago. Juan considers everything that has happened since then. Certainly, there have been challenges and not everything has been rosy, but despite a few bumps along the way, here they are together, ready to embark on another adventure in life. During the past year, in addition to getting married, they moved from Zacatecas, to Santa Barbara. The promise of abundant work and the possibility of claiming land in the north brought them here several months ago, along with many others, but so far, the expedition has not started.

Apparently today is the day they are finally going to get going, but they have already heard that same tune sung several times since their arrival, with no resulting rhythm to accompany it and rendering it nothing more than noise. Juan has doubts about if, and when, it will ever happen. They've been getting similar calls to action over the past few weeks, only to be canceled for one reason or another.

Juan is not going to get bothered about it one way or the other. If it happens today, as promised, they've got their things as ready as possible and can be up and running in no time. If not, they will continue to wait, there is no other option. In any case, Maria is very pregnant and, although the midwife says she can travel, the last thing Juan wants is for her baby to have to arrive someplace open to the elements and in some hostile environment. So, he's in no rush to get going. Regardless of whether or not the convoy ever starts, there has been no shortage of work or things to do since they arrived.

At this moment, nothing seems more important than seeing his lovely wife now fully moonlit, motionless, except for her torso, which slowly moving in and out with each breath. He takes her hands in his and brings them to his mouth, kissing them softly. She

opens her eyes, sees him, and smiles. Then, due to the moonlight in her eyes, she squints to get a better look at him, as she comes to her senses.

They say that a woman's complexion and appearance improve when she is pregnant. This has been the case with his Maria, she looks bright and beautiful. He kisses her forehead and starts to get out of bed. Before he can do so, she takes one of his hands in hers and stops him, pulling him back towards her. She places his hand on her belly so he can feel the baby move.

As he feels the hardened skin on her belly, he closes her eyes, as if this will somehow help him feel the baby better. She moves his hand slightly and suddenly he feels the baby move. He smiles broadly. From the first moment they felt the baby moving inside of her belly, they have been fascinated by the magical process taking place.

"He's been moving around a lot all night. I think he's ready to go," she tells Juan, raising an eyebrow as she does so.

"What makes you think it will be a boy? Maybe it will be a beautiful girl, like his mother."

"Just call it maternal intuition!"

Her pleasant smile suddenly changes to a wince. He takes both of her hands in his and asks if she's okay, seeing the pain in her expression. Although this is their first baby, many have told them what to expect from the process. Based on what they know, and how she's been feeling, the time might be drawing near.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replies, when the worst of the pain is gone. She doesn't want to alarm her husband, especially with the possibility of the convoy leaving today weighing on his thoughts, but she feels the time is coming. She releases herself from his hands and rolls over to her side of the bed keeping her hands on her belly. She puts her feet on the floor and stands up. Immediately, she feels a gush of liquid gush from between her legs, which can only mean one thing. She turns around and she sees Juan on the other side of the bed, bent over, putting on his shoes, oblivious to what just happened.

"Honey, when you get dressed, I think it would be a good idea for you to go find Petra," she says to Juan, as if she were asking him to go buy bread on the corner.

When Juan realizes what has happened, he bumps into everything in his path and almost falls several times, before making his way out the door of the place they are renting. He quickly arrives at a neighbor's house. He knocks on the door and a matronly woman in her late fifty's answers. No explanation is needed from Juan, his face says everything she needs to know, and in a short time the two of them are back with Maria. Petra is calm and collected as she watches Maria before saying anything. At first, Maria doesn't see them, nor does she hear them enter. Her eyes are closed and her agony is evident. Juan approaches her and sits on the bed next to her. Only then does his wife realize that they have returned.

“Thank you for coming, Petra,” she manages to say when she sees her, despite her pain.

The older woman smiles and approaches Maria, paying close attention to everything she says about the night before and what she's feeling now. Petra assimilates all the information and afterward, tells Juan that the time of delivery is indeed approaching and instructs him as to what they will need. He takes a careful mental note of everything she says, then repeats it back to her to make sure. Then, he's out the door again, as quick as he can.

Once outside, he realizes that he needs to go to a couple of different places, so he needs to formulate his plan of attack. Satisfied he has found the correct order of what needs to be done, he hurries turns on his heels and goes first to notify his mother and father about what is happening and, in turn, also to find out if they have any of the items Petra has requested

They are living just around the corner in another house, also rented, so he arrives quickly. He knocks several times and when he doesn't hear a response, he tests the door, pushing it to see if it is locked from the inside. When it opens, he enters first with only his head, announcing his arrival, so as not to frighten them.

His aunt comes out of their one bedroom, and Juan walks in to greet her. He asks for her blessing, which she gives it to him. He gently takes her shoulders and places a kiss on each of her cheeks. Since before Juan can remember, he has always asked both his mother and his father for their blessing every time he sees them, or leaves them. Although technically they are his aunt and uncle, to him they will always be his parents.

“How is my father?”

She tells him that he's been sleeping better but he's still not at one hundred percent of his capacity. She notices Juan is somewhat agitated, so she asks him if everything is okay. Juan explains what is happening with Maria and what they need for the delivery. From what Petra has asked for, they can provide several sheets and a pillow.

Juan asks her to go to her house as quickly as she can to be there in case Petra needs help with anything. Just as Juan is about to leave, his uncle Pedro comes out of the bedroom, still buttoning his shirt.

“What's all the fuss about here?”

“Blessings, father,” Juan says automatically.

“God bless you, son,” he replies. They greet each other with Juan giving him a kiss on each cheek, as is his custom, and a brief hug.

“Maria's water broke. Petra is with her now. She has asked me to get several things.”

“I'm going over there now,” Lorenza tells her husband.

“Well, wait a minute, what about me? I want to go too,” Pedro says, feeling excluded from the process.

"If you want, come when you're ready, but I want to go right now," Lorenza replies, intent on leaving right away and not wanting to wait any longer for her husband to get ready.

As he sees that Lorenza is not going to wait for him, he looks towards Juan to see what he says.

"Don't worry father. I know you haven't been feeling well. You don't have to go."

"Are you kidding, Juan? I wouldn't miss this for the world. Give me a couple of minutes and I'll go with you," Pedro tells him.

I prefer that you take your time, father. When you're ready, go straight there. To save time, I'll go for the other things we need and we'll meet at my house. Is that okay?"

Pedro nods as Juan and Lorenza leave, both going in different directions once they are out in the street.

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Both Pedro and Lorenza would do anything for Juan. He grew up believing that he was their natural child. It wasn't until a few years ago that his biological father, Lucas Griego, Lorenza's younger brother, accidentally told Juan one night in a drunken stupor that he was the Juan's father. They had both had a lot to drink and although Lucas did not remember what he had said, Juan remembered everything. The next day Juan confronted Pedro and Lorenza, to find out if what Lucas said was true. They shamefully admitted it was. They were actually his aunt and uncle, not his biological parents.

The truth of the matter is that they never wanted to pretend to be Juan's mother and father forever. When Juan was still very young, Lucas was one of the first to embark on an adventure across the ocean, to New Spain, leaving Juan with his sister and her husband. His intention was to seek a better life for all of them, and with the idea that Juan would reunite with him after they were established. When the time came for Lorenza and Pedro to make the journey, to follow in Lucas's footsteps, the only way they could take Juan with them was as their natural son. Passenger regulations were very strict at the time and, except for extenuating circumstances, and with the approval of the corresponding authorities, minors could only accompany their parents on the trips made abroad to Spanish colonies.

Pedro and Lorenza went to see a man in Madrid, to see if there was any way to take Juan with them. He told them that he could get the papers they needed to take him with them as their son. They didn't ask too many questions about the legality of what the man was going to do because they sensed it was not through official channels. The result is they obtained the document they needed for travel. Overnight, Juan Antonio Griego, son of Lucas Griego and Maria Isabel de García; became Juan Antonio Herrera, the

“legitimate” son of Pedro Herrera and Lorenza Griego de Herrera. Things have stayed that way since. Initially, they had thought of changing his last name back to Griego, once they got settled, as well as return him to Lucas, but things didn’t happen that way.

When the three of them arrived to where Lucas was living in Zacatecas at the time, in the new world, he was not stable at all, neither in terms of work or housing. So, Juan continued to live with Pedro and Lorenza as their son. Lucas never paid much attention to Juan as he was growing up, nor did he express any interest in taking care of him even occasionally, let alone full-time. For Lucas, it was much easier to let his sister and his brother-in-law continue to take care of Juan. Also, apparently his sister had a knack for mothering, and since they never had children of their own, it seemed to make sense not to rock the boat.

Growing up, Juan had always felt an affinity for his “uncle” Lucas, as he referred to his biological father, but since he was rarely around, that never caused a problem, nor did it make him question his ancestry. Although Lucas could be a decent uncle from time to time, as a father he was lousy all the time. He was more likely to drink, chase women, and gamble than to want to take on any kind of responsibility for Juan. The reality is that Juan is probably lucky with how everything worked out.

Pedro often had to cover for Lucas at work, every time he came in drunk, late, or didn't show up at all. Pedro put up with him for a number of reasons, none of which had to do with him being an ideal partner in his blacksmithing business. His brother-in-law, Lucas, could wield a hammer and set things in his place with the best of them, when he was sober. Unfortunately for everyone, this was not very often. But even with his flaws, Lucas was family, and Pedro had been taught that, above all else, family had to come first. So, he generally put up with his brother-in-law’s antics.

The day Juan discovered the truth about Lucas, Juan disappeared and didn’t return for several months. He never spoke of where he went or what he did during that period of time, but everyone understood that he had gone through a time of deep reflection. When he returned, he forgave Pedro and Lorenza for leaving as he did, telling them he was grateful for everything they had done for him over the years. Furthermore, he told them that no matter who his biological mother and father were, in Juan's mind, they would always be his only parents. His feelings for Lucas, on the other hand, only turned more bitter with time.

Juan told them that instead of working with “two fathers,” he preferred to stop working with them altogether. He moved to a rented room on his own, found a partner who already had all the tools of the trade, and began competing with Pedro and Lucas for business. Nevertheless, Juan visited Pedro and Lorenza frequently, and without fail on Sundays after church. If Lucas was there, Juan acted as if he wasn’t, completely ignoring him. In fact, since Juan found out that Lucas was his father and not his uncle, Juan had not spoken to him once, despite several attempts by Lucas to strike up a conversation.

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When Juan has everything, he returns to the place where they have been staying since they arrived in Santa Barbara. Like many of the places available for short term renters, it is very basic. Where Pedro and Lorenza are staying, there is a separate bedroom and a common area. Where Juan and Maria are living is a single room with a curtain in the middle separating the room in two, one where they sleep and the other where there are two chairs, a small table and a makeshift kitchen in the corner.

Juan and his uncle sit at the table talking, while Petra and Lorenza take care of Maria on the other side of the divide. Every now and then they hear evidence of her discomfort. Judging by the frequency of the howls, the baby could be born at any time. Juan gets up and begins to pace back and forth in the small space.

He stops, looks at his uncle with a questioning expression on his face and asks, "With everything else that is happening, I forgot to ask you about the launch of the convoy. Have you heard anything? If I'm not mistaken, the start time was about half an hour ago."

"Believe it or not, it's on the move. I talked to some people on the way here and it seems that this time, it's finally going to go."

"I don't think Maria and I have any choice but to wait until the baby is born to leave."

"Nothing is more important right now than what's happening in there," Pedro says, indicating the other side of the curtain with his chin, just as another piercing scream fills the space. The curtain doesn't do anything to muffle the sound and they can hear every scream, moan, and whisper.

Lucas expresses his concern for Maria, and hearing him, Lorenza comes out from behind the curtain. Her expression tells them right away she is cross with them. Seeing her expression, Juan immediately sits back down and neither of them says a word, instead, staring back at her, like scolded children.

"It could still be some time before the baby is born. Why don't you go for a walk, a run, or go jump in the river? But do something! You're not doing anything useful sitting there like two toads croaking on a log.

Suddenly, Juan has a flashback from when he was maybe five or six years old. He clearly remembers sitting in his living room, very bored and fighting with his best friend. His aunt appeared in a doorway, with exactly the same tone of voice and body posture, telling them exactly the same thing. As has become his custom over the years, Juan responds, "But if we do that, who will keep you company?"

"Get out of here, both of you, now! I don't want to see either of you around here. Do something, anything, but away from here."

They leave and once on the street decide to go see how the movement of the convoy is going at the village square, from where it is supposed to leave. As they walk the few blocks to get there, they see groups of people in different stages of preparation to join the convoy and/or witness this event which has brought many people to this small town, previously existing only to support the silver mines. Since the news came that there would be a new expedition by Don Juan de Oñate to the north, along with the promise of work on the road and land when they got there, many have flocked to the town, changing its character dramatically.

Some are already packed and, on their way, while others are in the process of packing and getting things settled. Tearful eyes peek through half-open doors. Many of the women with their children will stay behind until they are sure that it's safe. The morning dawned clear, without a single cloud in the sky, but now thin, wispy clouds appear on the horizon, fading the blue of the sky to white.

When they are convinced that the convoy is, in fact, on the move, they head up the hill and walk just outside of town to where a small spring provides water and creates a small oasis in the otherwise arid setting. They sit on a small bench and gaze out at the city below them bustling with activity and movement.

"Son, I was thinking of something."

"Tell me, father."

"Don't you think it's time for you to make peace with Lucas?"

Pedro never refers to Lucas as Juan's father, but rather by his first name, as Juan asked him and Lorenza to do after learning the truth about his ancestry. Juan is silent, looking at his clasped hands, his thumbs moving in circles around each other, something he does when he's nervous.

Juan doesn't say anything.

"As you know my health hasn't been very good," Pedro tells him. "Although your mother and I would love to accompany you on this trip, I don't think it's going to be possible, so we'll return to Zacatecas, to our home there until I regain my health."

Juan hoped his aunt and uncle would join them on the trip, but he also knows that the trip is going to be arduous, and particularly difficult for Pedro, if he goes. The caravan has no defined destination and his father's health has been delicate the last several months.

"Lucas is going with his apprentice, Mateo," says Pedro. "Since we won't be going, he will be the only family you have during the trip, as well as when you arrive." He is quiet momentarily, and then adds, "And you know, Juan, how I feel about the importance of family."

"Family? Lucas, my family? That's a joke!" replies Juan, annoyed and raising his voice.

Pedro knows that he shouldn't put too much pressure on Juan, but he also knows that this may be the last chance he has to express what he wants to say. He is silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, before continuing:

"I know you don't think much of Lucas, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm your father and you're my son. But with that being said, it's likely that from here on out he'll be all you've got."

Juan looks at his uncle, who is the only father he has known since he was a child. With exasperation in his voice, he says, "I know I should forgive him. I know the reasons why he abandoned me. I know that we all make mistakes, and the good Lord knows that I have prayed to try to forgive him. I just haven't been able to do it, father."

"I'm just trying to do what's right, and in the end, what's best for you. You know that, don't you, Juan?" Pedro says, pleading with Juan to see reason.

"Yes, it's just that there's something deep inside of me that makes me so angry, and I don't know why I can't get over this feeling that I have. Both you and my mother have explained to me that what was done was a matter of necessity and not convenience. However, there's something about him leaving me that I just haven't been able to understand. Every time I think about him, or talk about him, as we are doing now, my blood boils, it's hard to express what I feel."

"May I make a suggestion, Juan?"

"You don't have to, Father," he replies, already having an idea of what he's going to say.

"Well then, son, do it, go talk to him. You know that's the first step, there is no other. Also, you don't have to go as 'his son'; think instead of him as your uncle, as a friend, or simply as an acquaintance. It doesn't matter what role you want to play, but do it!" Pedro lets the words permeate into Juan's consciousness, before continuing. "We all make mistakes and we all have flaws, but we all also have good attributes, as does Lucas. You just have to take time to get to know them and to find them. There is something even more important—"

"What's that, father?"

"If it wasn't for him, you wouldn't even be alive; and we certainly wouldn't all be here right now, here in Santa Barbara. He was the one who took the first big step to emigrate. Despite everything you may feel for him, try to remember it took a lot of courage for him to pave the way for all of us."

Juan has heard these same words, and these same arguments, in his own thoughts over the years. He has played this same story, as well as others like it, in his mind hundreds of times since first learning Lucas was his blood father, but until now he has never really understood the sacrifice Lucas made to be the first in the family to take the risks necessary to give them all a better life. Before, he had always come to the same

conclusion: Lucas was a drunk, a womanizer, and good for nothing. Not only that, but what has hurt Juan the most is that Lucas left him in the arms of his aunt and uncle without a second thought, leaving them to care for him.

“You never know what awaits you around the corner and it's important that you have someone to count on, Juan.”

“Father, do you really think that I can count on Lucas, if I need him?”

Pedro considers the question carefully, knowing Juan has been disappointed by Lucas before, and not wanting for it to happen again.

“Yes, son, you can count on him,” Pedro declares, with certainty in his voice. “Lucas may have self-control issues, but never doubt his love for you. He has told me time and again how sorry he is that he can't have a relationship with you, and you know he's tried to make amends.”

Juan has to give that to Lucas. He has tried on many occasions to make peace with Juan, but the latter has not responded and instead has shut Lucas out of life. To Lucas' credit, he has taken it in stride, showing himself imperturbable despite his desire to communicate with his biological son.

“There's something else, John.”

“What's that, father?”

“Don't you think he deserves to know that you're about to become a father and that he's about to become a grandfather, or a great-uncle, or whatever you want to call him?”

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Pedro and Juan arrive to where Lucas and his apprentice, Mateo, have been doing business since they arrived in Santa Barbara. They are busy loading their last trunks to their wagon. When Lucas sees them, he immediately stops what he's doing and walks over to them.

“Good morning, brother,” he says to Pedro, giving him a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek, as is their custom.

Lucas is pleasantly surprised to see Juan with Pedro, but he isn't sure what to say or what to do. He starts to speak and then stops. He looks at Juan, detailing his features. He can't help but be amazed at their similarity in appearance. Seeing them together on the street, anyone would say that they are father and son. Juan has the same build, olive complexion, curly hair, and hazel eyes as Lucas. In fact, Juan has also considered their similarities. Both Pedro and Lorenza have much lighter skin. From looking at him, Juan has no doubt that Lucas is his biological father, he just wishes it weren't so.

What bothers Juan the most is perhaps not that Lucas has abandoned him for the reasons everyone knows, but that after having the opportunity to be with him, Lucas chose not to be around as he was growing up. Juan arrived with Pedro and Lorenza to Zacatecas, where Lucas had settled, when Juan was four years old. Couldn't Lucas have at least tried to spend a little more time with his son? The first memories Juan has of Lucas are almost all the same: drunk and being stupid. There are two types of drunks. Some get happy and go-lucky; while others become impertinent and quarrelsome. Lucas is one of the latter who is unpleasant to be around when he had too much liquor. Fortunately, he now appears to be sober.

Pedro sees Lucas's discomfort, so he decides to help him out. "As I told you the other day, Lorenza and I are not going north. We had originally planned to do so, but I don't think I can make the trip. I prefer to return to Zacatecas for now, then hopefully join you when you get settled, and I feel better."

Lucas remains silent, patiently listening to what his brother-in-law has to say.

"For me, family has always been instilled as the most important thing any of us can have in life." Pedro stops and an example comes to mind that he hopes might help them mend their relationship. "My grandfather used to tell me that friends come and go like leaves on a tree, but family is the tree!" Pedro looks first to Juan, then to Lucas, and then back again at Juan, to see if his words are reaching him. "I have taken these words to heart over the years and they have brought us to where we are today. God knows we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you, Lucas."

Pedro approaches Lucas and puts an arm around his shoulders. Juan observes the two men and knows that he, in some way, is a combination of them. One has been his father, present in every sense of the word; and the other has been a miserable father, absent most of the time.

"Lucas, you are like my brother," Pedro says. "As I just said, I will forever be grateful to you for opening the way for us to come to New Spain, but more importantly, for giving us the privilege of loving Juan and allowing us to raise him as our son."

With his free arm, Pedro motions for Juan to come closer, which he does. Pedro brings them both as close, hugging them with all his might, and his way uniting Lucas with his biological father. Even so, there is still a gap between them, which will have to be closed in its own time and Pedro understands this.

"I don't know how you two are going to solve this matter, and it's really not for me to say how you should do it, but for the good of both of you, and the whole family, you have to do it! Family is too important to let anything get in the way. Also, Lucas, I think there's something you should know."

Lucas remains immobile, hanging on every word and aware of every gesture, both from Juan and from Pedro.

"Do you want to tell him, Juan, or should I?"

Lucas and Pedro turn their attention to Juan, both wondering if he will finally break his silence with Lucas. Juan looks down, shuffles his feet momentarily, and takes a deep breath to gather courage.

“You are going to be a grandfather,” Juan tells Lucas, looking up at him as he does.

Lucas's expression changes in an instant from one of curious concern to one of utter delight and happiness. His smile goes from ear to ear. He lets go of Pedro and takes Juan by both shoulders, looking him square in the eye.

“I've never told you this, but I think you should know, Juan,” Lucas's eyes are moist and his voice shakes with emotion as he speaks, “you are the best thing that ever came from me.”

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While Mateo continues putting the finishing touches on the ropes that secure everything in the wagon, they all enter the place where Lucas and Mateo have been residing and doing business for the last few months. The only thing left in the space now is a large table with four chairs, which were there when they rented it.

“I'd offer you something to drink, but we've already put out the fire and packed everything,” Lucas says, apologetically as they sit down.

“It doesn't matter Lucas, we have to go back to Juan's house soon anyway, to see how things are going with Maria, but I was talking to Juan about you and he agreed to come to talk before going back.”

Lucas sits up straighter in his chair, fidgeting, not sure again what to say again, or if he should say anything at all. Although it seems that Juan should be the more nervous of the two in this meeting, it is quite the opposite. Seeing this helps Juan to calm down and collect his thoughts before speaking:

“I know I've been hard on you over the years, Lucas, and it's very hard for me to think of you as my father, but I haven't been able to get over the thought that you abandoned me without a second thought.”

When Juan finishes speaking, Lucas stares at his hands which lay on the table in front of him, as he thinks about what he can possibly say to make things better and wondering if anything he says will make any difference at all. He takes a deep breath to make sure Juan has finished speaking. When Juan doesn't say anything, Lucas looks up.

“I know that I have not been a good father and the truth is that I have been absent from you for much of my life. In addition, I don't think I have done anything to earn your respect. My life has been a disaster, and although I have my own excuses for why my life has turned out as it has, in the end, I am the only one responsible.

Although the outside world is buzzing with activity, right now the only thing that matters to these three is this moment. Pedro and Juan listen attentively now to Lucas. They are both sure that he has probably thought a lot about what he would like to tell Juan, and now he finally has the chance to do it.

“I don't expect you to forgive me, Juan, but I do hope that one day you'll understand what I did. What I can tell you for sure is that the second happiest day of my life was when you were born, and the first happiest was when I met your mother, and this led to you.”

“I don't think I know anything about her,” Juan replies, looking at Lucas and Pedro on the other side of the table, “what was she like?”

Lucas takes another deep breath, looks up at the ceiling, and closes his eyes now as he exhales. A serene smile spreads across his face and his entire expression relaxes with the memory. “She was the most wonderful person you can imagine. She was pretty, smart and very witty. She always had something to say that hit the nail right on the head, regardless of the situation.”

“What happened to her?” Juan asks.

Lucas exchanges a brief glance with Pedro.

“Let's just say that she died under very unfortunate circumstances that continue to haunt me to this day,” Lucas says, falling silent briefly before continuing. “I don't think this is the time to go into details, but I promise, when the time is right, and if you want to know, I can tell you whatever you like about her, or about your life before I left you with my sister, Lorenza, and Pedro,” Lucas responds, as he turns and grabs his brother-in-law briefly around the shoulders as he mentions his name.

At first, Juan is about to insist on knowing more about his biological mother but he sees that Pedro's expression indicates it would be better to talk about it on another day. So, he says nothing.

“I will always be in debt to Pedro and Lorenza for taking care of you, Juan. It hurts—” Lucas chokes with emotion and for a moment he can't say anything. Eventually, he clears his throat, and when he does speak, his voice shakes with the strange sensation he feels inside. “I guess what I'm trying to tell you, and it pains me to admit it, but I have no doubt you have been much better off with them as parents than you would have been with me. So, I think everything worked out in the end. I feel like our biggest mistake was not being more forthcoming with you about how you came into the world. For you to find out the truth while I was in one of my drunken stupors, was not the right way. My biggest regret in life has been losing my relationship with you.”

Tears now stream down Lucas's face as he speaks. He moves his seat closer to the table, extends his hands over Juan's, taking them in his, before continuing:

“Thank you for coming to see me, Juan. It means more to me than you can ever imagine and I will do my best not to ever disappoint you again.”

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After talking with Mateo, they decide that it would be best for him to go ahead and start the journey alone. Lucas takes one of the horses to catch up with his partner later, after Juan and Maria's baby is born. Since there will likely be work to be done as everyone gets going, Mateo can take care of things as the carriages and carts are being tested to the limit for their loads as the journey begins. This will give Lucas some time to spend with his family.

As they approach Juan's house, they can hear Maria's screams. When they enter, Lorenza hears them. She peeks out from behind the curtain that separates the room in two, finding it strange to see Lucas with them, but says nothing. Instead, she looks at her husband, who gives her a conspiratorial smile, a wink, and a slight nod. Seeing this, it is obvious to Juan that they have talked about reuniting him with Lucas before, though he has previously imagined this to be the case.

Lorenza tells them that the arrival of the baby is near and instructs them to wait without making too much noise. As if agreed on beforehand, Pedro, Lucas, and Juan look at the two chairs and then at each other, realizing they can't all sit down.

"Age before beauty," Juan says, indicating with a slight bow to his elders to take the chairs. Besides, I'm too nervous to sit down now.

After Pedro and Lucas sit, no one says anything for a while. They are still, listening to the sounds behind the curtain. After a time, which seems like forever but is really only a minute or two, Juan looks at the two men who have the right to call themselves his father.

"What can you tell me about my mother and when I was born?" Juan asks, his voice low, so as not to disturb the process on the other side of the curtain. "Now I realize that I don't know the story of how I was born. My birth has always been somewhat of a mystery to me."

Pedro looks at Lucas as if to determine who should tell the story, since they were both there at the time. Lucas indicates that he wants to be the one to tell him, so Pedro sits back and listens. Lucas shifts slightly to face Juan, sitting up straighter in his chair as he does so.

"Well, I guess now is as good a time as any to tell you a little more about your mother. It's been too long already," admits Lucas.

Juan stops pacing up and down and looks at Lucas with his arms crossed, standing in front of him, anxious to hear for the first time about someone he thought he knew but now finds he doesn't.

“She was a beautiful woman and, to tell the truth, very similar to your own Maria in appearance and stature. She was also called Maria, but we all called her Marisa, since her middle name was Isabel.”

“How did you meet?” Juan asks, curiosity evident in his voice.

“That is a good question. I haven't thought about it in a long time, but I remember it very well. My father always supported the church in everything they did. We also helped on Sundays, as well as on other special occasions, to prepare the service.

“A new family had just moved into town, so in that sense my story is similar to yours. The first Sunday they were there, she came to church with her husband and her five children, three girls and two boys. Marisa was the oldest of them. At that time, I was about twenty years old. Marisa's mother was very religious and she immediately approached the church offering to help in any way she could. The lady who normally taught catechism was sick, so they asked her if she could fill in, which she was happy to do. From there we met and started to get to know each other.”

As Lucas talks, Juan's mind travels through time. He accumulates information like a sponge, thirsty for information about his past that has always been unclear and picturing in all Lucas tells him. He drops his arms from their crossed position.

“I guess that means,” Juan says, “that I must have some uncles and aunts out there that I don't know about.”

Lucas looks at Pedro and then back at Juan before answering:

“Well, yes and no, Juan. You technically have two aunts and two uncles on that side of your family, but the truth is, it's been so long since I've seen them, or been in communication with them, that I probably wouldn't even recognize them if I saw them on the street.”

Juan has more questions, but he decides to let Lucas continue with his story, so he just nods.

“When I saw Marisa for the first time at church, it was love at first sight, at least on my part. Although it wasn't until two years later that we got married, I knew from the first moment I saw her I wanted to get to know her better. I was already working with Pedro in his business and we had worked out a plan for me to become a full partner with him, although at that time he was running the business and I just did what he told me to do.

“About a year after we got married, Marisa got pregnant, but she lost the baby when she was three months pregnant. Otherwise, you would have had an older brother or sister. We never found out if it was a boy or a girl. A short time later, she became pregnant again, this time with you.”

“Where did you live when I was born, also in Siero, in the old country?” Juan asks. “I understand that we all lived there before coming to New Spain.”

"Yes, that's correct, Juan," Lucas confirms. "Our family has been from that area for a long time. I think you might know that both your grandfather and your great-grandfather were bakers and very well known in the area."

"I know you worked with my father, or should I say my uncle?" Juan is momentarily exasperated with the confusion. "Now, I don't even know what to call either of you."

"Just call me Lucas, I don't want to try to take Pedro's place as your father and much less, Lorenza as your mother. As far as I'm concerned, they are the ones who raised you and deserve to be called your mother and father."

"I know, but it's strange now that I have both in front of me, now with this new knowledge," Juan admits. Then getting back on the subject, asks, "I believe you worked with my father since you were young, as I recall."

"Yes, Juan, that's correct. With my father's approval I started working with Pedro shortly after he and my sister Lorenza got married, which was in—"

Seeing that Lucas is having difficulties with dates, Pedro steps in to help. "I was 24 when I got married and Lorenza was 16, so it must have been around 1552."

"That seems right to me," Lucas says. "If I remember correctly, I was 12 or 13 years old at the time."

Juan hangs on to Lucas's every word, learning for the first time about his true beginnings in the world and more about his birth parents. Momentarily lost where he was in his story, Lucas collects his thoughts again, and then continues:

"Marisa's pregnancy with you went smoothly. We were both very excited for you to come into the world, and when you did arrive—" Lucas pauses, his eyes moisten and his voice trembles with the emotion of what he feels inside, with the memory of the moment. "As I told you just a little bit ago, Juan. You are the best that has come from me. It was an amazing feeling when I was finally able to hold you in my arms."

"Were you there also, father?" Juan asks Pedro.

"From your very first breath, we were both there; your mother and me. I guess that's one of the reasons why it's been so easy for us to take care of you as if you were our own child because, in a way, you have been."

Juan rubs his chin pensively, looks first at Pedro and then at Lucas. He is about to say something, when suddenly the loudest scream they've heard so far comes from the other side of the curtain. They become quiet and listen. The next thing they hear is a baby crying.

All of their facial expressions change from deep thoughtfulness to pure joy and happiness. Pedro and Lucas, who have been sitting, stand and spontaneously the three of them come together, embracing one another with their emotion of the moment bringing them together.



Lucas feels like he's somehow in a dream. He has thought about making peace with his Juan and has tried over the years without success. At times, he imagined coming together again with Juan, and what the moment might be like if Juan accepted his apology. He never in his wildest imagination thought it could be as it is, right here, right now, becoming a grandfather and a father again at the same time. He hugs Pedro and Juan with all his strength, thanking Pedro for reuniting him with Juan, while congratulating his regained son on his new baby.

While they are in the midst of their celebration, Lorenza emerges from the other side of the curtain with the baby wrapped in a blanket in her arms.

"It's a boy!"

She approaches Juan and offers him the baby, instructing him to take his son into his arms. At first, Juan is hesitant and unsure what to do.

"I don't remember ever having carried a baby, I don't know how to do it," he says.

"It's easy, Juan, just pretend it's a small sack of potatoes and you'll do fine," Lorenza tells him, smiling as she steps forward, placing the baby in his father's arms.

Juan takes the baby tentatively at first and then pulls it close to his chest, hugging and snuggling his son. The emotion on Juan's face is evident. His expression is a mixture of gratitude, joy and fear. He turns his head towards the sky and closes his eyes as tears of joy run down his cheeks. Silently, he thanks God for his baby, then suddenly opens his eyes and asks Lorenza if his wife is okay. When she confirms that Maria is fine, he falls once again back into his state of bliss, his eyes closed and his face raised toward the heavens.

Juan opens his eyes and begins to see every small detail in his son's face. He becomes choked up with the emotion of having him in his arms. When he is able to regain his voice, he looks up, seeing Pedro, Lorenza and Lucas standing before him all hugging one another.

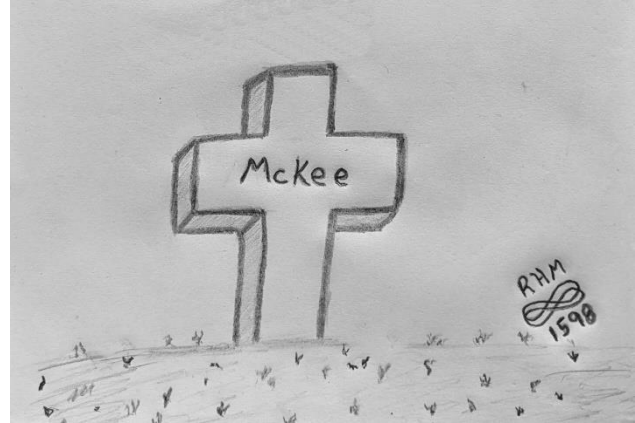
"I think I know what his name should be," Juan says, his expression firm with resolution.

"Tell us, son, what do you think it should be?" Lorenza asks.

"Well, first in honor of you, mother, and second in honor of my 'two fathers', and third because I think he looks like me, his name should be: Juan Griego Herrera II."

## The End

**The McKees  
August, 1598  
County Antrim, Ireland**



Samuel looks out the window toward the path leading up to their house, waiting anxiously for his father's arrival. Word has already come he was injured in battle, and that they are making their way back with him. So far, they don't know the extent of his injuries, but all are worried sick. The atmosphere is tense. His mother, Mary, is crying in one corner. She is being consoled by John and Anne Kelly, who have been neighbors for as long as Samuel can remember. His older sister and brothers also do their best to make their mother feel better, though little they do seems to help. Others who live nearby and others from town, are gathered outside. Standing in the portico is a doctor, who has been summoned. All are in anticipation of Captain Hugh McKee's arrival.

Though it is late in the day and the sun has just set, there is still enough light for Samuel to see as they make the rise on the horizon. He is out the door in a heartbeat, running toward the wagon where his father lays covered with blankets. Samuel jumps on the wagon as it's moving and is helped up by one of the two men on board. Samuel kneels next to his father, whose eyes are closed. At first glance, except for a pained look on his dirtied face, there are no other visual signs of anything out of the ordinary. He is much paler than usual, but other than that looks fairly normal. Looking to the soldier perched on the other side of the wagon sitting on the sideboard, whom he recognizes as being a friend of his father's, he gives him a questioning look, unsure of what his father's injuries might be. A brief glance to his father's legs by the man indicates the location his injury.

"His leg's got pretty torn up in the battle, son," the man says. He reaches over and places a hand on Samuel's shoulder, squeezing it gently as he speaks. With a grim tone in his voice, he adds, "They had to cut 'er off just above da knee on the way here. I'm afraid, he's lost a lot of blood."

Samuel pulls the blanket down from up around his father's chin to find his hands. They are crossed over his chest as he sways back and forth gently with the movement of the wagon, as it passes over the uneven ground. Grabbing his father's hands in his own, he feels them cool to his touch. He leans down, gives his father a kiss on the forehead, and whispers, "Papa, please don't die, we need you." Tears stream down over Samuel's cheeks as he thinks about facing life without his father. He can't even imagine what it might be like.

Once at the door, several of those who have been waiting help get Samuel's father out of the wagon and carry him into the house. The men accompanying his father explain they are they are coming from some 40 miles away, where the Irish militia engaged the English in a fierce battle. Though they had a resounding victory, repelling the English and keeping one of their forts nearby

under siege, as is usually the case in a war, regardless of who wins the battle, there are typically losses of life on both sides. They all hope Hugh does not become one of these casualties.

Mary waits at the door as they carry him in. While her initial tears upon finding out her husband had been injured in battle were profuse and constant, they have subsided to intermittent sobs. Now once again the floodgates of her tears and emotions open wide as she sees her husband, seemingly lifeless in their arms. She crosses herself, looks to the heavens, and prays to God that her husband isn't injured too badly.

They take Hugh into his bedroom and lay him on the bed which has been prepared for his arrival. The doctor follows, seeing that the items he has requested have been placed on the nightstand. Seeing Mary fraught with worry reminds him that this has been his most difficult part of being a doctor. One thing is to deal with patients who need medical attention and help them to get better; another is dealing with loved ones, who are torn apart when those close to them are in pain, or who are suffering. He can only imagine what must be going through Mary's mind. He knows he won't be able to do what he needs to do with her in the room, but at the same time, he hates to pull her away from her husband.

He walks up behind her and puts his hand gently on her shoulder. "Mary, I think it would be best if you wait outside. I will let you know when it's okay for you to come back in again to see him." He nods at the neighbor, Mrs. Kelly, who is helping to support her by her elbow on the other side, as she initially resists leaving. She gently nudges Hugh's grief-stricken wife out of the room, while helping to hold her up so she doesn't fall on the way.

Samuel stands in the doorway taking in the entire scene as if it were in slow motion. The doctor immediately bends over his father, as his mother exits and sobs intensify as she gets farther away from the bed. As was the case when he first saw him in the wagon, Samuel's father looks very much the same way when he left, only paler and dirtier. Samuel sees how the doctor pulls down the blankets covering his legs, and there he sees it. Where his father's left leg should be, instead there is a bloodied shirt wrapped around what's left of it. The cloth is completely soaked through with his blood. Just then, his mother gets to the door, and to keep her from turning around and seeing what he just saw, he supports her on the other side from where the neighbor leads her, and they direct her out of the room, closing the door as they do. Once into the living area, they lead her to the sofa, where they all sit down. As they comfort her, Samuel can't get the image of his father leg out of his mind. He can't remember ever seeing so much blood.

The two men who were on the wagon with his father are now inside as well. The short, stout one with curly red hair and a full beard, who spoke to Samuel on the wagon, is telling the story of what happened to several people who have gathered inside their home. The other taller man, with straggly brown hair and thin beard, says nothing, instead, listening intently to what the other one says, as if to make sure his is telling the story correctly.

"—you all know that we been laying siege to the English fort at Blackwater, since they first built it last year. We got those bastards starvin' and with no supplies getting into them now for some time. Some say that in Dublin, there was grumblings about them letting the fort go, but then O'Neill got word that they was going to finally come and rescue them who has been stuck at the fort, with none other than that damn traitor, Henry Bagenal, leading the effort."

There is some talking and chattering among those listening upon hearing this since Bagenal is well known to all of them. Bagenal has hated Hugh O'Neill, the leading clansman in the area, ever

since Bagenal's sister, Mabel, eloped with O'Neill against her brother's wishes. She died a few years later, with a lot of speculation as to the circumstances surrounding her death. The official story is that both she and her child died in childbirth, though not all convinced this is true. People in these parts are loyal to Hugh O'Neill, primarily because of the power he wields, but they also know him to be ruthless with his enemies. Many believe he and Mabel disagreed on many things, not the least of which were his infidelities. All this only serves to fuel the rumors regarding what really happened to Bagenal's sister, and how she died. This has served to fuel his hate for O'Neill over the years.

"O'Neill took Cap'n McKee aside afore everything started and told him he wanted us to keep an eye on Bagenal, and that if we had a chance, that we should take him out, not only because he doesn't like the man, but more important, because he knew it would cause a commotion in the ranks if he was gone."

More of those who were gathered outside come inside the house when they hear the story being told. Since the first riders arrived several hours ago, accounts of the battle have been starting to circulate, and all are anxious to hear about what happened.

"Our scouts was telling us thair every move since leaving Armagh, from early this mornin'. Just as O'Neill had planned, and with many of our men on the west side of the river Callan, Bagenal chose to cross to the other side, playing right into O'Neill's hand."

"And what was that plan, Fergie?" one of the men asked him, wanting to know each and every little detail. Then when Fergie doesn't answer right away, because he was taking a big swig of whiskey offered to him, the man adds, "And which hand was using?" laughing at his own joke as he does.

"He used the right hand, as it should be, Micky," Fergie answers the man, with a smile when he finishes with his drink. "From the very beginning, O'Neill told us that he thought the battle would be ours if we could separate the lead regiment from the others. By gettin' 'em to cross the river there, he knew it would give us an opportunity to split 'em upriver when they had to cross once again to get to the fort at Blackwater."

Samuel observes the two men who he had seen many times with his father. Every time he had seen one of them, it seems the other has been there as well. He thought it curious that in all the times he can recall, he'd yet to see the tall man talk, though the shorter one whose name he now recalls as Fergus Maguire, always did enough talking for them both, and then some.

"But from what we've heard, I thought we had stopped them?" asks an older man who had come from town and was just arriving.

"Hold your horses, John, I'm not done with the story, and the best is yet to come!" Fergie is momentarily perturbed by the interruption, but gets right back into his explanation. "Mind ye, all this time we was pelting 'em with shot from across the river to make sure we had their attention, but we was too far away to do any real damage, so we was more botherin' 'em than anything else, getting 'em to play into O'Neill's scheme." He pauses dramatically, looking around the room before continuing. "You all know the ford between Armagh and Blackwater, right?"

Most affirm that know the place, since it is a well-known landmark.

"There's a series of hills there, if you recall. That's where O'Neill had set up the next surprise for Bagenal and his band of thieves as they was comin'. Mind ye', all this time, our small regiment

of 10 men, led by Captain McKee, was shadowin' Bagenal. We was lookin' for him since early, but weren't able to lay our eyes on him until they crossed the river. He had a dandy white feather in his cap, making him easy to pick out, but he was always surrounded by others and we was too far away to get any kind of a decent shot at 'em—"

Fergus gets more animated as he talks. As one of those people who loves being in the limelight, as the life of the party, he is in his element and has the undivided attention of everyone there. Samuel can't see him directly, because of others who block his view, but he sees bits and pieces of him as he moves around, and can hear him clearly.

"So, you was talking about them hills, Fergie, what about 'em," one of the men asks to get him back on track with what he was saying.

"Yeah, right," he says, remembering where his was in his story. "So, we let them go pretty easy over them first two hills, popping them along the way from the sides with shot, but letting them go forward. After that is when they got their next surprise!" Fergie was getting more and more excited now as the crowd listening to him increased in size.

"And what was it?" another asked, while offering Fergie a drink from his bottle, which was gladly accepted.

"O'Neill had several of the regiments working all night long on a trench that stretched from one side of the bog to the other, right through the ford. We really started letting 'em have it from the sides, just before they got to the trench. When they seen the obstacle, they was surprised at first. But since we weren't defending it, they got through it to the other side without much trouble. They fell right into O'Neill's trap, which was to let them through easily when they got there. When they was on the other side of the trench, they knew they was getting close to the fort and could even see it from the crest of the las hill after passing through.

"That's when we trapped 'em in. With the first regiment over the trench, O'Neill ordered everyone who had been on either side to move in and cut them off from their other regiments. Just over that last hill, O'Neill had his next surprise for them. He had positioned the craziest of our group there and they was awaitin' there, hidden in the bush. As soon as the English thought they had it made, they started rushing toward the fort. Then is when O'Neill gave the order to attack. The English went from charging forward like there was no tomorrow, to droppin' into pike position to defend themselves as the crazies came at them. Already O'Neill had told them to concentrate their attack on the left part of the formation with as much firepower and muscle as they could muster. When they made a hole through the pike formation, the rest poured into the middle, taking the pikers out first, and then having a hay day with the rest who had no place to go. Their calvary couldn't help since they was separated by the trench and with our guys defending It, they couldn't get over. Those who had passed over the trench so easily were trapped with no escape."

"And you seen all this, Fergie, with yourn eyes?" yet another man in the crowd asks, wondering if he is making this up, or if he really saw it firsthand.

"I could see the commotion from where we was through the smoke, but all this I learn't later from them that was closer to the action. We was still on the second hill, keeping our eye on Bagenal, and looking for a way to get to him, all the while peppering 'em with shot to make sure they didn't forget we was there. Then, all of a sudden Bagenal ordered the lead regiment, that was trapped, to retreat back through the trench, even though they had little possibility of survival. It

was like target practice as they came back over the trench. The bastards were falling over one another right into the hole, as we picked ‘em off one at a time.

“Through all the smoke, then is when we seen Bagenal going forward to help those in retreat, as they were coming toward the trench, and towards our guys defending it. At the same time, Captain McKee gave the order for our group to attack. When they seen us coming at them from the side, several calvary came to defend their position. While we battled with them, Cap’n McKee, came up from behind us, took careful aim and took a shot at Bagenal, but he missed. As he was reloading, one of the cavalry got past us, leaned down and with his sword took a swipe at the Cap’n, hittin’ ‘em in the leg, and almost taking it off with one blow. With another round loaded and ready to go, the Cap’n positioned himself from the ground, took careful aim, and this time hit Bagenal right in the head. He fell off his horse like a sack of potatoes.”

Several of those listening continue to ask questions about the battle, while Fergus animatedly tells them about all the gory details. The long and short of it is they obliterated the first English regiment that had crossed the trench. The other two regiments of the English retreated through heavy fire and they lost a lot of men on the way. They were hampered by heavy equipment they had with them that got caught up in the muck and mud, and then were further disheartened by an explosion within their ranks. Apparently, it was caused by one of their own who accidentally ignited their supply of gunpowder. They didn’t have a chance and many of those who weren’t killed in the retreat, surrendered or escaped into the woods to come away with their lives.

While the general air is one of excitement and victory, John Kelly, sees that this isn’t the time nor the place for this kind of celebration. Not here, not now, particularly when his neighbor, and brother in life, Captain Hugh McKee, is critically wounded in the other room. He shoos them all out of the house and into the street, closing the door, and giving the family some privacy.

“Thank you, John,” Mary manages to tell him through her sobs. “I know they are excited about the victory, but I just can’t stop thinking about Hugh, in there with the doctor. I wonder how he is, and if—” her crying chokes off the rest of her words, as she hates to even imagine the worst case scenario.

Once again, the vision of his father’s leg comes to Samuel’s mind. His sister, Sarah, comes and sits beside him. “Are you okay, Sammy, you look like you saw a ghost.” He says nothing, instead just keeps staring off into space, shaking his head, unable to get out of his mind the sight of the bloody shirt where his father’s leg should have been.

At ten years old, Samuel is the baby of the bunch. His sister Sarah, who is almost 15 years old, takes him into her arms and rocks him, while his two older brothers, John and Andrew, who are 16 and 12, respectively, comfort their mother. The doctor walks out of the room and directs his attention to Mary, who with hope in her eyes, but fear in her soul, asks about her husband’s condition.

“I’m sorry to tell you that he’s in pretty bad shape, Mary. If it was just for the leg, he would probably be okay, but with the amount of blood he’s lost, it’s difficult to say whether or not he’s going to make it, and if he does, how he’ll be.”

Mary buries her head into her hands while the rest of them come closer to her, trying to offer some kind of relief from the anguish she feels.

“I wish I could tell you he’s going to be fine, but right now—” He cuts off mid-sentence, deciding it best not to say more for now. “You can go in and see him if you like.”

Several hours pass, as they keep vigil on Captain Hugh McKee, whose name is now on the lips of many across Northern Ireland as the man who killed Marshal Bagenal. People are already referring to McKee as a hero in what they are now calling the Battle of Yellow Ford, due to the color of the ford where the battle took place.

Ireland’s history of conflict goes back as long as anyone can remember. The Irish are proud of their heritage and anxious to keep not only their lands, but more importantly, their religion and their way of life intact. As far as they are concerned, the English, who have abandoned Catholicism in favor of Protestantism, are acting more out of a matter of convenience to fit their decadent lifestyles, than out of a sense of faith. The Gaelic people have long valued their independence and are willing to risk their lives to preserve their beliefs.

As a result, the Irish clans have decided that rather than warring with each other, as they have done for centuries, they will unite to repel the English. By bringing the clans together in a united effort, and with the help of the Spanish, who also champion their cause, they are committed to remaining independent from the English. The outcome of this conflict gives weight and substance to their desire for continued independence. Unfortunately, even in victory, misery can also be a companion, as it is now for them.

Mary is unsure if her husband is able to hear what she says, but nonetheless, she imagines he can, holding his hands and speaking to him as if he can understand every word she utters. As a means to pass the time, and also hopefully to do something beneficial for him, she recounts the story of how they met.

Theirs was an impossible love. While Mary’s father, who was one of the senior members in the MacDonnell clan, had always wanted for her to marry someone within their own social class, instead she fell in love with Hugh McKee, who owned no land, and whom she met because he ran cattle for MacDonnell’s. She will never forget the day she first saw him. Once a year, the senior clan members in the area would host a festival for those who were loyal and worked for them.

At the time Mary was only 14 years old, and Hugh was 18. Though they never spoke, through the glances they exchanged, each made a promise to get to know each other better. From that time on, they would take every opportunity they could to see each other, but it wasn’t until the following year at the same festival that they finally got a chance to talk to each other. Nevertheless, their courtship was nipped in the bud by Mary’s mother and father who both prohibited her from speaking to any of the workers, and in particular to Hugh McKee.

She had no lack of suitors over the following years, and her parents did their best to introduce her to suitable candidates for marriage, yet none made Mary feel what she felt when she was close to Hugh. There was something about his smile and the way he looked at her that melted her from the inside out. No doubt that marriage to any of the prospects her parents brought to her would have given her a life of leisure, but she wasn’t interested in any of them, or in that kind of a lifestyle.

Hugh and Mary started seeing each other on the sly, meeting where they knew no one could discover their indiscretions. When she was with him, she lost herself in his wit and in his ability to make her laugh. Perhaps this is what most attracted her to him. She found herself giggling at his antics, which only encouraged him to be even sillier, until they would sometimes both be literally be rolling on the ground with laughter.

Whenever a new suitor would come by to try and impress her, all she could think about was Hugh. In her eyes, there was no upper and lower class involved in their relationship. Instead, she saw a man who made her feel good and who cared little for what others thought about him. On the contrary, those who came to see her trying to gain her interest, seemed to be in constant competition. Each doing their best to impress each other and themselves.

After refusing several marriage proposals, her father finally took a stand, telling her that he would find a suitable mate for her and that would be the end of the story. After all, she was already almost 20, and, according to him anyway, almost an old maid. She cried for days, refusing to eat and remaining in her room, not talking to anyone. When she did come out, she was reserved and monosyllabic in her replies to questions about her condition and how she felt.

She sent word to Hugh to meet him at one of their favorite places along the lake. She was distraught and worried that her father would make good on his promise to make her marry someone of his choosing. While they had talked before of marriage, of having kids, and growing old together, Hugh feared that if he did approach her father, that old man MacDonnell, would simply get rid of him, sending him away to never come back again. He couldn't bear the thought of never seeing Mary again. She insisted that Hugh talk to her father, finally giving him the courage to ask her hand in marriage.

Hugh went to see MacDonnell, and was at first unable to gain his audience. Hugh persisted and was finally able to talk to the old man, who was incredulous with his proposal, once he heard what Hugh had to say. He couldn't believe the audacity of the boy. Nevertheless, Hugh was unflappable, telling Mary's father he would provide for her and give her a good life. When asked how he planned on doing that, being little more than a nomadic cattle herder, Hugh firmly told the older man he wasn't exactly sure how he was going to do it, but that he had no doubt he could provide for her every need, just as he had for himself since being orphaned at an early age.

Old man MacDonnell was impressed with the young man's composure and the way he handled himself under scrutiny. He had to admit that over the years Hugh had been loyal, doing everything he had been asked to do, and then some, while at the same time admiring the courage it took for the boy to come talk to him, particularly after knowing about his position regarding any kind of relationship between Hugh and his daughter. After talking it over with his wife, they finally agreed to give their blessing to the union. As a part of their dowry for Mary, they were given a plot of land to work nearby.

Mary tells the story to Hugh, while the others keep vigil. Though Samuel has heard this story many times before, hearing his mother tell it now to his unconscious father, it is as if Hugh were listening to it for the first time. Despite his young age and lack of experience, he gets the point. His parents' union, and subsequent marriage, was based on love, not convenience.

Then something happens that each of them will remember for the rest of their lives. Hugh O'Neill himself comes to their house to pay his respects, and to thank Hugh McKee for his service. By now word had spread throughout the territory, not only of their resounding victory, sending the English back with their tails between their legs to Armagh, but also of McKee's bravery in taking down Bagenal, even after having his leg almost cut off. As is often the case, as the story is told again and again, certain details are left out, while others are enhanced, but the underlying fact remains unchanged. Captain Hugh McKee is a hero in their eyes.



After speaking with the two soldiers who accompanied McKee from the battlefield, O'Neill goes into the bedroom, kneels down beside the bed, says a prayer for Hugh, making the sign of the cross, as he does so.

After he is finished, O'Neill stands up and addresses Mary directly, politely taking her hands in his as she sits beside her husband on the bed.

"I will never forget what Captain McKee did out on the battlefield ma'am," he says to Mary. "He is a very brave man and his actions will not go unrewarded. Besides, he is my name brother, and now we are forever bound together in spirit due to his actions to protect our freedom."

Samuel has heard of Hugh O'Neill many times before, but this is the first time he sees him in person, and he seems larger than life. There is something about the way the man carries himself, his presence, and his charisma, which command respect. Watching as others give reverence to this legendary man, and how they react to his presence remains etched in the boy's mind.

"I understand your father is John MacDonnell?" he asks Mary.

She nods.

"The good Lord knows I have had my differences with the MacDonnells over the years, but as you know, we've now come together now to get those English bastards out of our lands."

Mary says nothing, instead paying attention as best as she can, given her grief, to this important man who has played such an important role in their fight to remain independent from the Crown.

"We have to realize that we are not each other's enemies," O'Neill says. "The enemy is the English who are trying to force their way of life upon us. If they want to go against God's will and all go to hell, then let them, but I will be damned if I let them come into our lands and into our homes to convert us to their god forsaken ways!

"We must remain strong and united in the face of this threat to our independence. For hundreds of years, we have lived on our own terms, and we can't let that change. Of course, we have had our own problems, and no one is beyond reproach. We are, after all, mere mortals, but as God is my witness, I plan to defend our lands and our rights until the day I die."

When O'Neill is finished with his brief rant, he turns back to McKee, and leans over him, making the sign of the cross once again, this time on his forehead. "God bless you Hugh McKee, you have done a great service to all of us, and as I've already told your wife, your bravery will not go unrewarded." He stands up, bows slightly to Mary, turns on his heels and is out the door.

Immediately after O'Neill leaves, the priest who has been summoned by the doctor enters the room. Upon seeing him, Mary once again begins crying uncontrollably.

The doctor takes Mary gently by the shoulders, "I've done everything I can for him, Mary. He lost too much blood. I'm sorry but there's nothing else we can do for him." The anguish of not being able to save her husband resonates in his voice as he speaks.

As last rites are administered, everyone except for the priest, Mary and the doctor leave the room. Samuel waits outside with everyone else while the priest performs his ritual. The mood is somber and everyone is tired from the emotion of the ordeal. Since finding out his father was injured, Samuel feels like an eternity has passed, though in reality it's only been hours.

Samuel isn't old enough to understand a lot of things, but he does understand one thing for sure. What has just transpired is going to have a huge impact on his life. When he thinks about all the things his father does, he can't imagine how they are going to try and take his place and manage now that he's gone.

As it is, they will have to make due. As the youngest of his siblings, likely he won't have to bear the brunt of what's to come, but he knows he will surely have to help much more than he has so far. For now, the thoughts of what might be, or what already was, seem too murky and dark to hold the boy's attention for any period of time.

All he knows is that he feels a tremendous sense of emptiness and sadness enveloping his body and his senses. It's a feeling he will never forget. Samuel is numb by the time the priest finally comes out of the room with his final blessing:

"May Captain Hugh McKee rest in peace."