

HIDDEN PROMISES

By Annay Dawson

Hidden Promises

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Prologue

Dear Lord, let this be the right decision, Maria fidgeted with her rosary beads. She often prayed often and believed He heard, but right now she was terrified. She was totally out of her element.

As this young woman sat alone at the bench in a small border town in Mexico she had an old, small, multicolored bag with her and her long black hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail. Waiting on the bench at the bus station she contemplated what she was about to do. She was going to Phoenix. She had nothing left here for her. While scrubbing floors the woman she had worked with showed her a letter from her bother. In his letter he had told her to go to Nogales and to wait at the bus station there, a coyote would find her. She would need to bring about two thousand dollars. Her brother had sent her the money, a little bit at a time. His sister wasn't interested in crossing to the US and had used the money for other things. Her feeling about the trip was that it would be too dangerous.

She had never seen so many different types of people in her life before. Maybe if she had made it into college, maybe if her family hadn't been murdered. Life was supposed to be much better, maybe she would find it in the States, according to that letter. It had been a hard decision, one she might regret, but after the decision was made there was no looking back. Now here she sat in the bus station with what could be thousands of people around her all looking for the same thing or plotting to take what they had left. Letting the rosary beads slip through her fingers she kept her looking over the area.

From behind her a strange man threw his leg over the bench making her jump and then followed through with his other leg, stepping the rest of the way over. Making himself more than comfortable by sidling up close beside her, and her a little more than uncomfortable. Dressing in a fairly new leather jacket, dark glasses and a baseball cap turned backwards to hide all but a bit of his black hair did nothing to hide his slimy character. He was only about five feet ten inches tall, and he weighed in at about one hundred eighty or ninety pounds. She wasn't physically scared of him, but she wasn't positive about his intentions either.

"Where're you headed?" she sat eyes straight ahead, not sure whether or not to answer

his question. "Wherever you're going, I can get you there. What's your name?"

"Maria, and I want to go to the States," he didn't look like any official she had seen.

"The States right," he leaned close enough for her to feel his breath on her cheek and smell the peppers he had eaten.

"Yes," she wanted to leave, run, he made her skin crawl.

"Five hundred dollars will get you across the border safe and sound," Maria fiddled with her bag. She had been told it would cost her nearly two thousand dollars and here was some one that would take her for five hundred. Doubt started to grow and show on her face, and she wasn't gullible. She looked at him again, "No catches, I just want you to get there. I can find you a job and then I get the first two months pay. Most of the time I make more money that way."

Even though she still had doubt niggling at the corners of her mind she couldn't help but think that she may need the money she had for other things. His offer of finding her a job could be useful since she would be an undocumented worker.

"Okay," she replied tentatively as he smiled and grabbed her bag. He stood up and turned before she had a chance to change her mind.

"Follow me," and he walked off with her bag not even glancing back at her. Maria got up and followed him, not sure of what was coming next, and she was too afraid to ask.

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She sat on a rocky outcrop out in the mist of the ocean waves and waited. Maybe that wasn't the right word. It was the third day that week she had sat in the same place, at the same time, and was unable to meditate. Her ability to meditate had once saved her. The warmth of the sun on her face, the mist from the waves that cooled her and the steady beat of the waves on the rocks should have seduced her into a deep meditative state, but she felt nothing.

This had become her favorite spot over the last six months, but not anymore, and it was way past frustrating. She looked for a loose rock or shell to throw. Not seeing anything, she realized that she must have pitched them all off earlier this week. Turning, she looked back up the cliff and into the windows of the apartment that she shared with Ward. Low and behold there he was, on the balcony, and she realized that the source of her current problems originated with him. He didn't look down as Jan stared up at him, and he didn't smile. She couldn't quite read his mind, but she was sure he was reading hers. His range was greater.

'Damn you,' she thought as she unfolded her legs and slid down into the cool waves. Determinedly, she walked back through the surf, the waves pushing her back to shore. Jan marched towards the steps. It had been more than five months now since they had been on an assignment, any assignment. In fact, the last assignment they had worked on had freed her from the department that Ward had left over two years before. Leaving the department wasn't the plan, but as the events unfolded she saw an unfavorable pattern playing out before her.

It was that bureaucracy she learned she couldn't live with any more. Ward, her husband and true champion, had been caught in the department's web. Even though he had warned her, she allowed herself to become entangled in it as well. They both ended up leaving the department for the same reasons. She was no longer a mindless peon following orders ready to believe what they told her. The last assignment had almost cost both of them their lives.

The Paranormal Enforcement Department, or 'PED' for short, had identified and cultivated them both as mind readers in college. It had started out as an experiment by the CIA in the sixties, long before they were commissioned. Although all experiments had supposedly been stopped for lack of results, they hadn't. The PED had gone underground and taken on a life of its own. They were sure the department would go on for a long time.

The sad thing was that by joining the PED, they literally had given up their life, all aspects of it. Agents inside the department were removed from regular society, forever

belonging to the department. After unofficially leaving, Jan and Ward could never go back to who they were, or live normally without the department looking at them like human guinea pigs. Until six months ago, Ward had been the only agent to live outside of their control. Instead, Ward and Jan had chosen to live life as hunted people. Their only crime was in wanting a life.

Now, fully recovered from the injuries that assignment had brought both of them, Jan knew she was ready, itching, to get back to work, and back into life. Although Ward had not talked about it to her, she knew that he had turned down three assignments over the last few months. Once Ward had left the department, he had set up shop for himself. Picking his assignments based on need and not always on payment. Sometimes they paid him; sometimes the results were pay enough. What she found out was that most of the time he took no pay.

Somewhere out there, there were three people that wouldn't get his help because he had said no, because of her. The people he chose to help sometimes existed only on the edge of society, with no other advocate to come to their aide; he was their last hope, their only hope. This was the part of the career change that intrigued Jan and finally drew her in.

She walked up the beach deep in thought. Jan knew that Ward had received another request three days ago. She wasn't sure, but from what she had picked incidentally from his thoughts, she knew the request had come from Eddy and he hadn't replied. Putting all the pieces together, it was no wonder that she could no longer meditate, and she wondered if he could.

Each time Jan had tried all she could see was faceless people still looking for someone to help, and what had they been doing the last few months? They sat here, hidden, doing nothing, safe from the world. Jan's thoughts twisted around to Ward, and what she hadn't been able to read. Was he afraid to lose her? Six months ago he almost had. What he needed to remember was that she had almost lost him as well. And how many other times had she nearly lost him without even knowing it? The thoughts darted through her mind, as she got closer to the cement stairs that wound their way up the cliff's side to their patio. What Jan needed to explain to Ward, was that he was at risk of losing her again, but this time from stifling her. She needed to do what she did best, and so did he.

Focused and intent on what she was about to do, she had almost gotten back to the steps when she heard Ward move through the foliage. Stopping, she read his mind, 'Running,' and knew what was coming next. Jan looked at the gap in the brush just as Ward walked through. Ward was about six feet tall, toned, proportionally perfect, and nicely muscled. Jan never got tired of looking at him, he was easy on the eyes, and with the time they had spent in Mexico, at their beach hideaway, he had become evenly bronzed as well. It wasn't his body she was tired of skirmishing with it was his mind.

He walked over to her and gently kissed her on the cheek. He knew there was a problem, and when she didn't reciprocate he read just enough of her thoughts to see what was coming next. He also read enough to avoid it.

'Ready to go for a run?' He silently asked as he completely avoided the issue. He had read that she had not meditated for the past week and the reasons why she suspected she hadn't. He had also not meditated for the last week, and his conscious was also bothering him, for the very same reasons. He had read everything in her mind and she didn't know how close she really was to the truth. Soon she would though. Ward knew he couldn't stray from his plan,

no matter how much he wanted to. He had to be sure, very sure, before they took the next step. Ward left the subject alone for long enough, afraid that he would have to deal with the consequences of his actions, his conscious, as well as hers. It hadn't been the right time until now.

"Okay," and that was all Jan had to say. They went off down the beach at a steady pace for about ten minutes. The talent Jan and Ward shared, one that had been developed, used and abused by the government, was strangely not in use.

Jan and Ward had been empathetically sensitive all their lives. The government had harvested them, as well as others, in college to train them to become exceptional mind readers. Some had made it, others had not. Jan and Ward were now sure that the ones who had not made it into the department might have been the lucky ones.

Now, the tables were turned. They were the ones who where on the run from the government and society. They could live in neither and were needed in both. Today they ran for exercise and away from the people they had once been. And on this run, unlike the others they had taken on many other days, they chose not to share words or thoughts. They were avoiding the obvious, for the last five or so months they had been on the run from everything and everyone, even themselves. They couldn't run from themselves much longer.

Jan ran along beside Ward and started to wonder if they would ever work again. She questioned if he could make the jump from protecting her, back into working with her. Jan had not tried to discover how any of his jobs were presented to him. She was pretty sure that his network of friends, or associates, was fairly vast. She was also quite sure that only important jobs were presented to him. These were people in great need, with no one else to turn to, but he had chosen to stay hidden away for a lot longer than he had ever done before all because of her.

All of a sudden Jan could feel a gentle tug at her thoughts and knew that Ward had started to look in on what she was thinking. She didn't try to hide her thoughts. She watched his pace increase as he realized, from her thoughts, what was coming next. She had a bunch of questions; ones he didn't want to answer, ones he wasn't going to answer yet. Jan kept up pace with him as he started to pull away from her. They ran, slowly increasing the pace for another five minutes, before Jan finally said something.

"You can't run away from this, from me," Jan was keeping up with him and not even winded yet.

"I'm not running away from anything," Ward calmly stated as he continued to increase the pace.

"I know you read my mind, saw my questions," Jan took a breath, "We need to talk."

"No good conversation ever started with those words," and Ward increased his pace to a full run leaving her behind.

"You can fly, but not that high Eagle," she yelled from behind. Eagle had been his code name from the department. She followed in short order, this time mad as hell.

With one burst of speed, she caught up with him and leapt out tackling him from behind. They rolled a couple times on the beach then came to an abrupt stop. Jan was on top, effectively pinning him down, his hands above his head. Ward stared into her eyes for a moment about to say something, and then said nothing. Jan stared intently into his eyes.

“We need to talk,” Jan stated again, with a firm hold on Ward.

“So I would guess,” Ward lay motionless on the sand, not trying to get up, yet every muscle tense, readied.

“When was the last time you meditated?” Jan stayed on top.

“A few days ago, why?” Ward was surprised by this first question but stayed nonchalant.

“For the last week I haven’t been able to meditate even though I have tried,” she looked into his eyes, “Want to tell me why?”

“I have a feeling I won’t have to. You’re going to tell me,” he said with a smug look on his face.

“Alright. You keep turning down jobs, and it’s because of me,” Jan relaxed her right arm for a second. That was all it took. Taking advantage of that split second, Ward was on top of Jan before she had time to stop him.

“You’re arrogant, you’re right, and you’re gorgeous when you’re mad. I have turned down jobs, but that was when we were both still recovering,” Ward shifted on top of her to get a better hold. Jan knew part of what he said was true, but not all. He had just got a job in the other day that was weighing heavy on his mind, and she had the feeling he was about to turn it down as well.

“Have you forgotten? I can read your mind just as easily. What about the job you’ve just gotten in?” Ward’s face hardened only for a split second before softening again. If Jan had not been watching carefully she would have missed it. His grip relaxed, but Jan didn’t take advantage of it.

“How did you know about that?” he asked calmly, as his mind betrayed the conflict within.

“It’s been on your mind a lot lately, and I just happened to pick up on it a few days ago as it floated through the air. What’s it about?” Her voice softened to encourage him to open up to her, the way they used to before she nearly died.

He had known they needed to set these boundaries if they were ever going to work together. Before now, whenever they had worked together it had been by orders, never by choice. Ward looked into her eyes, and then let his anger sail away on the next wave that traveled back out to the ocean. Ward rolled off her and lay quietly beside her on the warm sand of the beach. They stared up at the blue sky and wispy clouds.

Jan wasn’t going to rush him. If he told her now, or in twenty minutes, it wouldn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was that he told her. This step would bring them even closer and she could tell that as she lay quietly beside him.

‘Eddy e-mailed the other day,’ he chose to let her read his thoughts so that if anyone was around they couldn’t be overheard. ‘Thought I might be interested in this job since no one else is doing anything about it. Seems like there are a group of coyotes that have found a new way of increasing their profits. After taking their fee to get the people across, these coyotes just make these people disappear, all of them women, and no one knows where they are going. Usually, in the past, the relatives would get ransom notes while they are held in a drop house, but they aren’t getting any of those from the coyotes either. This is what has made some people nervous. There are usually bunches of people that go missing. Not too unusual as the people who crossover illegally would rather not be found by immigration.

'The underground network usually connects the families sooner or later, but a few of the relatives that have talked with Eddy say that they haven't heard from them since before they crossed the border. They are sure something has gone horribly wrong. They are hoping someone can find their family members that are missing, but it is difficult, as they have no one they can turn to for help. They can't go to the officials for fear of getting sent back and then they would be in an even worse situation than they are now. This group of illegals are pretty scared as a whole and even more so with what has happened,' now Jan knew why they weren't meditating. It was a pretty heavy case to say no to. It would mean saying no not just to this group, but also to Eddy. Not something that Ward would do.

'How did Eddy get the information?' Jan thought she knew. Eddy worked construction as a sideline and would easily meet up with lots of illegal aliens that were hired to work there as well. 'Works with some of the relatives. Overheard their worries while on the job. He started talking to a few of them. Not an easy task since he doesn't quite fit the mold of someone they would trust. He slowly got the information over the last week or so. Seems as if he might have some good information,' Ward knew that Eddy would never contact him unless he had enough information.

'The leads could be pretty cold by now,' there was no doubt in Jan's mind about that; 'It could make the job a bit more difficult. Not impossible, just difficult.' She looked at the passing seagull and then spoke, "Are we going to do the job?"

"No," and just as quickly as he said the word, his hand came up, effectively blocking the next words coming out of her mouth, as well as her thoughts. He had to play his cards right at this point. "To do the job properly your life would be put in too much danger. I can't choose to do that to you. Plus you're right, the leads are too cold," now he put up the blocks in his mind to keep her out as well.

"Isn't the first part for me to decide?" Jan turned onto her side balancing on her arm and looked at Ward, studying the line of his jaw. Jan already knew that Ward had closed off areas of his mind to her and she wanted to know why.

"Another time when there are no right answers, huh?" Ward closed his eyes. This was the hard part for Ward, but he kept his focus. He knew what he needed to do and he needed her to be sure of the path she was about to take.

'What do you mean?' She forced her thoughts back into his mind, 'The only right answer is to find these people and put a couple of coyotes out of business for good. It may not stop what's happening completely, but it just may slow it down for a while. It's bad enough people are forced to cross the border in this way, but to make the journey even more dangerous, that's why we need to stop it. And stop it now. Haven't we always said we wanted to make a difference? Isn't that one of the reasons why I'm here?' Jan looked into Ward's eyes as his head turned toward her, and made sure he was looking back into hers, neither one was new to the underground world and the risks. Without breaking her gaze, she needed to make sure he understood what she was about to say.

"If I had wanted to retire, I could have stayed at the department," Jan knew those words had hit the soft spot she wanted, it wasn't fair play, but then again he wasn't playing fair either. There was another agenda here she hadn't seen to begin with. She could feel Ward's mind tighten around that thought and then she felt how he let it go along with his anger. She just

stared at him. He needed to know that by not letting her work, he just might lose her.

The problem was that Ward did know it, and didn't like it. He closed his eyes, he knew what was coming next, "And if you think I am going to spend my time raising a herd of children like Mama Garcia suggests, you need to think again. That's not us. We were meant to change lives for the better. We were given the skills to help and you're just going to throw that all away?" Jan sat up and crossed her legs, looking at Ward's closed eyes.

Mama Garcia, as they both affectionately called her, was the wife of the beach property's caretaker. Ward had once helped his family with a problem they had had with their son and a nasty group of people. Now, they took care of the house and apartment that Ward and Jan owned. Jan and Ward lived in the apartment, and the Garcias lived in the house and kept the secret.

Jan wasn't sure what bothered her most. Was it the fact that Ward might think he was in control of her life, or that someone needed to control it? Was it that he just lay there hoping the whole conversation would be washed out to sea? Or was it that there was still something else, something he wasn't letting her in on.

"Let's go," Ward's voice was flat, lifeless. He swiftly got to his feet and started down the beach again at a quick pace. He knew she wasn't there yet. His mind was filled with thoughts and emotions, all of which Jan was picking up on until she got a message, 'Stay out,' plain and simple, and that was the only hint she needed. He was focusing on a thought that she was not welcome to see. She followed Ward back to the hideaway at the steady pace he set and she let him keep his thoughts to himself for now. Jan worried that this may signal a change in the relationship between them, a change that she had been warned about by an old and dear friend.

Rob, her former partner in the department once told her that Ward would never be happy with any one thing, especially a relationship, for long term. As the years past, Rob had become more of a father figure, wanting what was best for her. At first it had been her happiness, later, he got protective about the events and sincerity in her relationship. He had known about them, but he hadn't known about the marriage.

The Ward she had come to know and love, though, had never showed tendencies that would even lead her to believe he was anything but trustworthy and true. In days of old he would have been called a gentleman, but that was not a persona he had shown to anyone but her. Even after he left the department as a wanted man, he kept in contact with her, couldn't leave her. Each time they had met, it had been dangerous for him. In fact, he had begged her many times to come and join him, to work with him, to make her own choices.

Jan knew they worked well together, played well together, loved well together and that was a bonus. Jan knew that leaving the department and working with Ward was a big step, for both of them. In the department they had been told what case they were to work on and who they worked with. Would they be able to transition into this equal partnership, and share the risk? Now, was the first time that he had ever given Jan cause to worry about whether he was ready for this change as well. Jan was deep in these thoughts when she felt his thought drift onto the edge of her mind.

'If you want the job, we'll do it, but,' he couldn't bring himself to say it, only through his thoughts could he tell her. Even with the 'but' it was enough for Jan. Ward had spent the time

on the way home contemplating just how he thought the rest of their lives would be now that the future, a future, had finally presented itself to them. It was hard. She was right; he really did enjoy working as a free agent, and the time he had taken off from it had been hard. He had missed the work. He had also missed working with her, even though he had enjoyed the time off with her. He smiled as he thought about the days, and the nights. Ward also knew there were things he could have done, maybe even should have done. Now she knew the jobs were coming in. He was also sure, really sure, she wanted to work on them with him. They could now become a team. He had wanted this so much and now it was right in front of him, just one last step.

There were lots of ways to lose someone. He knew that more than any one else. One sure way was to stifle them. If he stifled her, he would lose her and not just for a while, but forever. He had thought about some of the jobs he had done after leaving the department. How would she have felt all those times if she had known what he had been up to? He didn't want to think about that. As he approached the steps she jumped in front of him, blocking his way.

"Do you mean it? I don't want to do a job, any job, halfway," Jan stood there and waited for his answer. Ward could see the spark of life in her eyes, the smile that just barely touched the corner of her lips, but what he really saw was the woman he had fallen in love with.

"Yes," although he couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes after he said it. There was the last bit of realization she had to reach yet. He had gone through it, now it was her turn.

"Are you okay with this?" she could tell that something was bothering him. His eyes avoided hers, his muscles were taut and his face expressionless.

"About as okay as I will ever be with it. But you're right," he moved around her and went up the steps, "We've always thrived on this type of work, and it is what we do best, and we'll do it together," there, it was done. She still had one last step, and Ward would have to let her get there on her own. Soon.

Jan knew this was the partnership he had always promised and what she had given up everything for, but there was still something he wasn't telling her. That was bothersome. When would they get to that open and honest communication? They couldn't work together if he wasn't willing to share. People got killed that way. She took a deep breath, and the sense of calm that had escaped her for days began to creep in as she carefully followed him up the damp stairs. Jan remembered the mantra that Ward had needed and repeated as she had recovered, patience, but just how much longer could they wait?

Even as Jan and Ward walked back up the steps into what they called their safe place they knew that Mexico was not a place everyone would call safe. For many, braving the dangerous and illegal crossing into the states and leaving Mexico was their only hope. It would give them a chance at life, for them and their family. Over the last few years the borders in each state had been reinforced, all except for one, Arizona. The desert was a harsh and brutal place, even in spring. Daytime temperatures could reach into the nineties and nighttime temperatures back into the fifties. Without protection it wasn't the place to be, boiling and then freezing. Most knew this but with the stronger border enforcements on the neighboring states, it left them very little choice of where there were going to try and cross. Arizona was still the best place to make it across the border and not get caught.

Things were changing though and that meant using coyotes, or smugglers, to increase the chances of success to get across safely. Most coyotes were open about what they did here in Mexico and they knew the type of people to look for. Prowling the bus stations they could almost be assured of a couple of fares.