



A Promise Kept



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Dylan Johns made a promise to Elena Morales that went unkept... or did it?

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The day was cold, wet, and windy as Dylan made his way towards the entrance of St. Luke's. It was his last stop before he'd have to give up. He'd checked every other hospital in New York City already, with absolutely no luck; if this one didn't pan out, he had nowhere else to go.

It would have been easier if Morales weren't such a common last name in the Spanish-speaking community; asking about a young man with that last name was like asking if anyone named "Johnson" happened to be staying in the hospital. It would have been easier still if he had a *first* name to go with it, but Elena had never said it.

And of course, it would have been easier altogether if Elena Morales hadn't been a *stowaway*.

He pushed into the shelter of the hospital lobby and shrugged out of his coat. He never felt comfortable in it. Olympus Cruises, the owners of the *Poseidon*, had put him and the others up in a fancy Manhattan hotel, providing them with clothes and meals and *counseling* while everything got sorted out, but none of it was very comfortable for him. He wasn't sure why, but it felt to him like his clothes wouldn't fit well, and food wouldn't taste right, until this was done.

Until he kept his promise to Elena, however he could.

Thinking about her was frequently painful. She'd been so innocent, and so afraid and – as much as he'd *had* to at the time – he regretted shouting at her. Claustrophobia was something he'd never experienced, himself, not even after weeks at a time on a cramped submarine, but he knew how brave she'd had to be, how brave she'd *been*. Among his many regrets was that he never got to tell her he knew that.

Just gave her one kiss, he mused. And a promise that can never really be kept.

He missed her. He hadn't really gotten to know her well, but he missed her, and he wished he could have known her better. She'd intrigued him from the moment they met, from the moment he realized what she had to be.

"I'm not so much of a rules person," she'd said, even as he was noticing the comparatively shabby clothing she wore, completely unlike the things the privileged young women on the cruise would wear. It had only taken a few questions to confirm his suspicions. And she'd intrigued him.

He'd been moving from cruise to cruise, and ship to ship, for months, and actually *interesting* women were remarkably rare. Meeting one who had an agenda *other* than making the ship her personal Love Boat was unusual enough that those were the only ones he even *noticed* anymore. She'd been a bit *young* for his tastes, and in fact he'd swiftly come to think of her as a little sister, but...

She'd been a kindred outlaw spirit and he missed her. He'd *failed* her.

Sometimes at night he woke up, his heart pounding, her voice tearfully echoing in his ears. *"I'm gonna die... I'm gonna die..."* He'd reach up as though maybe, if he could somehow catch her before she vanished, grab hold of her, he could pull her back into the world of the living. Then the last mists of sleep would clear away and he was left knowing that she was gone... that she'd died exactly the way she'd feared she would. Trapped, enclosed... and alone. He hadn't managed to bring himself to speak of it to the counselor. Not of that, and definitely not of Valentin. Some things couldn't be said; simply had to be borne, and borne to the grave.

Putting his expensive but strangely ill-fitting new coat over his arm, Dylan walked over to the main desk. The woman on duty looked tired and annoyed; a definite minus given how many blanks she might have to fill in for him in order to get him any useful information. He gave her his most charming smile.

"Yes, I was wondering if you could help me. I'm looking for a young man, last name Morales, who I think might be a patient here. I know that's not a lot of information... he's in his teens, or maybe his early twenties. All I really know about him is that he's sick, he's in a New York City hospital, and he has an older sister named Elena who... asked me to give him a message."

The woman – Ms. Stowe, according to her name-tag – actually listened to his whole spiel without interrupting, but her brows slowly rose up. "And she never told you his name?"

"She didn't have time. This..." He swallowed and took the plunge. The headlines had been full of the tragedy for the last two weeks. "This was on board the *Poseidon*."

Ms. Stowe stared at him. "I *thought* you looked familiar. You were on the TV."

There'd been a time, when he was younger, when he'd thought that being on TV, having people know his name and face, would be amazing. Now the thought just left a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Yeah...”

“You had that cute little boy. Is that your son?”

Now *there* was something that didn’t make him feel ill. Conor and Maggie had become his light. He shook his head, but a hint of a *real* smile – the first of the *day* – crept over his lips. “If I’m lucky, he might be someday.”

Ms. Stowe began typing something into her computer. “Well, let’s see what we have in here, okay? Morales, right? Hmmmmmm...”

He waited, hoping.

“No, he’s too old... let’s see... still too old. Maybe her brother’s already checked out. It’s been two weeks, hasn’t it? Let’s go back and look...”

Dylan felt a strange relief move through him. It had taken lots of smooth-talking to get most of the other hospitals to look back at discharged patients for him. *Maybe I should’ve traded on the sinking’s notoriety sooner*, he thought, and promptly felt a little queasy.

When she looked up with a sad expression, for a moment, he thought she hadn’t found anything at all.

“I’m sorry, Mr...?”

“Johns.” What the hell was he going to do now? How could the kid have been in *none* of the New York City hospitals?

“We had a nineteen-year-old Manuel Morales here, from December sixteenth to the thirty-first, but... well...” Ms. Stowe swallowed. “He was being treated for Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, and... I’m afraid he didn’t make it.”

At first her words were just that: words, with little meaning. Just information. Then the full impact of what she was telling him struck him like the wave all over again. He clutched hard at the counter, his knuckles turning white, as his legs threatened to buckle on him the way they had when he realized Elena was dead.

Her brother was dead, too. Manuel Morales...

“*He was always so small...*” A voice he’d never *really* hear again seemed to sob that in his ear one more time.

“Did...” His voice cracked on the words. “Did he have family? Someone I can contact, maybe?”

“Yes, his parents.” For a moment Ms. Stowe hesitated. Then she picked up a pad and scribbled something down on it. Tearing off the page, she folded it and handed it to him. “I never gave you this.”

Somehow that managed to make his mouth quirk into something almost like a smile. “No, you never did. Thank you for your help, though.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Johns. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you better news.”

“It’s okay.” He almost walked away at that point. He was starting to, when he felt a jet of cold move through him and he turned around again. “Did you say he died on New Years *Eve*?”

Ms. Stowe glanced at the screen again and nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

His mouth was dry. It wasn’t possible, was it? “What *time*? Does it say?”

“Um...” She tapped several more keys. “Eleven-thirty p.m.”

My God.

“Thank you,” he managed after a moment. “Again.”

Dylan didn’t even try to make it to the door. He sat down in one of the lobby chairs, staring at the folded paper in his shaking hand, feeling an odd, superstitious dread move through him. Fate played some cruel games... and had a knife-sharp sense of humor sometimes.

Until it was cut short, the itinerary of the London-to-New York leg of the cruise had been a week long with a stop in San Sebastián, where Elena had probably come aboard. Once the ship had headed into the transatlantic crossing they’d begun to drop through time zones. Every morning at two, the crew of the *Poseidon* had reset the ship clocks, dropping back another hour. Ships’ passengers suffered very little “jet lag” for that reason. They’d still been more than a day and a half away from New York City, and two time zones ahead, when the wave struck.

Manuel Morales had died at eleven-thirty, New York time, but it had been one-thirty on the ship. Right when they’d been crawling through the air vent. Right when he’d been making his promise to Elena, the promise that he thought had gone unkept, that she would see her little brother again.

But it *had* been kept; he just hadn’t known it. Half an hour later, she’d *joined* him.

It was a cold, cruel comfort indeed.

As he pocketed the paper Ms. Stowe had given him, he hoped that – in time – it would be comfort enough.