



Like So Much
Hot Air

Kathleen Hayes

Free Short Fiction

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By Kathleen Hayes

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Dedicated to Sarah.
She wrote the prompt that inspired the story.

Thank you to my wonderful sister who reads everything I write. Also thank you to my friends KU and MR for their knowledge of Iowa and the Balloon Fiesta respectively and for their general awesomeness and support.

Present

I looked down at my bloody pant leg and groaned quietly to myself. My jeans had a ragged tear down the side of my left calf, and I dreaded pulling the two pieces of red-stained denim apart to see what damage had been done to my actual leg. There was enough blood that it was staining my footprints, so I knew it wouldn't be pretty.

Damn it. How in the hell had they found me here? I'd fled 2,300 miles and had been living essentially off the grid for almost 2 months.

I took a deep breath, pushing that thought to the back of my mind as I braced myself to look at my leg. I had to lean my head against the wall and take several deep breaths to avoid passing out at the sight. There was a 5 inch laceration marring the leg, and the stark smears of dirt and blood against pale skin were enough to make my head spin. I'd careened into a wall with an exposed screw or some such as I had looked over my shoulder in order to see how much distance I had put between myself and the goons chasing me.

They were far enough back that they were tracking me by the gap I left in the crowd rather than by sight. That was good at least.

"Jason," The voice was clear over the murmur of the crowd, calling my name in a teasing singsong. "Jason, where are you?"

The last time I had heard that voice, I hadn't known. I'd thought he was just one of my boyfriend's many cousins. Now I knew better. That voice belonged to Tommy Doherty, one of the top enforcers for the Boston Irish Mob.

Two Months Ago

My breath whooshed out of me as Shea slammed me up against the wall. His mouth latched onto my neck like a starving leech searching for breakfast. A month ago the slick glide of his tongue over my pulse point and the rough burn of his stubble against my throat would have had me panting and ready to be taken. Instead, my mind was

wandering – a sure sign that Shea and I were not meant to be. I'd just been too complacent until now to break it off. *Soon*. I sighed internally as I tried to focus, quite literally, on the matter at hand.

One hour and a mildly disappointing orgasm later, I found myself contemplating the pros and cons of counting the popcorn on Shea's ceiling and becoming increasingly frustrated by his erratic snoring. Eventually, I became annoyed enough that I rolled out of bed and wandered into Shea's office. I puttered around on his computer, checking my emails and reading Facebook updates from people I didn't care about. I was so bored it took me ten minutes to figure out I was in Shea's Facebook and not mine.

Disgusted with myself, I closed all the browser windows and moved the cursor towards the shutdown icon in the lower left hand corner. On its ponderous journey across the sculpted pecs that Shea used for his desktop background, though, the cursor scrolled over an unlabeled icon and a login box popped up.

I settled back in the chair, curiosity peaked. If only I had known then the chaos that little pop up box would cause in my life, I would have scrolled away and never thought twice about it. Alas, hindsight is always 20/20, as they say – and now sight is just about legally damn blind. Instead of walking away I found myself pondering what Shea was hiding behind a password. Porn? Confidential work files?

The username was already *auto-filled*, so all I had to do was figure out the password. Shea was always forgetting things like passwords and pins so it would be something obvious. I tried his birthday, forwards and backwards; my birthday, forwards and backwards; his address, with and without zip code; and a few other obvious things. Finally, it dawned on me. His username was *s.doherty* so I tried *ytrehod.s* in the password box and pressed enter.

A file sharing folder popped up.

I clicked on the first file, all the while knowing it was a bad idea. But the same they who know all about hindsight have another little gem – curiosity killed the cat. Sometimes I wonder why "they" had to be so literal in my case.

An accounting spreadsheet sprang forth from my ill-fated double click. I glanced at the headings and didn't recognize it as belonging to any of Shea's clients from the firm at which we both work. It may seem like I have the common sense of a box of rocks at this point, but if there is one thing I know, it is numbers. Having so many shiny, new, as yet undiscovered numbers sitting in front of me begging to be made sense of was a temptation beyond my ability to resist.

An hour later I was beginning to get an uneasy feeling at the base of my ribcage. Two hours later, that feeling had blossomed into full on nausea. Three hours later, it took everything in me not start hyperventilating. Somehow what looked like documentation of a massively huge money laundering scheme was in a password protected file on my boyfriend's computer. Not only that, but the same file also contained what looked like the books for various businesses ranging from completely above board to so illegal I could probably go to jail just for reading about them.

I allowed myself a moment to have a minor - ok major - internal freak out, and then took a deep breath. As calmly I could, I opened Shea's desk drawers and dug around until I found a couple of spare USB drives. I carefully copied all the files from the password protected folder onto both USB drives, planning to keep one for myself and send one to ... someone official. I'd figure that part out later.

Across town an alert popped up on Andy's screen to say that s.doherty had just made a copy of all the files he had access to. Since s.doherty was the youngest son of Old Man Charlie Doherty – head of the Doherty Family, more widely known as the Boston branch of the Irish Mob – that was a pretty damn large number of files.

Twenty minutes later Old Man Charlie growled, "Don't kill him but teach him a lesson he'll not soon forget," into the phone. As Tommy Doherty hung up, a grin spread across his face. Thinking about how much fun it would be to put that punk loser in his place, he grabbed his gun and stuffed it into his shoulder holster on his way out the door.

I was lucky – extremely freakin' lucky. That is the only reason I survived that night. I was in the corner of the living room, half hidden in the 3 foot space between the end of the couch and the wall when Tommy busted in Shea's front door and barreled in, gun aimed at chest height. I heard Shea's startled cry from the bedroom and ignored it. I hunched smaller into the corner and slowly pulled my laptop off the end table where I had left it to charge. After I heard Tommy slam open the bedroom door I shoved the computer into my hastily packed bag and, after a moment's hesitation, headed towards the fire escape on the off chance that Tommy had other goons guarding the hallway of Shea's apartment building.

I dropped the last six feet into the dark alleyway from the rickety ladder that had broken sometime in recent history. It was a sobering moment as I realized that I had no one I knew well enough, or who cared enough about me to help me escape from the mob. I might have said Shea but he was *in the freakin' mob* so he was out.

I just started walking, trying to keep my panic at bay. I had no idea how they knew, but there could be no other reason for *Cousin* Tommy to be waving a gun around in the middle of the night. And eventually he would figure out that Shea had been sleeping - that I was not in bed where I was meant to be - and he would put the pieces together.

For some reason I had this image in my head of one of those spy movies where they track people by their credit cards, and the people on the run can't get to their vast sums of money because whoever is chasing them will find them if they do. While I didn't have *vast* sums of money, I had a goodly sum. I began to formulate a plan. It probably fit better in a spy movie than in real life but at least it gave me something to focus on. I stopped at every ATM I passed and pulled out the maximum withdrawal amount. After wandering the streets of Boston for a good three hours, I had about \$2,000 in my pocket and the extent of my plan was exhausted.

I collapsed on a bench in the Common just as the first rays of sunlight were streaking across the predawn sky like brilliant scars. My clothes were a mess, my hair felt like it was sticking out in a hundred different directions and all my possessions I currently had access to were in a bag at my feet. If not for the \$2,000 in my pocket, I would have felt like Boston's newest homeless person. I closed my eyes as the reality of my situation wrapped itself around my brain and fear settled into me for the first time

since I had successfully evaded Tommy the night before. The chill of it seeped into my bones and I started to shake.

If I was right – and Tommy bursting into Shea's apartment with a gun drawn pointed pretty clearly in that direction – the *Mob* was going to be after me in the very near future. Whether my notions of the mob had any basis in reality or were completely fabricated from watching entirely too many episodes of the Sopranos, I figured I would get shot first on the off chance that the answers I might have given would have been the wrong ones.

I must have sat there, paralyzed by my fear, for a good hour or so because the next thing I knew someone had sat down next to me and there were early morning joggers and commuters dotting the sidewalks and trails nearby.

"Here," a rough voice next me said as I noticed a hand invading my personal space. I looked up and saw what appeared to be genuine homeless person handing me half a bagel. His blue eyes peered steadily out at me from under a ragged wool beanie, and the arm stretched between was covered in the stained sleeve of an ancient grey hoodie.

I shook my head and said, "I'm good. I don't need any food." The last thing I wanted to do was take some homeless guy's breakfast.

He smiled warmly at me and replied, "I didn't think you did, clean and pink as your skin is. You did look like you could use a friend though."

My jaw dropped open and I gaped at him for a good ten seconds before I managed to stammer out a "Thank you" and take the bagel he was offering.

He leaned back on the bench and stretched his arm across the back. We were just far enough apart that his hand didn't quite touch my shoulder. He took a deep breath and I could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "Beautiful morning innit?"

For a moment I couldn't respond, and then I followed his gaze to the sky where the newly risen sun was heralded by a cacophony of colors I had never really taken the time to notice before. Warmth was just beginning to spread across the ground, and I

couldn't help the laugh that escaped me as I watched a full grown duck trying to chase after a bunch of tiny ones near the water.

In that moment, as a new day was starting, sitting next to a complete stranger and holding half a stale bagel, I laughed until I cried. I didn't stop until it had turned to laughing again. When I had settled back down into a normal breathing rhythm again, the stranger shifted forward and got up to leave. He patted me briefly on the shoulder and said, "There you go, son" before he walked off into the park again.

After a few more moments on my bench, I grabbed my bag and decided I just needed to take things one step at a time. Step 1: Go to the bank and see if I can get any more money and then destroy my ATM and credit cards.

As I was striding purposefully down the sparsely populated sidewalk, I almost had a heart attack as I heard my phone ring in my pocket. I looked at the caller ID and was completely flabbergasted to see Shea's name flashing across the screen. After one ring's deliberation I pressed the *accept* button.

"Shea?"

"Oh My God, Jason. Where the fuck are you?" He sounded beyond panicked.

I put ice in my voice as I replied, "Not sure I want to tell you that right now. Especially after seeing Tommy bust into your apartment with a *gun* last night!"

"Jesus, Jason. Whatever you took, you gotta bring it back. Do you have any clue who you're dealing with? He'll kill you."

It was what I had been thinking all night but it didn't really help to have my fears confirmed. Rather than argue with Shea, which would have been pointless, I just hung up my phone and with a wince threw it in the nearest garbage can.

I went to my bank and withdrew another \$9,000 staying just below the \$10,000 reporting minimum and just about cleaning out my savings account. I stopped at a thrift store and bought some clothes. I bought a pay as you go cell phone, and then I

bought six bus tickets and four train tickets all going to different places across the US and Canada – all with my credit card.

Finally I hopped on the next local bus that stopped and rode it until I was on the outskirts of the city. I got off the bus as soon as I spotted a cheap used car lot. I spent a good chunk of my cash buying the cheapest car on the lot and a little bit more to not have the paperwork processed for a week.

I headed south for as long as I could stay awake, which turned out to be about 13 hours. I ended up somewhere in West Virginia. I traded my car for an even cheaper looking car at a local truck stop. I warned the guy that he might have trouble come after him but he pulled a fierce looking shot gun out of his trunk and just smiled at me. My nightmares will now be haunted by armed rednecks. I almost felt sorry for Tommy. But only almost.

I drove for two more days before the car died completely just inside the Albuquerque city limits. It was getting dark outside so I left the car abandoned in a parking lot and started walking. I must have looked to be in a right state when a few minutes later a stranger stopped me on the sidewalk and asked if I was all right.

It took a moment for my exhaustion addled brain to respond and before I could get a word out, a kind looking older man was leading me into the front of an adobe style building with some sort with blue painted wood trim. A tan face lined with wrinkles and laugh lines swam in and out of my vision as I collapsed into a chair in what looked like the lobby of a small hotel or inn. A few moments later a steaming cup of tea was pressed into my hands and I drank it without thought.

It was too hot, especially for the summer in the desert, but after just a few minutes, I felt the caffeine working its magic-like fire in my veins. It burned away the worst of the fog in my brain and I shook myself the rest of the way alert.

"Thanks," I said with a chagrined smile on my face.

"You look rode hard and put away wet, kid." I rankled at that for a moment but then I figured compared to him, I was a kid. He kept talking, "My name's Air."

"Jason." I said and held out my hand for him shake. Then, "Air?"

"Yup. My Luann always said I was full of hot air. Somehow it became my name and 40 years later I'm still stuck with it." He sounded like he was complaining, but he said the whole thing with a grin on his face. It made my heart ache just a little. I wasn't really broken up about Shea in particular. Just lonely in general. Really damn lonely.

"Hey, kid. Jason!" Air snapped his fingers in front of my face and I jerked out of my reverie. "Let's get you settled into a room for the night, ok?"

Without waiting for an answer he grabbed my bag from the floor beside and a keycard from the desk and herded me out a side door. I had enough presence of mind to mumble something about paying him but he brushed me off and said to come and see him when I woke up in the morning.

The sun was shining down from almost directly overhead when I finally woke up the next day. Despite being cool from an intense air conditioning unit in the room, I almost broke into a sweat just looking at the bright hot heat that baked Albuquerque in the summer. My shower damp hair dried completely in the arid heat during the short walk from my room to the front lobby.

Air looked up from the desk as the bell over the door rattled, announcing my entrance. "Well hey there sleepy head. You're looking much better today." He grinned at me in welcome.

I returned his smile and said, "Thanks." Now, normally I am not all that shy but there were very few topics of general chit chat that I could honestly engage in now that I was on the run for my life. Also, I am a terrible liar. I wracked my brain trying to find something to say to Air and probably appeared slightly slow as I opened and closed my mouth.

Air took the reins by interjecting, "You want some lunch?" into my pregnant silence. Thankful to be let off the conversational hook, even if it was just for a few seconds, I said, "Sure." He tossed me a sandwich in a ziploc baggie. After investigation, I learned it was turkey and swiss on rye with some sort of sauce or dressing I didn't recognize on it.

I took a bite and I don't know if it was because I was so hungry or because that sandwich was just that delicious but I groaned out loud in pure pleasure. "God, that's delicious." I managed to get out around a huge bite.

Air chuckled and nodded. When I finished he threw me another and then a bottle of water. I was just guzzling down the last of the water when I heard a stream of muttering rising in volume coming from behind the desk.

As I walked closer I was able to make out what Air was saying and it was a string of such ridiculous made up curse words that I would not have believed he was *actually* cursing if it wasn't for the pissed off glare he had leveled at the computer.

Trying to lighten the mood a bit I put my hands out in front of me with exaggerated slowness and said, "Take a deep breath and step away from the computer." He spun his glare on me but it didn't last long before he huffed and pushed his chair back. I walked around so I could see his screen.

"What's wrong?"

"The *frillarkin* thing doesn't make any sense."

I ignored his made up curse word and smiled because the screen was full of numbers in a spreadsheet. And that was something I could definitely do. I felt a little warmth fill my chest that I could do something to pay back Air's kindness from the night before.

"Move over," I said. "This is what I do. Give me a few minutes and I'll figure it out." Air looked extremely skeptical but went over the other side of the desk and started working on something else.

About 25 minutes later I had read through all the spreadsheets he had in the document and found where his mistake was. He had duplicated a couple of boxes during data entry. After I had shown Air the mistake and asked for the receipts and files I would need to fix it, he just stared at me with a look of wonder on his face.

"What are you doing here in Albuquerque?" I was a little shocked by his seeming non-sequitor and I felt myself wall up. I scrambled for something to say and came up with, "Just needed a change of scenery."

Air looked at me speculatively, "You runnin' from something, kid?"

My jaw clamped closed and I turned away. Yeah, I'm great at being on the lam.

"Hey, Jason. It's fine. I've got my own mileage. You ever want to talk about it I got good ears. Otherwise, it's none of my business. What I was going to say was, if you want to take care of the books a few hours every day you can have the room as long as you need it. I'll even throw in lunch."

I took a deep breath and decided to trust Air, if only a little bit. "And you wouldn't put my name down or anything?"

"Nope."

"Okay. You've got a deal."

Over the next month or so we settled into a pattern. I woke up and spent the morning working for Air, then we ate lunch together and I spent the afternoon wandering the city or in my room. Eventually, I confided in Air and we decided to send one of the USB drives to the FBI anonymously. He took it with him on his weekly trip to Socorro to visit Luann's grave and mailed it from there.

Two weeks after Air had mailed the USB drive we still hadn't heard from either the FBI or the Irish Mob so I started to relax, to feel safe again. Then "they" popped into my life again with another one of their pearls of wisdom: it always comes when you least expect it.

When Air heard I'd never seen a hot air balloon in person he forbade me to come into the office and shooed me off to the Balloon Fiesta to "experience" it as he put it. The first day was fine, fun even. But as I stood in the predawn light watching the ballooners of the Dawn Patrol spread out their massive envelopes and slowly fill them with fire heated air on the second day, I felt an uneasy prickle on my spine. Like

someone was watching me. I spun in a circle scanning the gathering crowd for any face I recognized or that seemed out of place. There was no one.

It was only a matter of time before they caught up to me, though.

Present

Tommy's lilt was still relatively far away, so I decided to try to make a break for it. I just had to figure out which direction I wanted to go. Albuquerque during Balloon week was insane – like Mardi Gras on laughing gas, Air had told me. It would be easy to hide in the crowd, but how would I get away? Once I left the Fiesta grounds, my leg would slow me down.

I peeked my head around the corner of the building I was still hiding behind and saw that the path opened up in about 200 yards to large field where the balloons took off. Just inside the field I saw a man with a balloon that looked about halfway full. He was alone, trying to get his balloon off the ground. You needed at least two people to get one of those monsters in the air.

I didn't know enough about hot air balloons to know how long it took for one to fill up completely but it looked to be rising pretty quickly. I gauged my timing for when Tommy was turned in the other direction and slipped into the crowd. I made sure to walk at the same pace as everyone else and had attached myself at the side of a group of college age guys who were about my same height.

As I reached the edge of the field, Tommy must have discovered my temporary hiding spot and the bloody footprints leading away because I heard him shout to his fellow goons to follow him. The closer I got to the one guy with his two person balloon I could see a bad day, between pissed off and heartbroken, written all over his face. As I approached, he stared down at my leg, and as soon as I was close enough I grabbed the edge of the basket for support.

"Need some help?" He laughed, then looked behind at the trail of bloody footprints I'd left. "Whoever you're running from, you just led them here, bud."

I turned around briefly and stared at the footprints, a burst of hopelessness shooting through me. Then I turned back and looked up at him. He dropped the fuel gauge, reached out and lifted me into the basket like I was a sack of groceries.

"Stay down before you fall down. I need six more minutes to get this balloon out of here. Have you got six minutes?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Probably not." I sighed and slumped down against the side of the wicker balloon basket, unable to support my weight now that it was not strictly necessary that I do so. I stayed there, with my eyes closed, for about 30 seconds listening to the man do whatever it was that he was doing to get the balloon off the ground.

Then I took a deep breath and steeled myself for whatever pain my moving was going to cause my leg. I wasn't going pass out on another stranger trying to help me.

"Anything I can do to help?"

He gave me an appraising look and then nodded. "Start tossing those ballast bags over the edge. If we can lose some weight we'll get off the ground sooner." He paused. "But don't stand up all the way. We don't want whoever's chasing you to see you." I had to bite back a snarky response of *no shit Sherlock*. Instead of speaking, I just nodded and turned to my task.

Without looking at me, the stranger started talking. "There are three guys who look like a bad stereotype for goons combing the crowd and headed this way. They the ones you're running from?"

"Tall dark and muscled? Look related to each other?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Well, as soon as they make it to the field your footprints will lead them right here. We got maybe another minute."

"That enough time to take off?"

He shrugged and knelt down to rummage through a pile of boxes in the corner of the basket and said, "Maybe."

He pulled out a small plastic case with a handle and popped the clasps. When he pulled out a small gun and slammed a magazine into the handle, I just about wet myself.

"Shit. Why do you have a freakin' gun?"

"2nd Lieutenant Rhys Whelan, retired, at your service." It was as he shoved the gun in the back of his waistband that I noticed his army regulation haircut and UNM ROTC sweatshirt. "Don't worry. I don't plan on shooting anyone who isn't shooting at me. Just pays to be prepared."

I nodded dumbly, part of me relieved that I had found someone who might actually be able to protect me, and part of me scared shitless that I was soon going to be trapped in midair in tiny basket with a stranger who had a gun, and probably knew how to use it.

Relief quickly outweighed fear as I heard Tommy yell, "This way." 2nd Lieutenant Rhys Whelan tensed and started messing with the flame a bit, making it bigger. I decided to risk a glance over the edge of the basket.

My heart jumped into my throat when I saw Tommy, and two of Shea's other cousins, Stephen and Liam, fifty yards away, at the edge of the field and headed in this direction. I felt the basket start to lurch and lift off the ground at the same time that Tommy drew his gun. I figured he wouldn't start randomly shooting because even Old Man Charlie wouldn't be able to clean up a civilian shooting in public without a lot of trouble. As soon as he got close to aim though, we were toast.

I saw Rhys tossing a few more non-ballast items over the edge of the basket and I felt us start to rise into the air with a more encouraging speed.

When the three Doherty's reached the place where the balloon had been, it was about fifteen feet off the ground. It wasn't until I saw Tommy holster his gun that it occurred to me that they didn't want me dead. They wanted me alive so I could tell them what I did with the USB drives. I slumped over in relief.

I glanced up at my rescuer and got my first good look at him. His dark blond hair was close cropped and ice blue eyes stared at me out of a rigidly angular face.

"What's your name?"

"Jason"

"You got a last name that goes with that?"

"Not until I know you a little better." While his face didn't move a whit, his eyes seemed to smile at this and in that moment they turned from dull ice cubes to rich glacial pools. I scolded my heart for doing a double beat and broke away from his stare.

Rhys turned away from me then, and began rummaging in the corner that had produced the gun again. This time when he turned around he had a red box marked with a white cross on it in his hand.

"Come on. Let's get a look at your leg."

Five agonizing minutes later my calf had been cleaned and bandaged and the ragged bloody part of my pant leg had been cut off. I had to clench my fists and take slow deep breaths to keep from passing out because *goddamn* that hurt.

Rhys' voice broke me out of my pain-filled reverie. "You ever been up in a balloon before?"

I shook my head, not trusting my voice.

He crossed the small space and leaned over to help me stand up. "Well, come on. It's magnificent."

My breath caught in my throat as I looked out of the basket for the first time since we had taken off. Don't get me wrong, intellectually I had known, but it struck me just then how *high* we were. My stomach did a slight swoop at that. This high up the last rays of the setting sun were still visible across the horizon. I finally saw why the locals called these the "Watermelon" mountains. In the light of the setting sun, the cliffs blazed brilliant pink and the dense patches of evergreen trees that covered their tops shone deep green.

"It's beautiful," I said, after a few minutes.

He sighed, and as he looked out over the mountains the pissed off and heartbroken faded from his face and a simple peace settled across his features. A quick burst of wind knocked into us and I was forced to lean more heavily into Rhys' side in order to keep my weight off my injured leg. He just tightened his arm around my waist and kept smiling into the distance. My heart sped up as I stared at this beautiful kind man and I knew that given half a chance I could fall for him.

I gave myself an internal shake and turned to watch the land mosey by below us. I noticed that the city was getting further and further behind us.

"Where are we going?"

"I figured with the goon squad chasing you it would be best to avoid the group landing zones. We're using the circle current around the city to land near my cabin."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. You know, once we land, I think you're going to need to tell me what alls going on." He paused, "You can trust me."

"Yeah," I sighed. "You're probably right." Satisfied with my answer, he helped me sit back down and then turned to start messing with the various knobs and dials that I

assumed would help us land. He looked to be struggling to keep everything under control by himself now that it was time to land.

"You need any help? It looks like this was meant to be a two person job." A flash of pain streaked across his face before he answered.

"It is." A few seconds passed and it appeared he was not going to add any more to that statement so I asked again, "Can I help?"

He nodded tightly and we spent the next twenty minutes in a harrowing attempt not to dash our brains against the mountain and land close enough to his cabin that we didn't have to hike for hours to find our beds.

In the end it was about a twenty minute walk from where we landed the balloon safely, if less than gracefully. My leg was not going to stop throbbing for weeks at this rate.

Rhys' cabin was one big room with each quadrant dedicated to a different "area" – kitchen, living area, dining area, bedroom. There was another door off the bedroom area which I assumed led to a bathroom. It was small but looked well-made and neat. My heart (and maybe other parts of me too) did a tiny leap when I saw there was only one bed. Unfortunately, Rhys was chivalrous, and because I was injured, he insisted I take the bed. He slept on the couch.

Less than twenty minutes after crossing the threshold of Rhys' cabin I was piled high with blankets and fast asleep in a bed that smelled like the sky and 2nd Lieutenant Rhys Whelan.

The next morning I was startled awake by an odd rhythmic noise that I could not identify for the life of me. I glanced around the cabin and found it empty. Using my brilliant early morning deductive reasoning skills, I figured Rhys was outside making the noise that had awoken me.

After quick ablutions in the bathroom and a speedy wardrobe change, I headed outside to see what Rhys was up to. As I stepped onto the porch I was treated to the sight of a

shirtless muscled god chopping wood. Firewood, that is. He must have been stockpiling for winter as the pile took up almost the entire side of the cabin.

I stared, feeling slightly guilty, until he noticed me on the porch. He smiled at me and I wondered how I wasn't burned to cinder. "I'll be inside in a few minutes. There's breakfast stuff in the fridge if you want to start cooking something up."

I nodded mutely and headed back inside.

Rhys had put on a shirt by the time he sat down at the table to eat the bacon, egg and cheese scramble that I had managed for our breakfast. He let me get about halfway through my plate before he asked the question.

"Who are you running from, Jason?"

When I finished telling my story about an hour later, Rhys just stared at me for a good thirty seconds. "Wow. You don't do anything by halves do you?"

I shook my head. "The thing is, I have no idea how they found me. I thought I covered my tracks pretty damn well."

"You may never know. Maybe they have a mole in the FBI. Maybe there was a security camera at the post office in Socorro and they tracked you through Air. Maybe both. Maybe a million other things." He took a deep breath. "We need a plan."

"I'm all ears. My plan ended with get far away and give the FBI my evidence. That plan has obviously failed." A wave of despair, cold and heavy, passed over me. I just wanted a normal life with a normal job and a normal boyfriend, without people trying to kill me.

I'd reached the end of my rope. I let my head drop to the table with a thunk. Before I knew it, Rhys had come around the table, pulled me out of my chair and wrapped his arms around me. It was so completely unexpected that I tensed in his arms for a brief moment before I let myself fall into him. One strong arm cradled my head to his shoulder and the other wove gently around my torso. I took a shuddering breath as a

deep sense of safety sank into me. I hadn't realized how truly scared I was until the lack of it stole my breath away.

Before I knew they were there or could do anything to stop them, tears started streaming down my face, soaking the shoulder of Rhys' white t-shirt. It was such a relief. I hadn't cried like that since my parents had died in a car crash seven years ago, during my junior year of college. Rhys crooned sweet nothings in my ear until I had calmed down again.

Once I was done being overwhelmed, it just felt awkward being hugged by an almost complete stranger and I tensed up again. He let me go and gave me a moment to wipe my face and collect myself.

"Don't worry. Everybody has a breaking point. Doesn't matter that you break as long as you pick yourself up after. Come on. We've got some planning to do."

And just like that I felt normal again.

A few hours of talking and arguing later, we decided that the best plan was to call a friend of his in the FBI. Apparently the now Agent Geoffrey Kortig and Rhys had served together during his stint in the army and he could be trusted with anything. Once that was decided, it was another few hours of discussing to decide what exactly to tell him and how.

Rhys would head back into town tomorrow to pick up his truck, grab a new cell phone and collect supplies. After which we would call Agent Kortig.

After a long boring day of waiting for Rhys to return, I was extremely glad to see the cloud of dust on the road that presaged the arrival of his truck. Despite the fact that my leg was feeling much better he would not let me help him unload the motorcycle on which he had ridden into town from the back of the truck. He gave me a stay put glare and rather than start an argument I stayed where I was.

Once he had unpacked all the supplies from the truck and brought them inside – again I was not allowed to help – he handed me a phone. While Rhys was putting all the groceries away, I called Air's home phone and left a message to let him know I was safe. I could have called his cell or the office line, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to lie convincingly enough if I were talking directly to him. So I took the coward's way out.

After everything was put away, we sat down at the table together. Rhys pulled out his phone and pressed one of his speed dial numbers. As the phone was ringing, he pushed the *speaker* button and put it on the table between us.

"Rhys, my man. How're you doin'?"

"Hey Geoff. I've got a bit of a situation I could use your help on."

"Sure thing. What can I do you for?"

"I've got a friend here on speaker phone and I want you to listen to what he has to say."

Rhys nodded at me and I started talking – telling my story again. It was slightly edited and definitely more streamlined but it still took a good twenty minutes to get through the whole thing. When I finished talking, Geoff had turned completely professional, all traces of the bluff army buddy gone. He said he'd look into the situation and give us a call back in a few days. In the meantime, we were to lay low.

Later that night, as Rhys and I were sitting on the porch drinking beer, I realized that I knew almost nothing about my rescuer, except that he had been in the army and could pilot a hot air balloon.

"How did you get into hot air balloons?" I asked, hoping to break the ice a bit.

He smiled before he answered so I thought it might have been a good question. "My grandpa was a senior balloon pilot in World War II. He loved it and we grew up with him taking us to the Fiesta every year. He died about ten years ago but I still love going up in a balloon. Always reminds me of him."

"Who do you usually go up with now?" I asked, remembering how difficult it had been for him to try to fly his balloon by himself. The look of heartbreak that flashed across his face at that question made me regret asking it immediately. The silence stretched a bit and I thought that he wasn't going to answer. Eventually, though, he said, "My best friend, Alejo."

Before I could stop myself, I heard my mouth saying, "Where was he the other day?"

Bitterness laced his voice as he replied, "Alejo thinks that 'cause I like guys it means I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off him. Don't ask, don't tell isn't just a military thing, apparently."

I reached over and laid my hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "I'm sorry, Rhys. That sucks."

He harrumphed and managed to sound like an 80-year-old man and look like a pouting two-year-old at the same time. "I don't care." I said.

He looked at me and smirked. "I know. Especially if that once over you gave me while I was chopping wood was any indication."

I felt the red hot of a blush spread all the way to the roots of my dark brown hair. "Shit," I muttered under my breath.

He looked at me and, mimicking my tone of voice from a moment before, he said, "I don't care, either."

I smacked him in the shoulder and we both burst out laughing.

Once we calmed down, I spoke again, echoing my thoughts from a few minutes ago. "You know, other than hot air balloons and the army, I don't know anything about you."

He relaxed back in his chair and propped his feet on the porch railing. "Not much to tell. Grew up in foster care. Went to UNM on a ROTC scholarship. Served my four

years and got out. Now I live here and lead eco-tourism groups around the desert when the weather is good."

Despite not having much to tell, we talked into the wee hours of the morning. The fierce attraction I had been feeling for him settled into something warm and comfortable as we got to know each other. We fell asleep in our chairs, staring at the stars. Around 3 a.m. he shook me awake and we went inside, me to the bed and him to the couch.

The next few weeks were a welcome break from the stress that had invaded my life. Geoff called every few days to update us on his investigation, or to ask me questions that I mostly didn't know the answer to. We made one trip into Albuquerque to ship another copy of the USB drive to the FBI – this time directly to Geoff. Rhys taught me poker – which is really all about numbers – and then refused to play with me anymore when I kept beating him. I finally convinced him that we were adults and could share the queen sized bed. It must have been the military training or something, but once he was asleep he did not move a muscle. He stayed on his back with his hands folded across his stomach for six hours and then he woke up. Sometimes, in my sleep I would end up with an arm thrown across him or my leg against his and still he never moved.

It was probably for the best because if he had shown any indication that he was open to it, I would have found myself falling for him with no thought to the consequences. And even I knew that this whole situation would end in one of two ways – me dead at the hands of the Doherty family, or me in protective custody and the Doherty family in prison. Allowing myself to fall in love with Rhys would only make it that much more difficult when I finally had to leave him.

Despite all that, I was halfway there already.

I must have spaced out because, the next thing I knew Rhys was snapping his fingers in front of my eyes and saying, "Earth to Jase. Come on!"

I shook myself and ever so eloquently responded, "Huh?"

"What were you thinking about?"

I blushed. "Nothing."

"Okaaay."

Grabbing the deck of cards out on the table as a distraction, I waved them at him. "You sure you don't want to play poker after dinner? I promise I won't beat you too bad."

He smiled and let me get away with the subject change. "Nope."

"How about rummy?"

"Nope."

"Black Jack?"

"Nope."

"Speed?"

"Nope."

"Go fish?"

"Nope."

We dissolved into laughter right as the phone started to ring. I sobered quickly when I saw Geoff's number on the caller ID.

I answered with the ghost of Rhys' laughter still ringing in my ear.

"*It's time.*" Geoff said.

"Okay. We'll go tonight."

Geoff had arranged for me to turn myself in to one of his contacts at the local PD in a small town outside Albuquerque, who would then transfer me into the custody of the FBI to be delivered to Geoff at the Dallas field office. We weren't sure how deep the corruption ran so he didn't want me being filtered through any of the big city stations, PD or FBI, before I reached him. From there I would officially become a witness for the prosecution and then enter the witness relocation program.

When I hung up the phone, I told Rhys, "It's tonight."

We had every move planned out and both of us fell into autopilot as I grabbed my packed bags and headed out to his truck. I walled off the part of my heart that was breaking and kept moving, knowing I had to be strong. Since we had put Geoff on the trail, he had discovered that not only was the Doherty family running drugs and guns through Boston, they were also moving human cargo – women and children to be sold to the highest bidder. No matter what I was feeling right now, I had to help put a stop to it.

An hour later, Rhys pulled the truck over into a parking lot a few blocks from the police station. The look in his eyes was unfathomable as I got out of the truck. "Thanks for everything, Rhys. I won't forget it."

I slammed the passenger door closed and started walking down the street at a determined pace. I vaguely registered the sound of another car door slamming before someone grabbed my arm and pulled me into the alley I was passing.

Before I even had a chance to register any fear, I was being pressed against the wall of the alley and kissed within an inch of my life. Rhys threaded his hands into my hair and pulled my head towards him with such force that I wouldn't have been able to resist, even if I had wanted to. And, God, did I not want to. I opened my mouth to his hot, fierce tongue and melted into his body as his hips held me against the brick wall. I wrapped my arms around his back and gave as much as I was taking, something clicking into place, my heart screaming pleasure, and home, and stay at my brain.

Finally, he pulled back mere inches and stared at me - his eyes boring anchors into my soul, connecting us irrevocably. "You stay alive, you hear me. You stay alive and I will find you." His voice broke a bit on that last bit and all I could do is nod. "Promise me."

"I promise. I'll stay alive. I promise." The intensity in his eyes eased back just a little. He kissed me one final time and spun on his heel, heading back to his truck.

I was cold and aching in more ways than one from the empty space he left in front of me.

I stared at the glass of the two way mirror in front of me and wondered, not for the first time since they had put me in this interrogation room, what I had gotten myself into. I was cuffed to the table "for the sake of appearances" according to the officer who had left me here over three hours ago.

I had counted the ceiling tiles, counted the water spots *on* the ceiling tiles, determined the rate at which the fluorescent light blinked in and out overhead, and spent entirely too much time contemplating what could have caused that stain on the edge of the table.

Finally, two detectives came in and got me. They led me, cuffed, to their car that was parked in the back parking lot. Detective number one (they never told me their names) held my arm while detective number two unlocked the car.

Then all hell broke loose.

I heard what sounded like a car backfiring, but it took me all of about five seconds to realize it was actually a gun. Before I could consciously decide on a course of action I was shoved to the ground by detective number one. Detective number two was busy shooting at someone across the parking lot. There was a lot of shooting but from the sound of it most of the bullets were hitting cars and not people – on both sides. And I took a moment to be pleased about that before I was covered in detective number one's blood. If I had not been laying completely flat on the ground the bullet that had

torn a dinner plate sized hole in the back of his chest would have punched through my brain like so much jello.

In that moment I decided discretion was the better part of valor and stayed hunkered on the ground. The shooting continued and eventually detective number two was shot as well – in the arm and not the chest – but that made it difficult for him to keep firing.

I jumped almost out of my skin when I felt someone from the other side of the car I was hiding under pull on my foot. I was dragged unceremoniously out from under the car, scraping my torso up on the asphalt the whole way. I scrambled to sit up and a hand went over my mouth before I could do anything else.

"Sshhh, Jason. Calm down."

I recognized that voice. "Geoff?!!?"

"Yeah. Be quiet for a second."

I ignored him. "Aren't you supposed to be in Dallas?"

He gave me a withering look and I just kept looking expectantly at him. I needed to have a valid reason for him to be here or he was going to end up as suspect numero uno in my book for the person who had betrayed me – Rhys trusting him or not.

"An informant told us about a leak approximately an hour after I spoke with you last. I hopped on a helicopter and got here as quickly as I could. I arrived to this." He waved his arm encompassing the parking lot as he said that last part. I stared at him for moment, looking for I have no idea what before I responded. "Fine, but if you are the leak I am going to get Rhys to kill you for me."

Geoff huffed out a brief laugh and said, "Agreed." Then he looked around the parking lot for a moment and turned to me, "Follow me. Keep your head down."

The waiting was the worst. The first two weeks had been filled with 14 hour briefings and paperwork and answering the same question 52 different ways. As soon as they were done with me though, I got stuck into a safe house with nothing to do except think; and inevitably all I could think about was that kiss. It sent hot shivers through me and made my chest ache with missing Rhys.

Finally, about a week before Christmas, Geoff showed up at the safe house. TV shows never do justice to how long a trial takes to prepare and execute. He said it could be as long as a year before the whole thing was over, if you took into account trial prep, and the inevitable continuations and legal maneuvers the Mob would be throwing at the prosecutors. Then there was jury selection, which would include its own game of legal chess. And even once the trial actually started, I was not the first witness and I would have to stick around in case I was needed to be put back on the stand later on.

I looked at the possible months before me and despaired. I begged Geoff to let me write Rhys a letter. Since they were army buddies Geoff could see Rhys and send him stuff without it looking suspicious. Eventually, Geoff agreed. I also managed to get him to agree to send *one* letter to Air to let him know I was alive and mostly well. That one had to be heavily censored but I was glad that he would not have to worry any more than he already had.

A few days after Christmas, Geoff brought my first reply.

Jason,

Thank you for your letter. I am glad that you kept yourself alive. Please keep doing that. I wish you had been here for Christmas. Even though it never did before, my cabin seems empty now, without you here. I miss you. Please write again.

Sincerely,

Rhys

PS I will think of kissing you at midnight on New Year's Eve.

Think of me too?

Despite it being awkward and short, I couldn't help but grin as I read it over for the hundredth time since Geoff had given it to me.

Jason,

I was sorry to hear about the continuance. I hope they don't get another one. Geoff says you keep beating your guards at poker. If you can beat Geoff for me some time I would appreciate it. I can never seem to manage. I took some tourists out into the Sandia Mountains over the MLK day weekend and we got to see the first snow of the year. It was beautiful and I thought of you.

Sincerely,

Rhys

PS I miss you.

Dear Jase,

I have never had someone to celebrate Valentine's Day with before. I find I wish you had been here. We could have sat on the porch and kissed under the stars. Or would you have preferred a fancy restaurant? I think not. I remember the feel of you in my arms and I cannot help but think how many opportunities I missed keeping you at arm's length to save my heart when you left. I want to fall asleep with you in my arms.

Yours,

Rhys

Dear Jase,

I heard they finished jury selection this week. That's fantastic. I spent the whole month taking spring breakers out in the mountains. College kids are weird these days. I wish you were here to laugh at them with me. Don't be frightened but on the last trip out I got bit by a snake. I am fine but I will be laid up for a week or so. We will have scars in the same spot now. You'll have to kiss it better next time we see each other.

Yours,

Rhys

Jaaase,

I fear ima little drunk as I write this. Baby, how can I miss you sooo much when you were only here a month? ~~I think~~ I'm in love with you. I'll proly regret sealing this without seeing it again sober but I don't care.

Love,

Rhys

Dear Jase,

I must apologize for my drunken letter. I hate that I made my confessions under the influence but that makes them no less valid. Forgive me?

Love,

Rhys

Dear Jase,

You like it when I call you Baby do you? Okay. I miss you so much Baby. It's only a little while longer now. Geoff says you testify in a couple of weeks. I am so proud of you for doing the right thing. Don't be scared.

Love,

Rhys

Dear Jase,

Yes!

Love,

Rhys

I touched the folded piece of paper in my pocket one last time before I walked calmly to the front of the courtroom and took the stand. It was my talisman. Rhys' letters were all that kept me sane while I was kept isolated in my safe house. I knew that he was waiting for me at the end of this, no matter the outcome.

I swore to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and sat down. The prosecutor walked me through my story with carefully planned questions, and I answered everything in a calm and even voice, trying to project my own honesty.

The defense attorney tried to poke holes in my story, get me to admit to being a liar, to planting evidence, but I stuck to my story as I had practiced and eventually they let me off the stand.

The trial took another three weeks but I got to be in the courtroom when the jury brought back a guilty verdict for all the major players in the Doherty family. Geoff had told me I would need to stay in one of the conference rooms off the courtroom until the defendants had all been escorted out of the building so I was staring out the window at the Boston cityscape when I heard the door open.

Expecting Geoff, I didn't turn around right away. I was startled when I heard a familiar throat clearing from about two feet behind me. I spun and launched myself at a grinning Rhys. We just stood there holding each other, smiling like idiots for a good two minutes.

When Rhys finally broke away, he looked a little nervous. He put his hands in his pockets and fixed his eyes on a spot over my shoulder for a moment before he took a deep breath and looked back at me.

"I know you asked me to go with you in your last letter." I started to panic a bit that he was going to take back his answer, and it must of have shown on my face because he rushed to say, "And my answer is still yes." He paused again, gathering his words, I assume. He muttered, "I don't know why I am so nervous."

He shook his head, pulled his hands out of his pockets and dropped to one knee all in one graceful motion. As he opened the small box in his hand, he looked straight up at me and said, "Jason O'Brennan, Will you marry me?"

A smile split across my face, even larger than before, and I gave the only answer I could, "Yes!"

He whooped as he stood up and put the ring on my finger before kissing me. Geoff chose that moment to interrupt.

After much handshaking and congratulations, Geoff explained that if we wanted to do this we needed to do it now, before we signed paperwork and got placed in the program. We followed him down a few floors in the courthouse to the office of the Justice of the Peace.

I stood up in front of Rhys, joy bubbling up in my heart as we both pledged ourselves to each other for the rest of our lives for better or worse, for richer or poorer and in sickness or in health.

One Month Later

"Lynch! Hey, Lynch." I startled as my new boss grabbed my shoulder and turned me around to face him. "Didn't you hear me? I was calling your name."

I groaned a little on the inside. Even after a month I still had a delayed reaction when someone said our new name. I had to stop a grin from spreading across my face. *Our* new name.

"Sorry, sir, I'm still not used to all the noise in here." The marshals, in all their wisdom, had gotten me a job at a Casino about half an hour outside our new hometown of Leon, Iowa teaching noobs to play poker.

I had been a bit skeptical at first but it was actually really fun. I was glad that Rhys, now Reese so it wasn't so distinctive looking, was enjoying his new identity as much as I was. He had been placed at a local nursery that focused on xeriscaping and helping local farmers maintain sustainability. It was a far cry from eco-tourism but at least he got to be outside and working with nature.

I forced myself to pay attention to my boss as he double checked who was covering my shifts for me over the next week and reinforced how much trouble I would be in if one of them didn't show up. I sighed and nodded. I had triple checked with everyone

because I did not want anything to ruin the next week. I wanted everything to be perfect for our belated honeymoon.

I was finally able to escape and I reveled in the freedom of speeding down the highway, watching the farmland race by outside my windows. I pulled into the nursery where Rhys (I would never be able to think of him as Reese) worked and just stared for a minute before I honked my horn to let him know I was there.

He was helping one of his coworkers load a flat of plants onto the back of a truck. His tanned skin gleamed with sweat in the bright sunlight and I marveled that I got to call this beautiful man my husband.

When he had finished, he came over and got in the car. After a brief but warm hello kiss he glanced at me and smiled. "Still not going to tell me where we are going?"

"Nope. It's a surprise."

"Fine." He grumbled. But he couldn't keep a smile from curving at the edge of his lips so I knew he wasn't really put out.

We went home and managed to shower and pack at a record speed. He wanted to linger but I had a plan and I didn't want to miss the sunset launch.

A little more than an hour later we passed the Indianola city limits. I still wouldn't tell him what we were there for but as we drove through town it became readily apparent. Every flat surface of the town was plastered with signage and advertisements for the National Balloon Classic.

We pulled into the parking area with barely any time to spare. I had arranged for us to ride in one of the balloons that was going up at sunset as a part of the lighted balloon exhibition. Because Reese Lynch was not Rhys Whelan, and thus did not have a balloon piloting license, we could not go up on our own in a balloon, but as we watched the sun dip below the horizon surrounded by a field of bright colors from the basket of a balloon floating in midair, it didn't much seem to matter.

I leaned back against his chest and turned my head up to kiss him just under his chin. He wrapped his arms around me just a little tighter and said, "I love you, Jason," into my ear.

I smiled back up at him and said, "I love you too, Rhys."

The Beginning.

Author bio: Kathleen is a relative newbie to writing but has jumped in feet first (there might have been a dare involved). She is a bit of an all-around geek. Kathleen loves sci-fi television (the good, the bad, and the ugly) and could argue to pro and cons of *Serenity* vs. *Stargate* until the end of time. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats, and loves being a Christian (but not the scary kind). Her favorite thing to read about are first kisses, and she is way more likely to write a first kiss than a sex scene. Kathleen loves to hear from readers, writers, reviewers and pretty much anyone so feel free to email her at kchayes54@gmail.com or comment on her blog. She has two self-published stories available, "Broken" and "Christmas Tradition", as well as a plethora of ficbits, available on her blog. She is also in the middle of a serial story, **True Love's Kiss**, which updates every two weeks or so.

You can find her online at <http://khayes54.blogspot.com> (her blog) or on her [Goodreads Profile](#).