



By Kathleen
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Free Short Fiction

Distributed at khayes54.livejournal.com and www.goodreads.com by Kathleen Hayes

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For Leah.

Written as a part of the *Hot Summer Days* anthology for the M/M Romance Group on Goodreads. Visit them at <http://goodreads.com/group/show/20149>

Chapter 1 – Watching

I was staring out my window trying to tell myself it wasn't because I was waiting for him to come out. It was either stare out my window or stare at my wall. My gaze swept across what my landlady, Mrs. Liu, liked to call a courtyard. It was really just a patch of mud in the middle of the four buildings that made up the apartment complex. Where the water came from to make it mud instead of dirt was something I didn't want to contemplate as it hadn't rained in ages and there was no way Mrs. Liu was going to pay to water the dirt in hopes that grass would magically appear.

I watched as a group of four kittens wandered from under the stairs to the building just to the left of mine. Mrs. Liu tried like crazy to get rid of the cats that infested the "courtyard" and she never could figure out why they wouldn't leave. It was because every night, after she went home, he came out and fed them.

My beautiful stranger lived in the building with the kittens and my back window had the perfect view of the steps up to the door. Every night I watched as five feet eleven inches of pure man sat on the steps and cuddled kittens. He was covered in tattoos and looked a little over 30 years old. He had gorgeous green eyes and dark brown hair that looked like it might curl if he would just grow it out a bit. He looked rugged and determined, like he hadn't had an easy life but wasn't going to give up anytime soon. Over the weeks I had grown increasingly jealous of those cats.

Tonight was no different. I wondered what it would be like if I could just gather the courage to go down and say hello to him. Daniel would be laughing so hard if he could see me. I've tried not to shut myself off since he died, but I am just so damn shy. I own my own pet store, for goodness sake. It's not like I didn't have an ice breaker. I sighed as

I continued to stare. Tomorrow. I would go down and say hello tomorrow.

A sudden rattle from across the room startled me out of my reverie. I jumped and then realized it was just Mickey getting a little over excited on his exercise wheel. Yes folks, I have a pet mouse named Mickey. Go ahead and laugh. My little sister came over the first day I had him and named him before I got a chance.

When I turned back to the window I was shocked to see my beautiful stranger staring up at me. Our eyes met for a second and I wondered if he knew I had been watching him. As I realized our eyes were still locked, I panicked and spun around, trying to get out of sight as quickly as possible.

I reached over to snag Lucy as she tried to escape. I didn't get much time to play with my kittens, so I wanted to take advantage of it. There were four of them. Lucy was white with vertical tan markings that ran from her nose all the way over her head and down her back. She was the most adventurous of the group. Then came Chloe. She was also white with tan markings but they were not as prominent. She and Lucy spent half their time fighting and the other half getting into trouble together. The boys were both orange but Oscar was larger than Charlie. Oscar tended to get in trouble along with the girls. Charlie, on the other hand, was the quiet one. He tended to be happy to just let me cuddle him close whenever I got the chance.

Lucy, Chloe, Oscar and Charlie were all I had. I learned long ago that you can't count on people; they will always let you down. Or you'll let them down. The kittens were simple though. I fed them and played with them and they came back every day. I was a little

worried about them because Mrs. Liu's "courtyard" was becoming more and more mud these days. They stuck around because I fed them, but soon there wouldn't be anywhere dry for them to stay.

As I settled Lucy back into place, I glanced up to see if my personal spy was watching out his window. He had straight blonde hair that fell just above his ears and looked to be about five feet seven or eight inches tall. He was skinny, but didn't look like he would blow over in a strong wind, and I had never seen him in anything but a green polo shirt. I never could get a good look at his face. I guess he was trying to be stealthy about his spying.

I don't know if he was watching me or the kittens but he sat at the window every damn day, staring. He didn't seem to be dangerous, so I tried to ignore him for the most part.

He had been turned away from the window but as I looked up, he turned around and our eyes met. I had never seen his eyes before. They were a piercing blue, like the color of the ocean in one of those tropical island pictures. Our eyes met and held for a split second and then he hurriedly ducked out of the window. But that was enough. I flashed back to another pair of piercing blue eyes.

These blue eyes were more like the sky on a clear summer day. They belonged to Aaron Talbot. We had been best friends for almost ten years. We met in Sunday School in Kindergarten. Our Moms were the teachers. Since then we had been enrolled in God's Light Bible School together. The school was small enough that we had been in the same class every year until tenth grade.

It was during the summer after tenth that everything changed. Aaron and I had always

done everything together. We went to church together. We played soccer together. We got braces together. We aced history, and failed math together. So, of course, we were together on my 16th birthday.

We were getting ready to go to this soccer camp put on by college coaches that was sure to get us scholarships so we could go to college together. We had our whole lives planned out ahead of us. We had two more years of high school. Then we would spend four years playing soccer in college. After that we would get teaching jobs at the same high school and coach together. We would have houses near each other and raise our kids together. At 16, it was so real we could taste it.

But we would never get to that soccer camp that would kick everything off. That day everything changed. Aaron had been acting funny for a couple of weeks. I figured he would get around to telling me what was wrong when he was ready. He never could keep anything from me. That afternoon, I was trying cheer him up by telling stupid jokes and stories while I was packing. He seemed to be getting quieter all afternoon and I could tell he was really nervous about something.

Finally, I had had enough. I stuffed my cleats into my bag and zipped it up, intending to pry whatever was wrong out of Aaron. I turned around to go across the room where he was sitting and ran smack dab into him. Our foreheads cracked and I saw stars for a few seconds. By the time I could see again, I realized Aaron hadn't moved away. He was staring into my eyes. He looked terrified and determined. I'm sure I just looked confused.

Before I knew what was going on, he grabbed me by the ears, pulled me to him and kissed me. Now, growing up like we had, in the church, the thought that I would ever be

kissed by a boy had never crossed my mind. I had never really wanted to kiss any of the girls I had met but I figured I was young yet. I probably wouldn't meet the girl I was going to marry until I was in college. That would be the girl I wanted to kiss. So I was feeling a fair amount of shock when Aaron kissed me.

At first, it was just weird. His lips were a little damp and kind of warm and they just pressed against mine. But I could feel him holding onto the sides of my head for dear life. Then he tilted my head, slipped his tongue out of his mouth, and licked my lips. It felt like fireworks had exploded inside of me. My skin got tight and tingly. I thought my heart might burst out of my chest. Any thoughts I might have been having about this being wrong or weird or awkward flew straight out of my brain as I opened my mouth to let his tongue in.

When I started kissing back, he released his death grip on my head and slid his arms around my back, pulling me against him. I melted into him and in that moment it seemed that there was nowhere more right for us to be. I don't know how long we stood there, melted into each other and kissing like our lives depended on it. But, like I have since learned, all good things are eventually ripped away from you.

We were so into this wonderful new amazing experience that we didn't hear my mom coming up the stairs. She did the typical mom "knock and open before waiting for a response" and it was the crashing of the tray carrying cookies and lemonade to floor that broke us apart.

I was too shocked and aroused to really process anything that had happened in the last few minutes, but Aaron had shoved me away and looked like he was about to crumple into the floor crying. My mom shook it off the quickest. She grabbed Aaron's arm and

started dragging him out of my room all the while screaming for my Dad.

She finally got to the front door and threw him out on the stoop. He fell in a heap on the ground. Her eyes looked murderous as she finally began to yell at him, “AARON JOSEPH TALBOT, WHAT ARE YOU THINKING, CORRUPTING MY BOY LIKE THAT? YOU DISGUSTING LITTLE FAG GET OUT OF HERE AND NEVER COME BACK. I WON’T HAVE YOU LEADING JAY INTO HELL WITH YOU.”

Then she slammed the door on him. The last time I ever saw Aaron he had tears streaming down his face and looked so broken that just looking at him made my heart ache. My chest felt like someone had punched a hole in my ribcage. I had matching streams of tears flowing down my cheeks.

My mom turned on me, then, “Go to your room, mister. There won’t be any dinner tonight and we will be talking about this tomorrow. Don’t even think you are going to soccer camp anymore.”

I stumbled and ran up the stairs to my room as quickly as I could. I wanted to call Aaron and make sure he was okay but I didn’t think I could get away with that without my mom finding out. I curled in a ball on my bed and cried until I fell asleep.

The next day I woke up to my mom rubbing my head saying, “Don’t worry honey. He won’t be able to hurt you anymore. He won’t ever come back and do those evil things to you. I know he was your best friend, but he obviously didn’t care for you.” She kept crooning these thoughts to me over and over again. I just wanted to die. I was never going to see Aaron again. I didn’t care if he wanted to kiss me every day. I just wanted my best friend back. Finally the phone rang and she got up to answer it.

A little while later I heard my mom and dad arguing downstairs so I snuck out on the landing to listen,

“...serves that little Talbot boy right, trying to corrupt innocent boys. Justice has been served by him killing himself. The devil just took back his own...”

I couldn’t listen anymore. It felt like the world I knew was crumbling around me. All that I knew to be true had turned out to be false. The eyes I had seen the world through had been blind. As I sat there with my soul crumbling around, all I could think was that Aaron is gone, forever. I felt a wall of numbness erect itself within me. It was an act of survival. If I had allowed myself to feel it all, I would have bled my soul out and I would not have survived the loss of it. My wall saved me. My wall gave me strength. My wall kept me standing.

In that moment I knew I couldn’t stay there. I had to leave. I took the bag of clothes I had packed for soccer camp, emptied my piggy bank into my wallet and swung out my window, down the tree and out of my backyard.

Since then, no one has ever breached my walls and no one will.

Chapter 2 – Hurt

“Are you sure you don’t have the Turkey and Liver flavor? I see Chicken and Liver but little Fluffy doesn’t like anything with chicken in it does she? No she does not. No no no.” She kept baby talking to the cat in one of those purse carrier things.

I just wanted to scream at her, WE CLOSED TEN MINUTES AGO, PICK A DIFFERENT FOOD OR GO SOMEWHERE ELSE! But she was one of the biggest donors to the shop’s Abused Animal Charity Fund so I smiled and listened as she picked up every can of cat food, twice, finally settling on seafood medley.

Finally she was gone and I sped through closing and counting the deposit. I really wanted to get home while my beautiful stranger was out with his kittens. “Tomorrow” was six days ago, but today was going to be the day. I grabbed one of those sticks with ribbons hanging off the ends that cats go ape-shit over and stuffed it in my bag. Voila, ice breaker.

I unlocked my door and threw my mail on the counter, rushing to the back window to see if he was still there. I was shocked by what I saw. It looked like a water main or something had broken and was spraying water into the courtyard. At first I was distracted because my beautiful stranger was soaking wet and wading through the deepening water in the courtyard. His shirt outlined his chest so I could see every ridge of muscle. Streams of water flowed over his tattoos. It took me a second to wonder *why* he was wading through the flooded courtyard until I saw him reach over grab what looked like an orange dish rag from the water and wrap it in his shirt. Then, I realized he was trying to save his kittens.

I spun around and grabbed some towels off the stack of laundry inhabiting my couch and ran downstairs to help him. By the time I had splashed across the courtyard, it looked like he had all four of them in a laundry basket, huddling together and looking terrified. He began wading back towards the stairs of his building.

I was about to call out and see if he needed any help when he slipped on something he couldn't see under the now six inches of water filling the courtyard. If he hadn't been carrying the laundry basket of kittens he could have swung his arms out for balance and been fine. But he tried so hard not to drop the kittens that there was no hope for him. I got there just in time to grab the basket before it toppled into the water.

I ran and sat the basket at the top of the stairs and hurried back to make sure my beautiful stranger was alright. He looked a little dazed, and was trying to get up. As he put his weight on his left foot, his whole leg buckled underneath him. I offered him my arm and helped him over to the steps as well.

He looked around frantically until he saw the basket and that there were four kittens still alive and, if not well, at least not drowning, in it. Then he looked at me. All of the sudden I got nervous again.

"Hi, my name is Charles. I saw you trying to save them and I wanted to help. Are you ok? Do you need me to call an ambulance? Can you make it up the stairs? I own a pet store so I can help with the kittens if you want. I..."

I stopped talking because he was just staring at me and I realized I had gone into babble mode. I could feel the heat of my blush spread across my face. God, I was so embarrassed. I took a deep breath and tried again.

“What’s your name?”

“Job” he rumbled out. That voice sent shivers all through me. But wait, Job? Wasn’t Job that guy in the Bible who God took everything away from and killed his family just because of some bet with Satan. Did his parents go to BadBibleBabynames.com to name him???

“Really, Job, that’s odd...” I clamped my mouth shut and shook my head. “Never mind. If you can stay here for second, I can run your kittens up to your apartment and then come and help you.”

He looked like he really wanted to say no but glancing around he saw no one else who could help him and was smart enough to realize he couldn’t do it himself. He dug into his pockets and pulled out a key ring. As he handed it to me he growled, “Number 205.”

He still hasn’t given me my damn keys back yet.

We spent hours in the ER waiting room and finally they took me back to be checked out and then I had to spend three more hours getting x-rays and a cast. It turns out when I tripped on whatever the fuck was under that water I broke one of the bones in the bottom of my leg. The doctor said I needed to stay off it for at least a week and Charles took that as an open invitation to be my nursemaid.

It’s been five days and every damn night he lets himself in with *my* keys and sets up shop in *my* kitchen. He spends hours cooking and babbling and playing with the kittens.

I didn't think I can take it much longer. Goddammit, I just wanted to be left alone. I was going to snap soon. It doesn't help that the kittens, *my* kittens, had adopted him. Charlie, in particular, would curl up in his lap anytime he stopped moving long enough. Lucy, Chloe and Oscar were bribed with catnip toys from his shop. They're all traitors.

Silence broke through my senses and I realized Charles had asked me something. I gave him a withering look that showed just how much I didn't want him to be here. "Huh?"

"I asked if you wanted some dessert." He tried to look patient but I could tell he was beginning to get annoyed with me. I was tired, in pain and annoyed and for some reason, it all bubbled over, right then.

"No, Chaz. I don't want dessert. I want you to leave. Why are you here? Why do you keep coming back? Get the fuck out and leave my keys!" As I was yelling, I could see a storm cloud coming over his features.

"My name is Charles, not Chaz, and I am here because you don't have anyone else. You think you can take care of yourself when you can barely walk across the room. Fine. See if I give a flying rat's ass."

He threw the keys at the couch next to me and slammed the door as he left. "Good riddance, Chaz" I shouted at the door, sure he could still hear me in the hallway.

I felt a wave of triumph wash over me. Finally, I had gotten rid of my busy body neighbor. I could do whatever I wanted to. As I sat there reveling in my success, a shadow came over me when I realized I didn't have anything I wanted to do. I stubbornly stared at the television for a few more hours before I dragged myself off to

bed.

By the time I woke up the next morning, I realized I might have made a mistake. I really did need some help to get around and feed myself and take care of the kittens. I hobbled out to the kitchen and microwaved some leftovers from yesterday, poured enough cat food for a couple of days into the cat feeder, and planted myself on the couch for the day, the four kittens draped in varying positions around and on me.

By the time Dr. Phil rolled around I wanted to scratch my eyes out. I was sure Charles would come back tonight. He was too much of a do-gooder not to. He just wanted to make a point last night. But 6:00 came and went with no sign of Charles.

Around 7:30 there was a knock on the door. My heart leapt. He came after all. Then I berated myself. I couldn't care less if he showed up or not. I shuffled to the door and pulled it open, preparing to call him Chaz just to annoy him. But when I opened the door, it was a guy standing there with a pizza, not Charles.

“I didn’t order a pizza.”

“No, a Charles Greyson ordered it to be sent over to you. He also asked that we remind you to feed the kittens when we delivered the pizza.”

“Huh?”

“Charles Greyson reminds you to feed the kittens and paid for this pizza to be delivered here. Do you want it or not?”

“Um, Sure.”

I took the pizza and closed the door. I didn't know how to deal with the disappointment that it hadn't been Charles at the door. His do-gooder nature wouldn't let me go hungry when he knew I couldn't feed myself but he was obviously done with me. That thought shot a splinter into that wall I had built around my heart for so long.

I didn't know what to do. Part of me was angry at myself for driving him away. Part of me was angry at him for getting close enough to cause that splinter. I let the angry at him part take over. He had no right. And I was going to tell him so.

I let that anger flow through me like a righteous river and give me strength. It numbed the pain I was feeling, both physical and emotional. I grabbed the pizza box and stumbled out the door and down my stairs. By the time I made it over to his building and up his stairs the pain was starting to edge out over my anger and I was beginning to regret my plan. But I was almost there.

I got to his door and leaned against the door frame to gather my strength. Then I slammed a fist into his door three times.

“OPEN THIS DOOR, CHAZ. I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!”

The door swung open and Charles stood there looking flushed and magnificent in his outrage. He looked like he could barely speak but managed to get out, “My name is Charles, not Chaz.”

“What is the meaning of this?” I hissed as I held up the pizza box, before I threw it to the ground just outside his door. I really needed this confrontation to be over so I could collapse. Pain was pulsing up through my leg and making me dizzy.

“You kicked me out. You said you never wanted to see me again. I didn’t want you to starve while stewing in your pride. Excuse me. And while we’re asking questions, what is the meaning of this?” He waved his arm towards me, clearly indicating my presence at his door, as he continued to glare at me.

I wanted to look away from him, to gather my thoughts. Why had I come over here again? But his eyes bored into me and wouldn’t let me go.

I have no fucking clue how it happened but all of the sudden I had pulled him towards me and was kissing him like I needed him more than breath itself.

Chapter 3 – Tattoos

He kissed me. Oh my God, he's still kissing me. I let that thought take over my brain for a good ten seconds before I started kissing him back. It was everything I had hoped for while staring out the window at my beautiful stranger for all those weeks, but more real because I felt his strength and his vulnerability wash over me like waves on the shore. This was my beautiful stranger who fed kittens and looked hotter than a man should be allowed. But it was also Job, who was prickly and proud and didn't let people in. Then all of the sudden it was gone.

“Wha...?”

I looked down and it appeared that Job had fainted in my hallway. It was in that moment that it hit me that he had walked all the way down his stairs, across the courtyard and up my stairs to get here. On his broken leg. Oh my God.

I looped my arms under his shoulder and did my best to drag him into my apartment but he was really heavy. In the end I got to where I could lean him up against my couch. I grabbed a damp cloth from the kitchen and wiped his face while I was trying to wake him up. Eventually, I got him alert enough to stand up and let me help him hop to the bed. I gave him some painkillers, helped him undress and tucked him in.

Then I stared at him. Did I get into bed with him? Was there any way I could do anything else, knowing he was in here asleep? After a few minutes of deliberation I stripped to my boxers and climbed in next to him. I spooned against him, being careful not to jostle his broken leg.

At first I just listened to him breathing and reveled in holding him in my arms. But, after

about thirty minutes I fell asleep as well.

I woke up as Job became restless in my arms. I glanced over at the clock. We had been asleep for about four hours. He rolled over and faced me, looking a little uncertain. I could see the defensiveness building behind his eyes so before he had the chance to say something stupid or yell at me again, I kissed him. This one had all the passion of the first one but was much gentler.

I laced my fingers into his hair and held him close so he would have to work at it if he wanted to break the kiss. He didn't want to. He wrapped his arms behind me and pulled our hips together. I could feel his cock rubbing against mine and it just about melted all my bones. Except the one that matters, of course. I squirmed to get closer and my leg knocked into his cast. He let out a pained grunt and I pulled back.

“Sorry”

“Fucking broken leg. Not your fault.”

He pulled me back closer to him but didn't try to kiss me. He tucked my head onto his shoulder and put his arm around me. You could have knocked me over with a feather if I hadn't already been lying down. Job, who had spent the last week yelling at me and telling me to get out was *cuddling* with me. He didn't say anything so I just enjoyed the moment.

After a good while of just laying there, I began to trace his tattoos. He had them all over his torso and his arms. I had seen them over the course of the week while I had been taking care of him but I hadn't had a chance to get a good look until now.

Below his belly button in a gothic script was “Job 3:3.” I traced it a few times before I asked him what it meant. He got quiet for a few minutes and I thought he wasn’t going to answer. But then he started out with a whisper saying,

“That was my first tat. I got it the week after I ran away from home.” He paused and I thought that was all I was going to get, but then he continued, “See, I grew up in this really religious house. My parents were really into all that church stuff and I was their poster child.”

“Until one day my best friend kissed me. I had never kissed anyone or even wanted to kiss anyone before that. My mom walked in on us and she threw Aaron out, calling him nasty names and told him never to come back. All I could do was sit and watch, I was so stunned. The next day he killed himself and I overheard my mom saying it was the devil taking back his own. So I ran away.”

“Growing up in church I knew the story of Job. God made a bet with Satan saying Satan could do whatever he wanted to Job and he would still remain faithful. So Satan took everything from him. All his stuff, his land, his family. That verse is when Job says, ‘Let the day of my birth be erased...let that day be turned to darkness.’ That’s sort of how I felt after Aaron was gone. I lost my family, my best friend, my future. That’s when I started calling myself Job.”

He sort of startled then, as if he realized he had just said more than two sentences in a row. “I’ve never told that to anyone. Not even the guy who did the tat.”

“What’s your real name?”

He gave a little snort then and said, “Jacob Obadiah Bain. Even my initials wanted me to be Job.”

Rather than let him stew over what he had revealed, I began to trace his other tattoos. There was one of some flowers on his forearm and I asked him about that one next.

“I got that one when old Mrs. Rosenbaum died. She was this sweet little lady who let me crash in a room over her garage before I was old enough to get my own place. She loved her yard. She had these great big Oleander trees all around it. They stank something awful but she loved them. She would sit there on her porch staring at those trees and feeding all the damn cats in the whole neighborhood. I started feeding the kittens down in the courtyard cause I knew she woulda been heartbroken to see ‘em starve to death.”

We went on like this until I had asked about all his tattoos. I was surprised he was willing to share that much but I wasn’t going to argue. When I had asked about the last one we lapsed into silence for awhile. Then I rolled over on one arm and gave him a playful smile and asked, “Aren’t you going to ask if I have any tattoos?”

He looked at me a little sideways and half laughed. Then he asked, without even trying to keep a straight face, “Okay, do you have any tattoos?”

“Yup, sure do. I’ve got two.” He just about fell out of bed he was so shocked.

“Where?” He demanded.

I pushed the sheet down below our waists and pulled the waistband of my boxers down.

Just below my left hipbone was a dolphin. Rather than making him ask me about it, I just told him.

“I was on swim team in college and after we won states junior year we all went out and got drunk and tattooed ourselves with various sea creatures. I’m lucky I woke up with a dolphin. One guy woke up with a manatee tattooed on his left ass cheek.”

After we both stopped laughing, he asked, “Where’s the other one?”

This one was a bit more serious. I reached over and took the watch off my right wrist. Around my wrist I had tattooed, “...And none of that makes the love not worth it.” He gave me a questioning look. I took a deep breath and remembered the day Daniel had died.

Junior was wagging his tail so hard, I knew if he weren’t better trained he would be dragging me by the leash to get off the elevator. We didn’t usually visit the oncology floor on Mondays but we were here to see Daniel. We visited him last, every day, so I could spend more time with him. We got some funny looks from a few of the visitors. Not everyone realizes that there are organizations that train dogs special to visit patients in the hospital.

I waved at the nurses as I passed by the nurse’s station and ended up in front of room 24. The door was closed so I paused a moment to take a deep breath. I grabbed a handful of that foam sanitizer stuff as the “Foam in, Foam out” sign by every door instructed. As I opened the door, I said a brief prayer that today would be one of his good days. If he had a few more of those they might let go home before he ... no don’t want to think about that.

As soon as I saw him curled on his side, with his dark blond hair plastered to his pale face by sweat I knew that today was not a good day. His arms were curled around one of those pink plastic bins they give you to vomit in so they can measure it later and he was fast asleep. I signaled to Junior to sit in the corner and walked over to Daniel and gently kissed his forehead, making sure not to wake him up. I settled into the chair by his bed to read until he woke up.

I guess I must have dozed off at some point because I woke up to him smiling at me and saying, “Charlie.” Even his weak smiles did something to my insides that had never happened from anyone else.

“Hey, Danny Boy, how you doing today?” I tried to smile back at him but I don’t know how successful I was.

“It’s a crap day,” he said as he reached a hand around his thankfully empty barf bin to grab mine. I took hold of it and then got lost in his hazel eyes for a moment. On his good days they would sparkle with humor and joy and there was no greater sight. On his bad days, like today, they were clouded over with pain and it seemed like the candle that was normally lit behind them had been blown out. When Junior and I had first met him, almost a month ago, his eyes sparkled more often than not. Now it had been four days since I had seen them sparkle.

I was pulled out of his eyes when I noticed him grabbing for something on his tray. I reached over handed it to him, watching as he pulled out a piece of gum and stuck it in his mouth. “You’re going to waste energy chewing a piece of gum when you can barely lift your hand to pick it up?” I asked him.

"I taste like puke and I wanted you to kiss me today," Daniel rasped tiredly. He made a brave effort at a grin but it fell short when he lapsed into a painful grimace halfway through. It felt like a bruise to my heart, watching him try so hard when he hurt so much. I would have kissed him no matter what he tasted like.

I leaned over his bed and pressed my lips to his. I ran my tongue over his teeth and pressed inside. He rallied with strength I wouldn't have thought he had and I felt his nasal cannula smash into my nose as he clutched my head to his and tangled his tongue with mine. It tasted like love and pain and was desperate and bittersweet. I couldn't help but feel like it was a goodbye. There were tears in my eyes when we broke apart and that bruise on my heart was three shades darker.

He seemed to collapse in on himself after that, like he had used up all his strength on those ten seconds and there was no more left. He closed his eyes for a second and then looked at me and whispered, brokenly, "Hold me." I don't know how the nurses generally feel about the visitors climbing in the hospital beds with the patients but there is nothing on God's green earth that could have kept me from climbing in that bed and wrapping my arms around Daniel.

We had never done this before, always too conscious of how often the nurses came into check on him. He settled in using my bottom arm as a pillow and I wrapped my top arm around his waist and pulled him up to me so we were touching from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. He was so thin and fragile and precious.

He fell asleep that way, until Kelli, one of the nurses, came into check on him. I gave her stubborn stare and made it clear I was not going anywhere unless they had to do

something medical that required him to move. She smiled at me and nodded.

“How’s he doing?” I asked Kelli. He barely stirred in my arms. I saw her smile falter a bit and somehow I knew, there weren’t going to be any more days with sparkling eyes.

“His systems are shutting down one by one. We could keep him alive a little bit longer on a ventilator and dialysis but he has signed an advance directive and an A.N.D. stating that he doesn’t want extreme measures.”

“A.N.D.?”

“Allow Natural Death.”

“Oh.” I felt my heart break a little just then. I didn’t want him to hurt but it just seemed too soon. Any time seemed too soon. I had known from 5 minutes after meeting him that he was dying but somehow it wasn’t real until that moment. Daniel woke up as she checked all his IV’s and ports and whatnot that were connected to him.

After she left, he turned around in my arms so he could look me in the face. “I found something for you today,” he said.

“What’s that?” I replied as I tucked his sweaty hair behind his ear.

“In the tray. One of the volunteers was reading to me from her poetry group’s blog.” I twisted around pulled out the drawer of his tray and found a piece of paper. I looked at him questioningly.

"I thank God every day that he gave me you to love this past month. It gave me happiness I thought I had lost when they told me I was going to die. But I would take it all back if I thought that loving me and watching me die was going to break you beyond repair. Promise me you won't stay broken."

Tears rolled down my face as I read through what the volunteer had copied down for Daniel:

Broken

You look at me and
You ask
With fear
And disbelief
And maybe just a little bit of awe
How can you love, again?
It shows in your eyes
You think only of
The broken heart
The shattered pieces
The lonely silence
That comes after.
But I say to you
I have been broken,
I have been shattered,
I have been lonely.
And none of that
Makes the love not worth it.

I looked up at him. We had never said I love you. But it was clear, in the month that we had gotten together, we both had fallen. "I...I... don't know if I can," I stammered, tears still streaming down my face

"You can. Promise me." He wasn't even gone yet and my heart felt broken beyond

repair. But he stared steadily at me, waiting for an answer. And I thought, if he is strong enough to die this bravely, the least I can do is be strong for him after he's gone.

"Okay, I promise." I whispered, as if saying it quietly would make it easier to follow through.

"Good." And he rolled back over so he could be the little spoon again. He rested his head on my arm again and wrapped one of his hands around my wrist, holding on for dear life. With my other arm, I clutched him to me as tightly as I dared, realizing I needed to say it out loud at least once before he was taken from me, "I love you, my Danny Boy."

"I love you too, my Charlie," he barely said before he drifted off to sleep. Junior came over then and put his head on the edge of the bed so I could pet him and I lay there holding Daniel as he slept with Junior keeping us company.

I don't know how much time passed, but it couldn't have been too long because Junior hadn't made a fuss about needing to go out yet, when it seemed like Daniel started breathing slower. Every time he breathed out I would hold my breath until he breathed in again, praying this wasn't it. My head started swimming and I was seeing black spots before I realized that he hadn't taken a breath in a really long time.

I pressed the nurse call button, knowing there was nothing they could do because he had signed an A.N.D. By the time the doctor came in, I knew he was dead. I cried silent tears as I held him. This boy clutched to my chest was the only thing keeping my heart from falling out and it's million shattered pieces from being irretrievably scattered on the floor. His hand was still around my wrist.

Eventually, I had to take Junior and leave. I slept for three days and when I finally dragged myself out of bed I had the last two lines of the poem tattooed, on that wrist, so I would never forget my promise. And, God knows, there were times that tattoo was the only thing that kept me eating and sleeping and getting out of bed in the morning.

We both sat there in silence for a bit after I finished telling my story. Job wrapped his arm around me and pulled me in to rest my head on his chest. And I think I felt him kiss my hair as we fell asleep.

Chapter 4 – Healing

I woke up when the sun from the window started to trek across the bed. Chaz's arm was still wrapped around me like he thought I was going to try to escape or something. I sat there staring at the ceiling for the longest time trying to decide what I was feeling. It felt like the night before, Chaz had broken giant pieces of my wall down and now I wasn't sure how I was supposed to live like that, all exposed to the world. But he had done it. For years. Just lived, all broken like that. And now he was whole again, mostly.

Before I could get too worked up over it, I felt Chaz's lips press against my shoulder where his head lay. He mumbled "Good morning" as he began to lazily run his hand across my torso, occasionally encountering a nipple or grazing the top of my erection, which was quickly turning from morning wood into full out hard on.

No matter how much my body was saying don't stop, my heart beat a hundred miles a minute and I knew I needed to pause him at least for a second to explain. I grabbed his wrist and he looked up at me with a heated gaze I could get lost in. He raised his eyebrow in question. I looked away and looked back, unsure how to get this out.

"I've never done this before."

"What?"

"After Aaron, I thought I was dead down there. I've never wanted to with an actual person before." That was a lot harder to say than it might seem. I looked away again, hoping Chaz would get it and not kick me out of bed.

“It’s okay, Job. We’ll take it slow.” He whispered in my ear as his tongue traced the outside of my earlobe. Who knew my earlobe was directly connected with my cock. Apparently Chaz did.

He swung his leg over me, so he was straddling my hips. I was still naked from the night before and somewhere along the line, without my noticing, he had gotten rid of his boxers. His balls covered the tip of my cock as his crack settled over my shaft. As he leaned down to kiss me, his balls rasped over my shaft until our cocks were lined up next to each other between our stomachs.

Then our lips met and the sensations were just so much I couldn’t think anymore. It felt like the rest of my wall was blasted to bits but, at the same time, something from Chaz wrapped around my heart and protected better than any wall ever could have.

I began to flex my hips just so I could feel our skin and our cocks move against each other. It was torture but it was wonderful. Chaz broke off from my mouth and kissed his way down my throat until he was able to flick one of nipples with his tongue. He lapped and laved and bit until it felt like my nipple was on fire and then he moved to the other one.

It was hard to breath. I needed … something. “Please, Chaz.” I gasped.

“I’ve got you, Job,” he rasped as he slid further down me, making sure not to bump my cast. I knew where this was going but I was utterly unprepared for the feeling of his wet hot mouth around my cock. My hips snapped towards him and I scrabbled to get a hold of something to ground myself. Finally, I reached my hands out and tangled them into his hair.

He was bobbing up and down, running his tongue all around me and fondling my balls and it was the best thing I had ever experienced. I felt my balls start to draw up and I could feel my orgasm starting like a starburst from the bottom of my spine. I held my breath as I waited to fall over the edge.

But Chaz grabbed my balls and pulled, wrapping his hand around them to keep me from coming. My erection strained in front of me, begging, needing release, dripping all over my stomach. My brain barely had enough blood to register what was going on. “Chaz, wha... don’t stop...need to come...”

“Wait. Don’t want you to come til you’re in me,” he breathed in my ear. If he thought that was going help, he was wildly mistaken. I almost fainted.

He reached into the drawer beside his bed and pulled out a bottle of lube then leaned back so he was sitting on my thighs, but careful not to put too much weight on my broken leg.

Then he spread the lube on my cock. All the sparks that had been shooting throughout my body coalesced in a heated pool based in my groin. It felt like my skin was suddenly too tight and too thin. Any movement would cause it to tear and for all of me to be turned inside out and revealed. It was wonderful and frightening.

Finally, he knelt up, placed me at his entrance and sank down on me. I don’t know how I didn’t come right then. I felt his tight ring of muscle slide like a vice grip down my cock until all of me was surrounded by his amazing heat. All of the sudden, it didn’t matter if I was turned inside out and revealed, because he was there to contain me. I would be safe with him, safe in him.

I strained towards that heat, that safe place. Chaz ground his hips in a circle, not letting any of me leave him but still giving us friction. I grabbed his cock and gave him that same friction he was giving me. My hand slipped through his precome, up and down his shaft.

I looked up and met his eyes and, in that moment, he screamed out my name and came. I could feel his muscle squeeze around me as spurts of his come covered my chest. It was too much. Still looking at his face, locked in pleasure, I came undone in him.

Jolt after jolt of pure pleasure washed through me as everything I was came open before Chaz. I flailed my arms trying to find him, to grab him, to anchor myself. I made contact with his shoulders and pulled him to me so we could kiss as the aftershocks of our orgasms played through our bodies.

His kisses brought me back and settled me in my own body again. And in that moment, I knew that, even though I had been broken, I was strong enough to love again someday.

6 months later

Job came into the shop dragging our two new puppies on their leashes in one hand and carrying the jumbo sized cat carrier with the kittens in the other. It really was quite a comical picture, my badass tattooed boyfriend barely keeping his balance as he is almost overrun by small furry animals. I smiled and thanked God or Danny or whoever that I had this man in my life.

“A little help here, Chaz.”

“Stop calling me Chaz,” I grumbled and then I laughed a little, knowing he was never going to stop, and went over to take Danny and Aaron’s leashes from him as he sat the cat carrier down. It was the shop’s monthly Pet Play Day and the back area was going to be filled with local pets and their parents in just under an hour.

After we let our passel out, Job turned around to give me a proper greeting. Then he nipped my ear and grumbled, “You know you love it. Besides, what else am I gonna call you. Charles is way too stuffy and Charlie is the kitten. So you have to be Chaz.”

“Fine,” I pouted, just a little bit. Then he kissed me and I stopped caring what he called me. Finally, I had to push him away or I was never going to be ready to open on time. “Go get the treats out.” He turned to walk away but before I was out of hearing range he shot back, “Love you, Chaz.”

Alright, I kinda like it when he calls me Chaz.

THE END.

Author Bio:

I have been reading since forever. I was the kid who didn't get grounded but got her books taken away when she got in trouble. I spend my day job surrounded by death and grief so when I read I want to see those happy endings. Recently I have been convinced to try my hand at writing my own happy endings. There might have been a dare involved.