

# RECKLESS KISSING

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## FRONT MATTER

Holiday Bright is on deadline. Her book is due in two weeks, the plot bunnies are running amok, and she might be a little stressed by the whole situation. Just a little, mind you. What's the perfect solution? Go home for the holidays.

Hahaha. Nah, that's not the perfect solution. But unless Holiday wants her family to storm her cramped apartment—something that they've done in the past—then she needs to hie away to her parents' home in Upstate New York.

Holiday expects the crazy, something her family could definitely gold medal in. She expects the turkey, the sweet potatoes, the Battle of the Pies, and stuff her face with stuffing. What she doesn't really expect?

Joe Mahoney.

The grouchy man of few words next door. Sure, Joe might be hot in that mountain-man kind of way—beard included—but he does not like Holiday at all, which is fine. Because Holiday doesn't like him, either.

So what if they kissed last Christmas? There won't be any mistletoe around this time. They have no excuse whatsoever to kiss. And it's not as if Holiday actually wants to

kiss Joe again. At least that's what she tells herself. But it's Thanksgiving and anything can happen—even something like love.

Warning: this rom-com short-story (~10,000 words) is super light, super fun, super breezy, and fades to black. But you'll still have swearing, kissing, and a HEA. Also includes a plucky heroine whose idea of dressing up is putting on a bra, a grumpy hero who has a super duper secret, and a dog. You'll learn about the kiss, why opposites attract, and that home is always where the heart is.

## CHAPTER 1

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2017, 1:39 A.M.

STOP THINKING ABOUT IT.

Stop.

You need to go to bed, Holiday.

You are getting up in—I turn my head just enough to read the clock that's stated on my DVR directly underneath the TV—in exactly four hours.

And you have a plan.

Get up at 5. Hit the snooze. Get up at 5:15. Hit the snooze again. For real get up at 5:45. Make some toast, then clean up. Dress. Head to Penn Station and take the Amtrak to Renssealaer where Dad will be waiting to make the fifteen minute drive to their home in Colonie. I'll say hi to Mom, then head up to my old room to unpack and relax.

I won't see him.

Okay, maybe I will see him.

It'd be impossible not to see Joe Mahoney.

Joe's their next-door-neighbor after all.

But it's not as if Joe's ever gone out of his way to say hi to me when I come to visit. I'm pretty sure he doesn't like me.

*He sure seemed to like you last Christmas when he was kissing you. With tongue.*

*Shut up*, I tell that annoying inner voice of mine. That inner voice can be a real bitch at times, especially when I'm writing. I'm a historical romance author and set my books in Regency England. I have six books and three novellas under my belt so far, and my last book, the last in my most recent trilogy, was my best-selling book to date. I actually made the USA Today Bestselling list for the first time and I was only three hundred books away from hitting the NYT. I was soooooo close. My agent was super excited as was my editor and publisher, and they want to really push my next series, which will be centered around a big family. The first book is set to launch in June.

I've already turned in the book, tentatively titled *All About the Duke*, back in September. My editor gave me edits-slash-revision letter in mid-October. At the time, when I received the email and read through the revision letter, I thought: not bad, I've got this. Every author gets a revision letter, and if they don't, then it's my firm belief they're lying through their stinking teeth. And I've had revision letters before and have knocked them out of the park. So, I totally thought this edit would be like the others. A few weeks, some wrangling, some stress, but the book would be much stronger and I'd love it even more.

And, at first, it was going swimmingly. Easy. I had no doubts I had this. I don't know what happened, but something happened whether I got too in my head or I hit a snag, and now, every time, I open up my document, I just think: I suck; no one is going to read this; I'm a fraud; I should quit all the things and ughhhhhhh, I hate this. My critique partners remind me this is my process every single time, but I don't know . . . it feels *different* this time and I'm seriously

worried that I'm not going to meet my deadline that's two weeks away. Especially since I'm only twenty thousand words into my revision.

So I'm stressed, as is clearly seen by the mountain of discarded Hershey's kisses wrappers, the empty cartons of ice cream, and the amount of Chinese takeout I've ordered in the last few weeks.

I should cancel. I should stay here and write. I can skip Thanksgiving. My parents might be disappointed, but they would understand. They know how much stress I'm under. Plus, there would be zero chance I would run into Joe at all.

But then I remember my mom's promise—which, honestly, was more of a threat—to me. If I didn't come up for Thanksgiving, then they'd just come down here. And everyone would follow. My younger sister, Valentina, and baby brother, Noel. My multitude of aunts, uncles, cousins.

They would follow through on this. They've done it before. Two years ago, when I didn't come up for Easter (due to a deadline), my whole family showed up, thankfully a week after I turned in the book. But still . . .

I have no desire to share a bathroom with Uncle Ernie ever, ever again. Let's just say ear wax, and leave it at that.

I have to go home. I know this. It'll be relaxing. I'll have some decent home-cooked meals and maybe go out to dinner with my family. I'll see everyone and be able to cuddle with our dog, Frank.

And I won't have to see *him*. Joe won't spend the holiday with us again. That was just a one-time thing.

I definitely know this, though. I certainly won't kiss him. Never, ever again.



## CHAPTER 2

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2017, 12:03 P.M.

MY PARENTS' house is at the center of the cul-de-sac at the bottom of our winding street. The first thing I noticed when we turn the corner are the balloons.

Not just one balloon. Or two. Or, even say, a bunch of six.

The amount of balloons reminds me of the movie *Up*. The balloons are everywhere. They're attached to the mailbox. They're strung around the pillars at the front of the house and then wound through the balcony at the top. They're big; they're small. They're every color of the rainbow; some are glittery, some are opaque, and there are others that are in shapes such as stars, hearts, and one is a turkey. And then there's the big pink and purple balloons, covered in glitter, that form out the words: Welcome Home!

I turn in my seat and shoot my dad a death glare. "You promised."

"I promised," he says jovially. "Your mother didn't."

"Mom is afraid of heights," I say. "There's no way she would ever climb a tall ladder to reach that balcony to string up balloons. You, sir, are an accessory."

My dad laughs. “Holiday, you know your mother.”

I do know my mother.

My mother loves balloons for some inexplicable reason. The more, the better in her book. As is evidenced by the gazillion balloons attached to our house. Seriously, if our house could float away, it would.

“She’s just happy you’re home,” my dad says as we pull into the driveway. “She worries about you.”

I’m twenty-seven years old, the oldest of the three. Valentina is twenty-five and Noel is twenty-three. My mom *and* my dad—because my dad is similar to my mom—worry about us. We’re very close, and I live the farthest away from our tight-knit family. Yeah, it’s only three-and-a-half hours away but I might as well have moved to Australia. It’s not like I go years without seeing my family. I try to come up when I can, especially for holidays and other celebrations, and sometimes, just to visit. I always talk to my parents, sister, and brother every day whether it be phone or text. So, it’s not as if my parents don’t know what’s going on with my life or vice versa. But I didn’t go on vacation with them over the summer; they were going a week away from the annual RWA conference that was being held in Disney this year. They did come toward the end of the conference and I stayed an extra couple of days so we could visit Disney and Harry Potter world.

But I haven’t seen them since the end of July and couldn’t visit in October for my mother’s birthday because I had a wicked bad cold. So I kind of get why my mom went balloon crazy.

And, well, my mom wouldn’t be my mom without the balloons.

“Just tell me one thing,” I say to my dad as he turns off

the car and pops the trunk. “Tell me there aren’t more balloons inside the house.”

My dad waits for me to get out of the car and heads to the trunk to lift out my suitcase. “Now, Holiday, you know I can’t tell you that. There are balloons, and there are a lot of them. Frank is going wild.”

Frank, our seven-year-old Welsh terrier, has a mission when he sees balloons: to destroy them at all cost.

I huff out a laugh and reach into the backseat where I stowed my laptop and purse. I still have a smile on my face when I shut the door and turn around.

The smile quickly disappears when I see a familiar blue truck pull into the driveway of the house next door.

Joe.

Joe gets out, and he looks . . .

Okay, I can’t lie. I just can’t.

Joe is hot.

He’s super hot.

Tall, dark, handsome.

Brawny.

Strong.

He’s got black hair. Striking blue eyes. A full black beard. And, really, I have never liked a man with a beard because I’m not into that Duck Dynasty thing or lumberjack fantasy.

But, damn. Joe totally changed my minds about men with beards.

Okay, that’s also a lie.

Because there only seems to be one man I like with a beard.

And that man just so happens to be the one man I can’t stand.

The same man I kissed last Christmas.

I shouldn't be thinking about it.

I shouldn't.

But all I can remember is that kiss. The way he pulled me to him; how hot he was—seriously, that man is like a furnace—how his firm, full lips delivered devastatingly-rock-my-world kisses. How he tasted. And how we both pulled away at the same time, breathing heavily, and he said it was a mistake.

It sure didn't feel like a mistake.

But it obviously was.

How could I have kissed someone who doesn't like me? Who thinks kissing me is a mistake? I might be a lot of things, but there's one thing I'm not. I'm not stupid. And it would be stupid to think about that kiss anymore, to remember how he felt, how right it all felt.

Because it would be a mistake to replay that kiss and want to repeat that kiss again and again and again. I don't need to be called a mistake again, and I don't need to feel like utter shit and cry my eyes out. No thank you.

It's fine. I can avoid Joe. I'm an expert at avoiding Joe since last Christmas.

This Thanksgiving won't be any different from any of my past visits.

I'll avoid Joe at all costs.

## CHAPTER 3

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2017, 4:41 P.M.

AVOIDING Joe has been super easy so far. I've been holed up in the house, writing in my old room, the kitchen, and down in the furnished basement. I was too tired from traveling to go out last night, but my family ended up eating at home anyway. After I stuffed my face with meatballs and pasta, I went back downstairs to focus on writing.

Luckily, I made some serious headway and the revision is going a lot better than it was. I think it's partially psychological, because late last night—or early this morning, depending on your view—I hit the halfway mark in my book. It's not as if I'm rewriting the book or taking out huge chunks; it's just little things that will make the romance stronger. But still, any kind of revision can create a lot of stress, because it's not as if I want to let my publisher or readers down.

Around seven this morning, I hobbled upstairs to finally get some sleep. When I woke up eleven, I felt like crap and got a crick in my neck. A shower and food helped with the not feeling great, but my neck is still sore and it hurts to move a certain way. I keep trying to stretch and loosen the

muscles, but so far, nothing is working. As a result, I'm moody and I'm definitely not in the mood to write the first sex scene between my hero and heroine.

I need some distance.

I need some fresh air.

I go upstairs to get a cold bottle of water and some pretzels to nosh on. My dad asks me if I want to go out to dinner with them tonight at six, and I say yes because a hamburger and fries is exactly what the doctor ordered.

I want to clean up again, because I feel ugh but I decide to get that fresh air. I clip the leash on our dog, Frank, and forego my jacket and gloves—it's not that cold out, and besides, I'm wearing a sweater-like cardigan—and open the garage door.

The sunlight is almost blinding, and I hurry back inside to grab a pair of spare sunglasses and then slip into my Uggs in the garage. Frank is completely excited about going out for a walk, and I grab a small plastic bag just in case.

Our street is one of six in this small neighborhood. Although it's sunny, it's still brisk. Not cold, but the kind of fresh air that wakes you up and reddens your cheeks at the same time. Frank wants to stop and sniff at every mailbox and mark his territory, and I indulge him. I'm not in any rush, and I can get cleaned up fast in any case.

We reach the end of our street and I take a left. Joe's coming the other way with his dog, Bunny. How a burly man ended up with a Pomsky named Bunny is something I'll never understand. At that moment, Frank decides to do some doggie business by a tree lining the street.

I have my cell with me and am tempted to play Pokemon on it so I look "busy" to Joe, but then I kind of get mad at myself because I have no reason to hide. If anyone

should be embarrassed, it should be him. After all, I didn't call *him* a mistake.

Maybe I shouldn't avoid him.

I mull this over as he nears on the other side.

Maybe I've made a tactical error here. Because, okay, I was totally embarrassed and felt like crap after that kiss, so any time I came up to visit and happened to see Joe, I would hide or ignore him. And it wasn't like he ever made an attempt to smooth things over. He's been perfectly fine with the status quo.

*This was a mistake.*

Funny, how those words can still burn even today. How they make me feel things.

But this time, I don't ashamed or embarrassed.

I'm pissed.

And I'm not going to avoid Joe anymore.

In fact, I'm going to do the opposite. He's the next-door-neighbor. I should be neighborly.

And I should start being "neighborly" now.

I square my shoulders in determination even as I bend down to pick up Frank's mess and tie up the plastic bag. I then cross the street.

Joe sees me do this, and I swear that his striking blue eyes widen and his whole body goes on alert as I walk toward him. His dog, Bunny, does this cute little hop-thing when Frank nears. Thankfully, Frank behaves like the gentleman he is and doesn't dog-hump her.

I look up at Joe. God, he really is tall. And good-looking. And hot. Even if he's wearing a stupid red-and-black checkered shirt. He might as well be the guy on those paper towels.

I give Joe my brightest, biggest smile.

Joe gives me a wary look. "Holiday."

“Hey Joe,” I say happily and step closer to him. He goes stiller than still, and for a moment, I totally think that he really does hate me, that he considered the kiss a mistake because he cannot stand me. But then I look into his eyes.

His eyes are going from that striking blue to a darker indigo.

And they’re eating me up.

I swallow. Heavily.

“So, Joe,” I say. “How’s it going? Thinking about that kiss like I am?”

Maybe not the best way to go about things. I’m an author. I should be able to say something more clever.

But hey, it’s something.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I’m not undeterred. “Sure, you do. Me. You. The mistletoe. Christmas. It started off kind of friendly, didn’t it? Just a brush of lips, and then . . .”

I don’t need to continue.

Actually, I *can’t* continue.

Because now I’m thinking about that kiss and I can’t stop picturing it. Remembering it.

And crap . . .

I think I want another kiss.

No, I don’t think.

*I know.*

I want to kiss Joe Mahoney.

Badly.

## CHAPTER 4

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2017, 12:03 P.M.

YOU KNOW when you do something embarrassing or say something stupid or just make a fool out of yourself or think of the exact right comeback an hour later, and you replay that moment constantly in your head? You remember *everything* about what had happened, down to the most excruciating detail.

Now, I've done plenty of things that I've unfortunately replayed in my head. But nothing—*absolutely nothing*—will top what I did on late Sunday afternoon.

The moment that I asked Joe about that Christmas kiss.

The moment I realized that *I* wanted to kiss Joe again.

The moment that, before Joe could say anything, I spun around and fled like zombies were chasing me. I ran track in high school—specifically the shorter distances—so I can book it when need be.

And there was a definite need on Sunday.

What the heck was I thinking? I've been so embarrassed by my runaway mouth and that Joe just kind of stood there—obviously he was gearing up for a variation of *sorry, it's not you, it's me and I'm not into you like that and it was a*

*huge mistake so let's go back to being enemies, k?* Obviously he would have been way less verbose but yeah . . . I'm totally shamefaced and have been hiding away in my parents' house.

Besides, I do need to write and get going on the deadline, so it's not as if I'm trying to avoid Joe again. It's just . . .

Yeah, I'm totally avoiding Joe, and he's been avoiding me. He hasn't come over, so I got the message loud and clear.

Joe never wanted to kiss me that night, and he doesn't want to ever kiss me again.

Fine.

I'm not going to want to kiss him anymore. I'm not going to pine away for a guy who doesn't like me. I'm not going to have some unrequited crush. I'm not in high school anymore. I'm older now. But perhaps not wiser.

At least I've written more in my book. I'm now at 65,000 words. I did have to delete about five thousand late last night when my hero, a duke nicknamed Sin, suddenly grew a beard and kissed the hell out of my heroine under the mistletoe. And then my heroine told my hero she liked kissing him. First, my hero doesn't have a beard. Second, my book isn't even set at Christmas. But after I cut the scene and got to working again, I made more inroads into my book. So I'm feeling good about it.

Unfortunately that's the only thing I feel good about right now.

"Holiday!" My mom opens the basement room door. "Can you come up here for a sec?"

"Sure." I save my work and then send it to my email. I'm paranoid about losing any of my book—some bad experiences having done exactly that in the past—so I always periodically save and email myself a copy in case anything

should happen. After doing that, I head upstairs to the kitchen. My mom is taking out a freshly baked apple pie from the oven and sets it on the counter. “Isn’t it a little early for the apple pie?” I ask. My mom usually makes an apple pie for Thanksgiving but she doesn’t make one this early. She knows it would be eaten away and never see the light of turkey day.

“It’s for Joe,” she says.

“Why are you baking him an apple pie?”

“Joe’s a great neighbor,” my mom says. “Much better than the people who used to live in his house. Remember the Gordons?”

I shudder. “How could I not? They were awful.”

My mom nods in agreement. “So, five years ago, when they decided to move to Florida and sell their house, your father and I were expecting that we’d have another bad neighbor. But thankfully that didn’t happen. We got Joe. Do you know Joe shoveled the driveway for us when your dad pulled his back last year? And then he helped your sister out of a snow ditch. He’s a great guy.”

“You told me,” I say. “But I also remember that you and dad and Val thanked me.”

I also remember the day Joe moved in next door. June first. 9:01 a.m.

“It’s also his birthday.” My mom takes out an extra pair of oven mitts and lays them out on the counter. “And since he doesn’t have any family nearby—”

“He doesn’t?” This is news to me. “That’s why you invited him to Christmas last year.”

“Once I found out . . .”

My mom doesn’t need to finish her sentence. My mom has the biggest heart of anyone I know. It’s no surprise to me that she’d invite Joe over; she would have hated the idea of

him being alone for the holiday. And, truth be told, so would I.

I hate the idea of him being alone for his birthday.

“So I need you to do me a favor.”

I know what my mom is going to say and brace myself.

“I need you to bring this pie over to Joe.”

## CHAPTER 5

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2017, 1:09 A.M.

I CAN'T SLEEP. I'm wide awake. The apple pie is still on the counter, taunting me. I tried delivering the pie to Joe but he wasn't home both times when I did so, once in the early evening and then again a few hours ago.

I stare at my Word document and frown at what I've just written. My hero is eating apple pie. Ugh. I delete the sentence and try to focus.

Ten seconds later, I'm opening Twitter and do a generic search on Joe Mahoney. Big mistake. There seem to be a gazillion Joe Mahoneys, and next door Joe doesn't seem like a tweeter. I go to Facebook next and find my mom's page. My mom friends everyone; she even friended the mailman. I'm pretty confident my mom would have friended Joe. I scroll through her friend list and don't find him. He doesn't have Facebook? In this day and age?

I tap my fingers on the desk, completely at a loss. No social media means I can't look at any pics or gleam any info as to where Joe was . . . if he's dating someone.

Not that I care.

My frown deepens and I heave out an aggravated

sound of disgust. Who am I kidding? I totally care. It bothers me that Joe might be dating and kissing someone else. But he's free and single as am I. It's not like we even like each other. But I haven't kissed anyone since Joe.

And the truth is . . . I haven't wanted to kiss anyone but Joe. God, I'm such a hot mess. Why does my nonexistent love life have to be so complicated? And where the hell has Joe been? Is he out celebrating with friends? Is he kissing anyone? Is he . . .

That's it.

I'm done torturing myself. I storm upstairs, grab the pie, clip Frank's leash on, and head out. I'll say Frank had to go the bathroom, and it's not a lie since he does exactly that when he stops at the mailbox. I spot Joe's truck in his driveway and a light on the first floor. It is late and I should just wait until tomorrow, but my body isn't listening to my brain. Before I know it, I'm walking up his driveway and standing on his porch. I glance down at Frank, who just cocks his head to one side as if saying, *what are you waiting for*. Right. Well. Let's get on with it.

I raise my hand and lightly knock on his door. Maybe he won't answer—

The door swings open. Joe stands there in a faded navy T-shirt and loose black shorts, and his dog, Bunny, is right by his side. I keep my eyes firmly on Joe's face, but it's useless because all I can picture are those thick, muscled legs, powerful thighs, strong calves, and I can't even begin to think about those sexy forearms of his. He makes casual pajamas smoking hot. Unlike me, because my polka dot pj pants, bright pink tank, grey hoodie, no bra, and messy bun scream *author on deadline*.

I shove the pie in front of me. "This is for you. From my parents. My mom made it, but it's from the both of them."

“What’s this for?”

I notice that he doesn’t mention that it’s past one a.m. or that I’m the one delivering the pie and wonder about that. “Your birthday. I know it was yesterday but technically it’s still your birthday on the West Coast, so you know . . . you can still celebrate it. Live it up. Happy Birthday, by the way.”

He takes the pie from me. “Why don’t you come in?”

My heartbeat quickens. “Okay.”



## CHAPTER 6

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2017, 2:16 A.M.

I FOLLOW him inside to his kitchen. He also has an open floor plan but unlike the trendy but comfy look my mom favors, his house is all comfort laidback but sleek modern appliances. He has a huge widescreen TV in the great room with a long, oversized leather couch. Bunny and Frank run around a couple of times, playing, before both settle near each other on the floor.

Joe sets the pie down on the counter and then heads over to his light oak cabinets. He pulls open a bottom drawer to take out silverware and ice cream scooper, and then reaches into a cabinet on the right for two dishes. He places those supplies near the pie before walking to the fridge. He opens the freezer and removes a carton of vanilla ice cream. On the fridge side, he gets a canister of whipped-cream.

Fridge door still opened, Joe looks over at me. "Coffee?"

"I'll never sleep if I take a cup now."

"Water?"

"Sure," I say.

He gives me a cold water bottle and opens one for himself, then walks back to where the pie is. "Your parents are awfully nice, Holiday."

"Thanks," I say. And because I can't help myself or have learned the lesson about my runaway mouth . . . "So, where were you today? I came by earlier but you weren't home."

Joe keeps his attention on slicing two generous servings of pie. "When did you come over?"

"Maybe around five the first time and eight the second."

He looks up at that. "You came around twice?"

"Well, my mom asked me to drop the pie off."

"Oh."

"And . . ."

He puts one slice on a plate. "And?"

"And . . . I don't know," I say helplessly. "I don't even know why I'm here right now."

"You don't?"

I hesitate for far too long. "I don't," I finally whisper.

"I think you do."

"Where were you today," I ask again.

"Still working," he says. "Both times. You know I'm a teacher, right?"

"Yeah."

"I teach English. This year, I have three classes of seniors and two classes of juniors. I'm also the advisor for Key Club and one of the advisors for the Drama Club; I run the tech crew for that one."

My heart kind of goes to mush hearing the warmth in his voice when he mentions teaching and his extracurricular activist.

"Anyway," Joe continues, "both clubs met tonight and the drama kids are rehearsing for a winter play."

“So you didn’t celebrate your birthday?” This seems criminal to me.

“You said it was still my birthday out West.”

“True . . .”

“I figure it’s not too late to celebrate my birthday.”

“With me?” I fumble for words. “But I didn’t even get you anything.”

Joe abandons the pie and heads toward me. My heart thumps fiercely, and my mouth goes dry. He stops a few feet away from me.

“Apple pie is great,” he says. “But you know what would even be better?”

“What?”

“A kiss.”

Yup. There goes my heart, galloping away. “I’m sorry but my mom can’t kiss you. You know, being married and all.”

Joe laughs, and the sound warms my heart even more. He takes a step closer. “Kiss me, Holiday.”

I walk toward him. “It is your birthday . . .”

“It is,” he says gravely.

“So . . .” I look into his striking blue eyes, and it feels like everything else falls away. “I should kiss you.”

“You should.”

“I really, really should.” I place my hands on his wide, firm shoulders and lean up on my toes. I feel too much right now . . . and the only thing that makes any sense is to do this, to kiss him.

I brush my lips against his as if I’m taking a sip of wine. His beard tickles my skin and surprises a giggle out of me. His hands go to my waist and his fingers flex, then tighten. The kissing sip isn’t enough. It only gives me too short of a

tease of what happened last year and a promise of what is to come. And I don't like teasers. I want it now.

I tumble into the next kiss. Fall into him, fall into the kiss. Last year's kiss was world-rocking, and this kiss . . . this kiss is phenomenal. The kiss is better than the first one. I can't even compare the two, because I suspect that every kiss with Joe would be the best kiss ever.

And this kiss definitely feels like the best kiss ever.

I kiss him, sliding my mouth over his. He lets out a harsh sound and yanks me toward him. His lips are firm and hot and utter seduction on mine. He kisses me like he's been thinking about it, wanting it, and it suddenly hits me.

He's wanted this—wanted *me*—all this time, too.

I let myself fall further, knowing Joe is there. He'll catch me. He'll fall with me. And he does. He tumbles with me. His tongue touches mine; his hands grip me tighter to him before caressing to my butt. He squeezes and lifts me up to the counter, never once breaking our kiss.

He tugs down the zipper to my hoodie as he tastes me and groans in satisfaction. I shrug out of the hoodie, impatient to have my hands back on him, to run my fingers through his thick beard and dark hair. To touch every part of him. I taste him and moan at the velvet, liquid heat of him.

His mouth leaves mine to trail kisses along my jaw, down my neck. I arch backward, inviting him to kiss me there again. His tongue dips at my clavicle, then his lips scatter kisses over to my right side. His teeth catch on the thin strap of my tank top. He pulls it down partway my arm, but not enough to make my tank top drop.

I wiggle my arms between us and tug my tank down over my delicate breasts. My breasts are on the smaller side, but they're nice and full and perky. My nipples are espe-

cially perky right now. The rosy tips are standing at attention, and a bright pink color rises along my skin under Joe's devouring direct gaze.

"Holiday," he groans. "You're beautiful. Perfect. Flawless."

And before I can say anything in return, he lowers his head to my nipple and takes it into his mouth.

I whimper.

He sucks.

I clutch his head.

He nips.

I moan his name.

He sucks deeper.

My insides go tight with need even as I get wet and ready. But I'm not ready for him sucking my other nipple. I'm not ready when he lifts me up just enough to lower my polka dot pants. I'm not ready for the slight chill that hits my bared skin, or for the sudden vulnerability that flashes through me.

He looks up at me. "Holiday?"

"I just need to know . . ." I swallow. "I just need to know that you won't think this is a mistake like last time."

"One day, I'll explain that, Holiday, I swear. But I promise you this, I never thought any of this was a mistake. I won't think that now, I swear." His blue eyes are solemn and serious and full of desire. "Let me show you. I'll make this good."

I decide to trust him, and I let him in.

My legs go soft as I spread them, and his gaze goes liquid hot. He traces a finger along my seam and his eyes close for a second. "You're so freaking hot, Holiday. So wet. All of this is for me?"

"Yes," I whisper. "It's all for you. Because of you."

“I’m going to make you feel good, Holiday.”

“Don’t make me feel good, Joe. Make me feel awesome.”

His eyes light up. “Will do.”

And he sets about doing exactly that.

## CHAPTER 7

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2017, 11:48 P.M.

LONG AFTER THE TURKEY, sweet potato casserole, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and other food goodness has been consumed—after which my baby brother, Noel, was declared this year’s winner in the Battle of the Pies with his cinnamon streusel apple pie—I slip out of the house, this time leaving Frank behind, and head over next door.

Joe was at dinner, seated to my left. All through dinner I could feel his furnace-like heat by me. Every ticking second I remembered the feel of his beard against my inner thighs, the hot press of his tongue, the way he unraveled me with every kiss, every flick, every lick. I came undone.

Nothing else happened besides that, even though I really wanted more and Joe wanted more. But, for some reason, we both held back by the skin of our teeth.

It’s been pure torture. All day, I’ve thought of last night and I’ve thought of what would have happened if I had stayed or if Joe had reached for me. When he entered my parents’ house earlier tonight, I *almost* jumped his bones, right in the foyer. Numerous times I pictured grabbing his

hand and leading him away to a secret rendezvous in the house.

But I didn't.

Instead, I felt his hot, hot gaze on me. Felt the strong, solid bulk of him seated next to me. And, just before he left, he leaned down and whispered three words.

*Come over tonight.*

So, here, I am. Less than fifteen minutes away from the stroke of midnight. Outside his door. Ready to be ravished and to do a lot of ravishing on my own.

I raise my hand—

And the door flies open before I can even knock . . .

Before I can even say anything . . .

Joe hauls me to him and slams the door shut. In a matter of seconds, I'm pressed against the hard wood door. In a matter of a blink, Joe is pressed against me, running his hands along my form. In a matter of a breath, Joe lowers his head . . .

"About damn time," he says.

And then he kisses me.

## CHAPTER 8

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2017, 10:47 P.M.

JOE TRACES lazy circles on my back. The bed sheet is pulled down to my waist, and I turn my head to the other side to let out a yawn.

“I’m not doing it right if you’re yawning,” Joe says.

I laugh. “You’re doing it exactly right if I’m yawning.”

The biggest surprise of my life?

Joe Mahoney is a sex god.

The things he did to me . . . the things *we* did . . .

It still brings a blush to my face. Makes me heated. Makes me want him all over again.

“I know that sound,” Joe says.

I look toward him. He’s deliciously mussed, his hair all ruffled from my fingers running through and tugging the strands; he’s as naked as me.

We haven’t stayed in bed *all* day.

We got up.

And in between filling our bodies, Joe filled me in the kitchen, in the den, in the bathroom . . . pretty much every room available was used. Each time, it started off so innocently.

*"We should eat something," he said after I'd woken up next to him, after we'd had the best morning sex ever.*

*"Sure," I said. "Let me get something on."*

*I rose from the bed, naked, and Joe just looked at me, with heat in his eyes. "On second thought . . ." he said. "I think I can wait. You?"*

*"Oh, I can wait for food." But I couldn't wait for him.*

We eventually did make it to the kitchen around mid-morning. In between eating grilled cheese, I finally answered numerous, nosy texts from my mom and sister—she knows I'm next door and can fill in the details, but I'm not giving her or Val specifics, even though my mom claims that she's been trying to matchmake all along. I soon left that convo, though, as soon as Joe started nibbling on my neck.

Joe offered me the use of his bathroom first, but when I pointed out we could conserve water, well . . . let's just say I'll never look at a shower stall in the same way.

But the biggest kicker is when I was downstairs in his den and ventured into the smaller room next door that Joe uses for an office/workspace for teaching. In there, Joe has another bookcase; he has books in every part of his house, which I absolutely love. But on that particular bookcase, a few things caught my eye.

My books.

Not just one copy or two. He has five copies of each book I've written. One copy from each set has been well read. And it's not as if I'm the only romance book he has, he has many of them. When I asked him about it, he said he got into romance after buying my books, which honestly . . . yeah, that just made me all warm and fuzzy, and I completely jumped his bones.

But that's not what made me realize that I've been in

love with Joe Mahoney this whole time, or that he's been in love with me.

It was this.

Just now.

As he traces lazy circles on my back, as I realized I could spend more and more days with him, how that every moment with Joe—good or bad—was a moment I wanted forever.

It was also this.

When I turn over on my back and raise myself up, not even bothering trying to covered my naked breasts. I lift my hands up to his face and kiss him, slow and sweet.

“I love you, Holiday,” he says.

“About damn time,” I whisper and kiss him again. “And I love you, too.”



## EPILOGUE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2018

I'M GETTING ready when there's a knock on the door. The makeup artist finishes applying lipstick to my lips as my sister, the maid of honor, goes to answer the door.

My sister returns shortly with a smile on her face. "I think you need to answer this one, Holiday."

"No kissing," the makeup artist says. "At least not until after."

"And no looking," my mom says, attempting a stern tone but failing utterly. "It's bad luck."

"I won't," I say. I don't believe in bad luck or superstitions but there are some things that are so ingrained in me that I wouldn't want to break, like the groom seeing the bride before the wedding. First look pictures are popular but Joe and I decided not to take any photos until the ceremony starts. He wants to see me for the first time as I walk down the aisle.

And, at exactly two-thirty p.m., he will.

So much has happened this year. Joe and I did the long distance thing until New Year's Eve. I moved back home in early January, and by Valentine's Day, I was living with Joe.

At the end of May, my first book released in my new series (I did finish those revisions and my editor loved them), and I hit all the lists, including coming in at number fourteen on *The New York Times*. My second book released at the end of August and reached number seven, and there are high hopes that book three will do even better.

On Independence Day, as Joe and I went on vacation with my family to the Jersey shore, Joe got down on one knee and asked me to marry him.

I said yes.

We didn't want to wait. We're not into the big wedding affair, but are keeping it low-key with a simple ceremony and small reception afterward. We're not getting married in some big venue, either.

We're getting married where it all first began.

Where we met, on the front lawn between his house and my parents'. Needless to say, the neighbors will all be there. Once we become husband and wife, our reception is going to be at a restaurant less than five minutes away. And after that, Joe and I are leaving for a few days in Vermont. Over the winter break, we're going on our official honeymoon in Hawaii.

Our whole romance has been a whirlwind, but when you know, you know. When it's right, it's right.

"Holiday?" my mom asks. "You're daydreaming again."

I laugh and secure the sash to my robe before heading over to the door. I open it just a crack and press my back to it so I'm not tempted to look.

"Give me your hand," Joe says.

I slide my hand through the narrow opening and sigh when his hand grasps mine. *There*. Absolutely perfect. I didn't know how much I needed to feel Joe until just now. We haven't seen each other since the rehearsal dinner last

night. I feel more centered. Some of my butterflies have fluttered away.

“Nervous?” he asks.

“A little,” I admit. “Not about marrying you. Just everyone watching.”

“Me too,” he admits. “But you know what I think to make it all better?”

“What?”

“That everyone there loves us,” he says.

He’s right. We will be surrounded by so much love.

“And there’s one other thing that makes everything better,” Joe says, his voice full of emotion. “That you’ll be walking toward me. That once we exchange rings, once we’re declared husband and wife, that you’re my wife. You’re going to be my wife, Holiday.”

“Mrs. Holiday Joy Bright Mahoney.” I’m keeping Holiday Bright for my author name but becoming Holiday Mahoney everywhere else. “And you’ll be mine, too.”

“The truth is, Holiday, I’ve loved you from the very start, but I never thought this would ever happen, not in my wildest fantasies.”

“I know.” If anyone had told me that I’d fall in love with and marry the guy next door, I would have laughed myself silly. “But I’m really glad, Joe. I’m so happy. I love you.”

“I love you, and I have something for you.”

“You already gave me a present,” I say. Diamond earrings that I’m wearing today, and I gave him a watch. It’s my something new. Something borrowed is my grandmother’s rosary that I’m carrying with my bouquet. Something blue are my shoes.

“And I have this, too.” He slips something in my hand. It feels light and delicate. “You can look.”

I slip my hand out of Joe’s and move it back inside so I

can see. It's a beautiful silver necklace with two small diamond hearts intertwined.

"I love it," I say.

"I'll be waiting for you at the end of the aisle."

"I'll be the one in white," I say cheekily.



"I NOW PRONOUNCE you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

Joe smiles at me, love and warmth in those striking blue eyes. "Mrs. Mahoney."

"Mr. Mahoney," I whisper back.

His hands cup my face, and I lean up to meet his lips.

To kiss him for the first time as his wife.

*My husband.*

*My heart.*

*My love.*

The kiss leaves me breathless, and we turn to face our cheering friends and family. Love greets us from everywhere.

Love is in my heart. Love is walking by my side.

Love is there.

Always.

## THANK YOU

Thank you for reading RECKLESS KISSING! I hope you enjoyed this rom-com short story.

If you'd like to be notified when I have a new release out, please consider signing up for my newsletter.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elyssa Patrick writes screwball romantic comedies that have a lot of heat, humor, and heart—and they always have a happily ever after. Elyssa lives in Upstate New York and is working on her next contemporary romance novel. You can find Elyssa at [www.elyssapatrack.com](http://www.elyssapatrack.com).



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