
CHOCOLATE KISSES

Judith Arnold

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Table of Contents

[Chapter Chocolate Kisses \(novella\) One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Chocolate Kisses \(novella\) Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

8:58 a.m.

“YOU BROKE MY HEARTS!”

Ned Wyatt dusted the snow off his black denim dungarees and glanced toward the road. He'd been accused of breaking a few hearts in his day, but what did that have to do with anything? She'd been the one driving the minivan, after all; he'd been riding a bicycle. If anything had broken it would have been his bones, not her heart.

Then again, she'd said *hearts*. If she had more than one heart, anything was possible.
Chocolate Kisses (novella)

He heaved himself to his feet and looked around. His eighteen-speed bike lay on its side several yards down the road, apparently undamaged. He recalled the way it had lurched under him like a wild bronco, spitting pebbles and slush in all directions until he'd deliberately
Chocolate Kisses (novella) jumped clear of it.

Closing his eyes, Chocolate Kisses (novella) he replayed the near-collision in his mind: the van cruising down the road toward him as he coasted out through the wrought-iron gates in the stone wall surrounding Wyatt Hall. The whine of the van's tires losing traction on the Chocolate Kisses (novella) slippery road as the driver slammed on the breaks. The violent spin. The van's Chocolate Kisses (novella) rear bumper bouncing off the stone wall, sending the vehicle teetering on two tires, tilting precariously for the longest, ghastliest split-second Ned had ever endured before it finally dropped back onto all four tires with a jarring thump.

As he pulled himself out of the snow bank, he heard the driver's high-pitched cry: “My hearts! You broke my hearts!”

“Now, wait a minute,” he said with what he considered admirable poise. He stalked down the slope to the van. “I didn't break anything. I'm not at Chocolate Kisses (novella) fault here.”

“Of course you Chocolate Kisses (novella) are! What kind of maniac rides a bicycle in the middle of February?”

The kind of maniac who'd grown restless from too many days of slate skies and frozen precipitation, he almost retorted. When he'd awakened that morning to a clear, sunny day, he'd decided to treat himself to some fresh air and exercise. He'd bundled Chocolate Kisses (novella) up and gone out for a morning jaunt in the brisk, biting cold. He'd balanced a huge red valentine-shaped box of candy across the handlebars of his bike, figuring he'd ride north along the winding rural lanes he'd Chocolate Kisses (novella) known as a child and then circle back

Chocolate Kisses (novella) to town and deliver his gift.

He wasn't sure what impulse had compelled him to detour through Wyatt Hall's austere iron gates. He hadn't thought of the estate as home in twelve years, and he'd felt like a visitor as he pedaled around the circular driveway to the stately pillared entrance of the mansion. It was a grand house, three stories of Georgian brick with a slate hip roof and four towering stone chimneys. It would make a majestic setting for Melanie's silly shindig.

He didn't think much Chocolate Kisses (novella) of the pretentious party his sister had organized Chocolate Kisses (novella) for that night at the family estate. Chocolate Kisses (novella) Debutante cotillions were absurd, even when they were scheduled in honor of Valentine's Day and even when his niece was one of the debutantes. He would attend because Melanie had begged him to. But he still found the entire notion of a society debut laughable.

"It's a disaster," the van driver was moaning. "Everything is ruined. My hearts, my buns—oh, God, my kisses!"

Ned paused. From where he stood, her buns looked terrific, packed tightly into a pair of snug blue jeans. She stood on tiptoe with her back Chocolate Kisses (novella) to him, leaning into the rear of the van. Her shoulder-length brown hair caught the early morning sunlight and shimmered with red highlights. Her puffy down vest hid her torso, but her legs were long and slim and enticing.

Her hearts, her buns and, oh, God, her kisses. What an intriguing combination.

He sternly reminded himself that she was talking about food. The side of her van featured the painting of a huge gold cornucopia, along with the words, "Fantasy Feasts—Let Us Cater to You."

"You're catering the cotillion?" he guessed, approaching the rear of the Chocolate Kisses (novella) van.

The driver groaned and turned to him. She had wide blue eyes, sweet pink lips and a surprisingly angular chin. Ned would definitely like to pursue the subject of her kisses with her. And her buns and her hearts, too—however many she had.

Her beauty couldn't disguise the sheer panic illuminating those crystalline blue eyes and darkening the natural blush along her Chocolate Kisses (novella) cheekbones. "This is an absolute disaster!" she wailed. "Why didn't you watch where you were going?"

"Are you all right?" he asked, recalling once more the horrid sight Chocolate Kisses (novella) of her van spinning like a top on the icy road.

"How can I be all right?" she glanced over her shoulder at the van and shuddered. "I'm about to lose the biggest job of my life, thanks to you and your idiotic bicycle tricks. And you want to know Chocolate Kisses (novella) if I'm all right?"

“I wasn’t doing tricks,” he protested. “I was just riding.”

“In the middle of snow and ice.”

“I didn’t know I had to get permission Chocolate Kisses (novella) from the weatherman to take a ride.”

“And you had to ride here, of all places. This is private property. It isn’t a bike trail. How the hell was I supposed to know some maniac on a bike would come speeding out from this private driveway—”

“This is *my* driveway,” he told her, growing tired of her ranting, even though he couldn’t imagine ever tiring of her stunning blue eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s Wyatt Hall.”

“I’m Ned Wyatt.”

She stopped in mid-tirade. “You’re who?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“Ned Wyatt.” He extended his right hand. “And you’re...?”

“Claudia Mulcahey,” she said in an even smaller voice. She lowered her gaze and slipped her hand into his. Her fingers were pale and slim; he detected a slight tremor in them. “I guess—I mean—you must be related to Mrs. Steele.”

“Melanie is my sister,” Ned said. He clasped Claudia Mulcahey’s hand without bothering to shake it. It felt delicate in his, graceful and cool Chocolate Kisses (novella) and feminine. The trembling indicated how much her driving mishap must have frightened her.

He didn’t want to let go, but she withdrew her hand before he could think of an excuse to keep holding her. “Well,” she said with a tortured sigh, “not only is this job completely ruined, but I’ve just Chocolate Kisses (novella) called my customer’s brother a maniac. I may as well crawl in Chocolate Kisses (novella) a hole and die.”

Ned nudged her aside so he could survey the interior of her van. “You may as well assess the damage and see what can be salvaged. Melanie has her heart Chocolate Kisses (novella) set on this stupid cotillion. She’s not going to take it well if her caterer crawls into a hole and dies.”

Claudia grimaced. “What can I do? Everything’s ruined. My cakes...” She pulled two overturned metal trays Chocolate Kisses (novella) toward her. They held large chunks and smaller crumbs of golden and devil’s food cake, along with dislodged sheets of plastic wrap. “The layers for two triple-tiered heart-shaped cakes. I was going to assemble them here at Wyatt Hall, but they’re all broken. And my kisses...” Her voice threatened to crack and she swallowed. Lifting an overturned bowl, she shook her head. “Homemade chocolate kisses. Not

the candy-store kind. There they are, under the seat with the strawberries. And the cheese biscuits and the date-nut buns and the braided loaves. Oh, no—did the yogurt dip spill? This is a disaster!”

Ned scrutinized the mess. A puddle of viscous white—the yogurt dip, he presumed—stained the floor near the sliding side door. Strawberries lay scattered about. Trays leaned at dire angles, spilling food items across every surface.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It’s a disaster.”

“What am I going to do? I can’t possibly make everything all over again. I have so much prep work, and without the cakes...” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Hey,” he said in a soothing voice. He wanted to envelop her in a hug and comfort her—and then, if she responded at all positively, he wanted to discuss her kisses and her buns. She was a fine-looking woman, and it had been six long months since he’d left Manhattan and the lively social life he’d enjoyed there. He wondered if Claudia had a date for Valentine’s Day.

Of course she had a date: Glenwood, Connecticut’s first annual Valentine’s Day cotillion, masterminded by Melanie Wyatt Steele. If Ned knew what was good for him, he would send the charming Ms. Mulcahey on her way so she could bake some more heart-shaped chocolate and vanilla layers before sundown.

“Surely you and your partners can whip up another cake.”

“What partners?”

He leaned around the open door to view the side of the van. “It says, ‘Let *us* cater to you.’”

Chocolate Kisses Novella

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