
THE HEART BREAKER

CATHRYN FOX

Cathryn
FOX
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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The Heart Breaker

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C hristmas Eve:

Tension radiates off my buddy, Brody, and fills the interior of his sports car as he eases it into my parents' slippery driveway. I tear my gaze away from all the twinkling lights on the snow-covered shrubs, worry going through me as I take in my friend's deep frown. Man, it's been a hell of a week off—for both of us.

It was just last month I invited Brody to come to my hometown of Holiday Peak, Massachusetts, to spend Christmas with my family and me. As soon as we got here, we set up a stupid bet that involved the local chocolatier, and in the end, my buddy went and fell for the girl who seemed to have a hate on for him. Tonight? Well, tonight was all about him trying to make things right with her, and while I was more than happy to help him—hell, I want to see him happy—I

hated being away from my girl Nikki Walsh for one single second.

Technically, she's not my girl. Nikki and I have been best friends since kindergarten—she's the only girl we allowed into our treehouse—and because I now live in Boston and play for the Seattle Shooters, we rarely get to see each other, and yes, it's possible that I'm in love with her and too chicken shit to do anything about it.

But fuck, man, she means everything to me, and while we joke and carry on, she's honestly giving me whiplash. One minute I think she wants to take things further, the next she's colder than the snowman on my neighbor's lawn. I'm afraid of making a move and ruining everything we've built over the years. I'd rather be her friend than run the risk of losing her. Yeah, that's right. Chicken shit.

"You good, bro?" I ask Brody, and he nods, but he's not good. He needs to do some serious damage control to win back his girl's trust.

He exhales loudly and stares straight ahead, a little lost in thought. "Yeah, I think I need a good night's sleep."

I study his face as the dashboard light highlights deep lines around his eyes. "The party should have died down by now," I tell him. There's only one car left on the street, which is a good indication that Mom's annual Christmas Eve dinner party has ended.

"Good, I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone." He kills the engine, grips the steering wheel, and shakes his head. "Sorry for tearing you away from the party, and from Nikki. I know you don't get enough time with her as it is, and here I am dragging you into my shit."

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” I open my door and a cool winter breeze swirls around the interior of the car. “We’d better get inside. She’s going to need a drive home.” I step from the vehicle and my heart speeds up a bit. It’s insane how excited I am to see her. I’ve only been gone a little over an hour, yet I can’t wait to have her close. I know I can’t touch or kiss her like I want, but I can throw my arm around her—under the guise that she might slip on the icy driveway, of course—as I walk her to my car and see her home safely. I grin. Maybe this year under the mistletoe, she’ll actually kiss me instead of whacking my chest and laughing. Heck, maybe I’ll finally get that kiss on New Year’s Eve when the ball drops.

Brody and I are supposed to head back to Boston right after Christmas, but I always try to come back for the big New Year’s bash. No one does the holidays quite like the folks here in Holiday Peak. Over the top decorations and parties? Hell yeah. Would I want it any other way? Nope.

Brody lags as I dart up the stairs and open the front door, and my heart sinks when I glance into the living room to find Mom, Dad and Aunt Jeannie. Mom takes one look at me and frowns. She stands, and crosses the room.

“Declan, what is it?”

I glance past her shoulder and turn around to see into the kitchen. “Where’s Nikki?”

“Oh, she wasn’t sure what time you were going to be back, and Patrick offered to drive her home. The roads are getting bad, and he has that big old sheriff’s truck to keep her safe.”

“Her safety is important,” I murmur, and work to fight off the green-eyed monster rising up from the depths of my stomach. I have nothing to be jealous of, though. Nikki doesn’t have a

thing for Patrick. If she did, she would have mentioned it to me, right? Seriously though, she can be with any guy she wants. I might not like it and it's not like I've done anything about my feelings for her, and I want her happy... Just not with Patrick.

Or any other guy.

Fuck me.

I don't need to turn to know Brody's eyes are on me. I haven't really opened up about my feelings for Nikki, but he's a smart guy. He clearly knows something is going on, and that I'm a big chicken shit.

"I'm going to head up," Brody says, his voice weary as he gestures toward the stairs.

"Yes, of course," my mom says and kisses her hand and places it on his cheek. He leans into it, a smile on his face. "I'll see you in the morning." She grins. "I hear Santa is close."

"Thanks, Donna." My heart beats hard for my friend. I'm glad I could give him this nice family Christmas, and I really hope he can fix things with Josie. They belong together.

Nikki and I belong together.

"I'm going to head up too," I say to Mom and throw my arms around her for a big hug. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Will you be having breakfast before you go with Nikki to the gravesite?"

My phone buzzes and I tug it from my pocket, hoping it's Nikki. It's not. Disappointment sits in my gut as I shove it back into my pocket. I give Brody a nod as he disappears up the stairs, and frown when I turn back to Mom.

“Did Nikki say anything before she left?” It’s not like her to just leave, no text to let me know what was going on. I told her I’d be back as fast as I could, and I’d take her home. Maybe she got tired of waiting.

“No, was she supposed to say something?” she asks, her eyes narrowed like she’s searching her brain because she might have forgotten something important.

I shake my head. “No, I’m just a bit surprised and I haven’t heard from her. I’m sure she’ll text soon, and I’m assuming we won’t be heading to the gravesite until after breakfast and presents are open.”

She kisses her hands and places them on my cheeks. “It’s so nice that you go with her every year.”

“She’s my best friend. It’s what friends do for each other.” My heart pinches tight as I think back to the night she lost her mom. We were just kids, only five years old. It was a confusing and sad time for everyone, and Nikki spent most of that first week at my place. I could hear her cry at night, and I’d sneak in to sleep with her and wipe the tears from her face.

“You’ve been a good friend to her.”

Maybe then, but have I lately? I barely speak to her during the NHL season. Thinking about her when I’m away, in a hotel room that looks like every other, or during a game, always fucks me over, and yeah, here I am hating that she might be with someone else, when I’m a well-known man-whore. As awful as it sounds, I bury myself in other women with the hopes of getting one out of my head. It hasn’t worked yet, and you know what, I am getting damn tired of it all.

What are you going to do about that, dude?

I pull my phone from my pocket again and run my fingers over the screen. Is it too late to text? I don't want to wake her up, but I can't shake the feeling that something is off between us. In the bathroom, I brush my teeth, and tug my shirt off as I walk back to my bedroom. Downstairs, the front door opens and closes, Aunt Jeannie finally calling it a night. Whispered words reach my ears as Mom and Dad put parcels under the tree. No matter how old I am, Santa still comes to the Bradbury house.

I glance at the little box on my nightstand, my gift to Nikki. We usually exchange gifts on Christmas Eve, which makes her sudden departure all that more confusing. Maybe she's not feeling well? She did have the sniffles the other day.

I strip off and climb between the sheets, and check my phone one more time. I wait one minute, until my clock reads midnight, and I send her a text.

Me: *Merry Christmas.*

I stare at my phone for a long time, and I'm about to set it down when three dots appear. I adjust my pillow and get ready for a texting session. We've been doing that all week, and some of the tension eases inside me. But after a long time, her text comes in, and it's wishful thinking on my part that we slip from texting to sexting, but the two words that appear on my screen send those thoughts running for the hills, and floods my body with unease.

. . .

Nikki: *Merry Christmas.*

I stare at my phone, waiting for more but nothing comes. Chest tight, I try to take a breath, but my lungs are a bit constricted. I struggle to tamp down my worries. I'm sure come tomorrow, when I show up to take her and her dad to the gravesite, all will be good, and I can't forget Christmas isn't always twinkling lights and sugar cookies for everyone. Some people, especially those who've had loss, have a hard time with the holiday.

I drop my phone, and put my arm over my head, willing sleep to come. I drift off, but have strange dreams that pull me awake. This goes on for a few more hours, until first light, and the sound of Brody's footsteps walking down the hall pulls me awake. I guess he's off to try to patch things up with Josie. While I'd like to hightail it to Nikki's, it's too early. I lay there for a couple more hours and when I hear Mom and Dad in the kitchen, trying to be quiet, I rush downstairs, eager to get on with my day...eager to see Nikki.

"Merry Christmas," I say, injecting enthusiasm into my voice when I enter the kitchen and find Mom and Dad cooking up a storm. But those two words, and the simple text from Nikki last night, churn in my stomach. "Coffee," I mumble going right for the pods.

Mom laughs at me. "Not much has changed since you were a child." She hands me the milk. "Still can't sleep when you know Santa is coming."

I laugh. "You know me. I love presents." I glance over Dad's shoulder as he cooks a full package of bacon. "Need any help?" I ask, although I fear I'm not going to be able to choke it down, not when my stomach is in knots.

“Grab the plates,” Dad says.

Ten minutes later, we’re seated around the table, and Mom frowns. “Should you go get Brody up?”

“Sorry, I should have told you. He left early this morning.” I check the time. He’s been gone for hours, so I can only hope that’s a good sign.

Mom has a little twinkle in her eye when she grins. “They make such a cute couple. It’s nice to see all your friends settling down, Declan.” She takes a deep breath and lets it out, and while she’s not saying anything about my single status, she’s saying everything about it.

My phone pings and I snatch it from the table, and smile when I see it’s from Brody, letting me know things are good and he’ll call me later.

“Was that Nikki?” Mom asks.

“No, Brody.” I set my phone down, and find it hard to keep the smile on my face as worry prowls through me.

“Why don’t we wait on the presents,” Mom says.

I nod. While I hate to rush off, everything in my gut is telling me I need to go, and I need to go now.

C hristmas Day:

Despite the twinkling lights, and the fresh Christmas snow falling on our lawn, my insides are a turbulent mess of loss and sadness. I left the party last night without saying goodbye to Declan, without exchanging gifts like we've done for years. That's so not like me. In fact, I told him I'd wait for him—I always wait for him—but as the night progressed, the strange, urgent need to flee, to save my heart and soul, forced me into action. I'm not sure what came over me, maybe it had something to do with my friend Josie telling me the town's sheriff was interested in me, and deep in my heart I knew I had to move on.

I'm not sure if Patrick sensed the panic in me last night, but when he offered to drive me home in his big, sturdy truck—I'm not a fan of slippery roads—I accepted. He's a nice man, a good man, a man any woman would be lucky to have. The

problem for me is that my heart belongs to another. But I can't be with Declan, not just because he'll only ever see me as a friend, but I'm not the right girl for him. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as I stand at the living room window, taking in the quiet streets, and hug myself as the coffee maker beeps.

"Hey kiddo, coffee's ready," Dad says from the kitchen, and I push off the sill and glance at the twinkling lights reflecting off the picture frame on the mantel—mom in her wedding dress.

I put a smile on my face for my Dad's sake. It's Christmas after all, and despite the losses we've suffered, we honestly have so much to be thankful for. The smell of turkey roasting in the oven reaches my nostrils. Normally Christmas dinner is just the two of us, but tonight Dad invited a friend from work. Apparently, she's new in town, with no family close by, and since Dad's motto is no one eats alone in Holiday Peak, she'll be seated at our table tonight.

"Roads look slippery." I worry my lip between my teeth as Dad hands me a steamy cup of coffee. I take a big sip and moan my approval. "Maybe we should wait until the plows clear the streets before we go to the gravesite."

"Up to you." He scratches his unshaven face. As the manager at the local bank, Dad's a suit and tie kind of guy, but come the holidays, he kicks back and relaxes, which makes me happy. You know what else would make me happy? If he found love again. The man dedicated his life to raising me, trying to be mother and father, and he deserves happiness more than anyone I know. "I'm good either way." He lifts his coffee cup, and glances at me over the rim, his graying brows raised. "Will Declan be joining us?"

I almost laugh. He knows me far too well, and clearly senses something is off and when something is off, it usually has to do with Declan. This Christmas is going to be different from the rest, though. Whenever Declan comes home, I drop everything to spend every minute with him, and when he says goodbye, it always leaves me alone and lonely. I just can't keep doing this to myself. I'm determined to break the pattern once and for all.

"No, I don't think so. He's with his family, and he has a friend staying with them this year." I inject lightness in my tone and add, "We'll go, just you and me." It's been Dad and me for so long, I can't see life any other way. Not that I'm complaining. I love my Dad. He's my rock, and I can't see getting my own place when he has this big house. Or maybe it's the thoughts of leaving a place that holds such strong memories of my mother. I don't remember much. I was only five when we lost her, but what I do remember, I hold close.

He stands, and his ankle cracks. "Florida is looking better and better," he says. "These old bones are done with the cold."

"You'll never leave Holiday Peak," I say with a wave of my hand.

"I think you're wrong. I think it's time for Florida winters."

I just shake my head at him. He's been talking about Florida for years now, but I'm not sure if he's serious. Sometimes I think he wants to move just to get me moving, but onto what?

"Maybe you should come too."

"My life is here, Dad."

He eyes me. "You can work anywhere, kiddo." His face falls, goes a bit serious. "You're not staying here because of me,

right?" he asks, and not for the first time. "It's a big world out there, Nikki. Don't miss out on it because you think you need to stay here and take care of me."

I swallow the lump in my throat. There's a part of me that can't argue with him. Maybe it's true, maybe I can't leave Holiday Peak, or this house, because I'd be too worried about him being lonely.

"No Dad, that's not the reason," I say and avert my gaze. "I have nowhere to go, and I love my job here."

"Didn't you always say that you wanted to travel and someday open your own salon?"

"I will, eventually." My phone pings, and I'm grateful for the reprieve, as I pick it up from the counter. Half expecting it to be Declan, my stomach tightens. I need to text him, and tell him he doesn't need to escort me to the gravesite, that Dad and I are going to go alone. *What's stopping you?* Oh, just the fact that it's something we've done for years and it's not that I want to just blow him off, he's my best friend, but I need to put a measure of distance between us once and for all. My heart is on the line here.

Just then the doorbell rings, and my gaze jerks to Dad when he says, "I guess Declan didn't get the memo."

"I...I..." Shit, once I see his handsome face, that adorable smile of his, I'll cave and invite him along. But I'm only getting myself in deeper, and I have to stop this now. He's not into me, and I'm not the girl for him, anyway. Deep in my heart, I know that. He might not be ready to settle down just yet, but when he does, and I suspect it will be soon, he needs a wife who can give him the big family he wants.

He always talked about having enough kids to make his own hockey team. That's far too many kids as far as I'm concerned. As an only child, he wanted siblings, lots of them. But I can't be a mom. I don't know the first thing about it. Sure, I had Dad, but without motherly guidance, I have no idea how to be feminine or nurturing. That's why the boys let me into the treehouse, I guess. Declan saw me as one of the guys back then, and nothing has changed over the years. Even if he did start looking at me differently, I can't give him what he wants. I don't want to mess up any kid's life, and if I'm being honest, there's a part of me that's afraid something will happen to me, and I'll leave my child behind. I know the pain from that and couldn't bear it for another child to go through what I went through.

"Do you want me to get it?" Dad asks, pulling my thoughts back.

"I...no...I'll get it." This is my problem, not Dad's, so I need to stay strong and deal with it. Phone in hand, I glance at the message from a co-worker, and hurry to the other room. I pull open the front door to find a very cold and snowy Patrick standing on the stoop.

"Patrick," I say, and glance around to see what's going on. It can't be a good thing when the sheriff shows up at your door unexpectedly. A shiver goes through me as I recall the last time that happened, and the loss we suffered afterward. It was right before Christmas, on snow-covered roads. His truck lights aren't flashing, but that doesn't mean something bad hasn't happened.

"Is everything...everyone...okay?" I ask, doing my best not to panic. Brody has that ridiculous sports car which isn't fit for winter in Holiday Peak. What if he and Declan...

Patrick takes his hat off, and gives me a reassuring smile. "Perfectly fine. I was doing rounds this morning, and it's pretty slippery out there. I thought you and your father might like an escort to the cemetery. We can take my truck. Those tires will plow through an avalanche."

My heart squeezes tight. He really is such a nice man. I don't feel any kind of spark for him, but maybe I would over time. Maybe I should give him a chance. Maybe he won't want things from me that I can't give.

"You are the sweetest," I say to him and his smile widens. "Come in, come in." I back up and wave my hand. He kicks snow off his boots, and brushes the flakes from his shoulders before he enters.

"Patrick, so nice to see you. Business or pleasure?" Dad asks as he comes from the kitchen. I quickly explain that Patrick wants to drive us and Dad gestures him to join us for a cup of coffee first.

That's when I realize I'm still in my Rudolf pajamas, and must look a mess. I smooth my messy bed hair down, and point to the stairs. "You go ahead and have coffee. I'll get a quick shower and get ready."

"Take your time. Things are quiet this morning."

Dad engages Patrick in conversation as I dart upstairs. I shower quickly, pull on my jeans and a big comfy sweater. Unlike the women Declan is photographed with, this is how I prefer to dress.

Stop thinking about him already.

As I work on that, my gaze goes to the present on my nightstand. Last night's exchange never happened, and I'm not sure I'll see him again this year to give him his gift. I guess

things really are changing, and I need to get over the man I can never be with. I glance around my room, which is filled with pictures of Declan and me, from our first birthday party together to last year's Christmas, when he gave me chicken leg socks that go to my mid thighs. I love all the silly gifts he picks up from the states they travel to for hockey. My stomach sours as I reach for my phone and read our last exchange. Before I can give it any more thought, I shoot a text off to Declan.

Me: Merry Christmas. Dad and I are headed to the cemetery early. Patrick showed up in his truck to drive us, so we're all good. You have a great day with your family and Brody and a safe trip back to Boston. It was great spending time with you, and I'll be watching you win the Stanley Cup!!

I stare at my words as they blur in front of my watery eyes. Declan is my best friend, and has always been there for me, and in no way do I want to hurt his feelings. But I have to find a way to preserve mine and move forward with life before I find I'm eighty years old and still pining away for my best friend.

I set my phone down and leave it in my room as I head back downstairs. Dad is telling Patrick some old fishing story, and the two are laughing by the time I enter the kitchen.

"Don't believe a word he says," I playfully warn Patrick. "That fish gets bigger and bigger every time he tells that story."

Patrick turns to me, and my breath catches at the way his eyes open, his gaze moving over my face with pure adoration and appreciation. My God, the last time a guy looked at me

like that was...never. Okay, well that's not entirely true. Declan looked at me like that last night when he picked me up for the Christmas party. Unlike Patrick though, there wasn't *want* in Declan's eyes and that's for the best in the end anyway.

"You look gorgeous," he says quietly, then color floods his cheeks when Dad clears his throat.

Dad stands. "If you'll excuse me, I'll just grab a sweater."

"I'll get the flowers." I walk into the living room. Patrick follows me in, and I scoop up the basket of plastic flowers for Mom's headstone.

"Pretty," he says, and I turn to find him smiling at me.

"Mom's favorites. Mine too," I admit. "Can't get fresh daisies in the winter, so fake ones have to do."

"That's so nice, Nikki. I know your mom is smiling down on you right now."

My heart skips a couple of beats. "I'll just grab my coat."

We walk to the closet, and I set the basket of flowers down on the table next to the bowl with our keys. Patrick shifts restlessly beside me and it's clear he has something to say.

"Can I ask you something?" he finally blurts out.

"Of course."

"You and Declan, are you—"

"Friends," I say quickly. "We've been good friends since our first day of kindergarten."

And I've been in love with him ever since.

He smooths his hand over his jacket. "I was wondering if maybe you'd like to go out to dinner day after tomorrow? I'm thinking Italian. We'll probably be all in a tryptophan-induced coma with all the turkey leftover after Christmas."

I laugh at that. "You're right, and I think that would be lovely, Patrick. Italian is my favorite."

He shifts from one foot to the other, and his nervousness is rather endearing. "Yeah, I kind of asked your dad. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

I tug my coat from the hanger, and he takes it from me. "Here," he says, and holds it out for me to slip on. I let him help me into my coat, and his hand brushes my arm. I wait for the little shocks of electricity to go through me, the way they go through me when Declan touches me, but they never come.

"Thanks." I pick the flowers up from the table.

"Are you going to the New Year's Eve bash?" he asks as he puts his hat back on, looking so handsome. I just wish he was my type. But no, I gravitate toward one bad boy hockey player with far too many notches in his bedpost.

But he's so much more than that, Nikki.

While that is all true, I need to get him out of my brain, and focus on the man who wants to take me on a date.

"I never miss it," I say. "How about you?"

"I'll be there," he says. "Are you...uh, planning on kissing anyone at midnight?"

"No plans," I tell him, and his smile widens.

The front door flings open, and I nearly jump into Patrick's arms. "Declan," I say, shocked to see him standing there, his body rigid, the muscles in his jaw tight enough to snap. "Did you get my message?"

"I got it."

"Then what..."

"I was already on my way."

I try for light. "As you can see, Patrick is here. He has that big sturdy truck."

I try to tear my gaze away as something that looks like hurt registers in Declan's eyes. "I thought we always..." he waves his hand back and forth between the two of us.

"It's different this year, Declan." I put on my best smile, an add, "You have company you need to be with."

"I need to be with—"

"Declan," Dad says coming around the corner, and there's a part of me that wishes Declan would have finished that sentence, wishes he was going to say, 'I need to be with you.' But that's not going to happen and like I said, I'm not the girl for him. "Merry Christmas, son."

"Hey Declan." Patrick gestures with a nod. "I'll uh, go get the truck started and warmed," he says.

I smile at him. "I'll be right out."

Dad walks past us, and heads outside with Patrick.

Declan frowns, and his gaze goes from me, to Patrick, back to me. "You and...Patrick?"

"He asked me on a date."

I don't know why I'm telling him. It's not like I want to make him jealous. Or maybe it is. God, I'm a mess.

He shoves something small and square into his pocket. "I...I didn't know."

"There's a lot you don't know, Declan," I say, in a low voice. "You're not around much. Maybe you don't even know me anymore."

He glances down, his shoulders rigid. "You're going then... you're going on a date."

My heart squeezes so tight, wanting to pull him in and keep him with me for the rest of my life. But I can't do that, so I ask, "Is there any reason I shouldn't?"