



A NOVEL

Trapped

BONUS CHRISTMAS SCENES

BEVERLEY
KENDALL

TRAPPED AT CHRISTMAS

Beverley Kendall

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 Christmas Eye 

MITCH

I swear to God, if Paige and I don't have sex soon, I'm gonna go nuts.

Or my nuts will fall off, whichever comes first.

I can only thank *God* that the end of our sexual drought is in sight. I figure if we put Bree down around eight, we'll do the polite thing and hang out with the "adults" until nine. Then we can hit the sheets and get naked without looking like a bunch of horny, anti-social house guests.

This year we're spending Christmas at my grandparents. It's been over a year and I'm still getting used to the idea that that's who they are to me—grandparents I thought I didn't have. It's been a mental transition, and with Dan it hasn't been too bad. By far, Diane's been the easiest since she's always acted more like a mother to me than a sister.

Hoisting my still-dozing daughter higher up in my arms, I follow my grandmother and Paige up the stairs to the guest rooms we'll be using during our six-day stay. Bree konked out on the drive over the minute we hit the highway.

I brush a kiss over the silky brown hair fringing her forehead. "Come on sweetheart,

it's time to wake up." It's two o'clock, which means nap time's over.

In response, she tightens her little arms around my neck, burrowing deeper into me.

My chest gets tight as I breathe in the scent of baby shampoo and baby powder. I don't think I'll ever get used to *this*—how much I love her. Diane says having a child is like having your heart on the outside of your body. She's right. Bree has mine wrapped around her little finger.

But as much as I love her, if she sleeps any longer, it's going to be a bitch getting her to bed before ten tonight. And I have plans with her mother that don't include a wide-awake, too-inquisitive two-year-old.

My grandmother stops and gestures through the open door of the first bedroom. "And this is where Paige and Briana will be sleeping."

Wait! What? Bree is supposed to have her own room. As a matter-of-fact Bree *does* have her own room whenever she spends the night.

Bewildered, my gaze shoots from my grandmother to a wide-eyed Paige, and then inside the guest room. The first thing I notice is that the pink and green toddler bed from across the hall now sits beside the queen-sized sleigh bed. Heart now thumping erratically, my attention swings back to my grandmother.

She returns my panicked stare with an arched look and answers my unspoken question in a prim, no-nonsense voice, "Call me old-fashioned, but in *my* house unmarried young people do not share a room, much less a bed."

What. The. Everloving. Fuck?

"Of course that's okay with us," Paige replies quickly. My gaze snaps to her. She manages to smile while sending me a quick and pointed *don't you dare say anything to embarrass me* look with a flash of her blue eyes.

My grandmother smiles approvingly at her. She loves Paige not because she's a sweet, intelligent, beautiful, young lady, but because she's a wonderful mother. A woman couldn't ask more from the mother of her great grandchild. Her words exactly. It's her

grandson who's failed to make an "honest" woman of her with whom she takes issue.

For the record, I *am* going to marry Paige. More than that, I *want* to marry her but a piece of paper isn't going to make me love her more. I get that making it official is important but we only *just* graduated. Actually, we don't walk until May. We worked our butts off the last year and a half to finish a semester early. In January, we become full-time at our jobs. So sue me if I want to make the proposal perfect. Something for the record books. Something Paige will remember for the rest of her life. And I think I've got that in the bag.

But this—this whole not having sex while we're here, that's definitely not part of the plan. Will *never* be part of any plan I ever make.

"Well I'm glad that's all straightened out, and that you both understand" my grandmothers says.

The involuntary tightening of my expression earns me a hard stare from my girlfriend. I fix my face.

But no, I don't understand. Not one bit.

My grandmother turns her smile on me as if there's something to actually smile about.

Sexual deprivation is *not* a smiling matter. Telling a twenty-one-year-old guy with a working dick that he can't have sex with his girlfriend—the mother of his child for God's sake—is nothing short of cruel and unusual punishment.

And at Christmas? This is supposed to be the season of joy and all that stuff not one where I suffer a bad case of blue-balls and wallow in Scrooge-like misery.

"Come down and join us as soon as you've settled in. There are snacks in the kitchen to tide you over until dinner if you're hungry."

In silence, Paige and I watch her until she disappears down the staircase. We turn and look at each other at the same time.

I jerk my head toward the room assigned to her and Bree. "We need to talk."

PAIGE ❁

I precede Mitch into the bedroom. After following me in, he shifts Bree into his other arm and closes the door.

“Tell me she didn’t just say what I think she said.” He stares down at me, his expression a storm of flummoxed incredulity.

I release a sigh of commiseration. “Hon, it’s her house and she’s your grandmother. We don’t have a lot of say in this.”

For a second he glances around as if trying to find an escape. There are two dormer windows in the room, but it would be one hell of a descent. But I understand. I feel his pain but we’re stuck here for a week. We’re going to have to make the best of the situation.

A calculating gleam enters his eyes as he looks at me. I know that look too well. “Sneak into my room after they go to bed.”

“Absolutely not.” I shake my head more forcefully now. “There’s no way I’m risking getting caught in your grandparents’ house.” My voice is firm and so is my conviction. I have to be or Mitch will have me doing only God knows what. He has a way of talking me into things. He also has a way with his mouth and his hands. He can be incredibly persuasive and I’m a woman who hasn’t had sex with her uber-sexy boyfriend in over a week. There *are* limits to my resolve.

He stares at me as if he can’t believe I won’t blithely go along with his plan.

“Don’t you dare give me that *woe is me* look. Your grandparents like me and I’d like to keep it that way. I’m not going to betray their trust.”

Realizing that he won’t be able to coax, sway or corrupt me into having his way with me, he grumbles, “Two years in a row, Paige. Christmas hates us.”

The pout of his soft kissable lips has me smiling despite myself. “No it doesn’t. It’s called bad timing.” Really *really* bad timing.

Bree's been sick with the flu the last week and when you have to deal with a sick child—plus work, cooking and housework—sex is the last thing on your mind. We've both pretty much been surviving on three to four hours of sleep a day. I'd forgotten what seven full hours of sleep felt like until last night. But knowing what I know now, I wish like hell we'd used one of those hours for some much-needed sex.

Last Christmas Bree had been teething. That should pretty much say it all because anyone who's survived a teething child knows exactly what I mean. The hardest thing to deal with had been the constant crying and whimpering. I'd been sympathetic to a degree but I'd finally had to tell Mitch he needed to suck it up because I can only deal with one child at a time. But when we did have sex after that long, eight-day dry spell it had been off-the-charts amazing. I'd been looking forward to that tonight.

Suddenly, Bree's eyes snap open wide. Alert, she stares at me for a second before her head pops up off her father's shoulder. "Is it Kissmas?" She looks at me and then turns her big, green-eyed gaze up to her father.

I feel a smile taking over my face, a fresh wave of love for my daughter swelling my heart. Mitch and I created her, this beautiful child. Sometimes I look at her and find that hard to believe. But there's no denying she's mine. Everyone says she's the mini version of me with her father's eyes.

Mitch laughs roughly. "Not until tomorrow, sweetheart," he says, kissing her flushed cheek.

Then he sends me a look filled with so much want and longing, I feel the heat of it throughout my body. "And then five more days after that." The low growl of his voice is the sound of unadulterated pent up frustration.

Sigh. I know exactly how he feels.

Closing the distance between us, I tip my head back and silently purse my lips for a kiss. Mitch's eyes darken as his mouth claims mine, immediately engaging my tongue in a hungry, breath-stealing kiss.

“Mommy, Daddy, I wan kiss.” Along with her plaintive demand, Bree wedges her little fingers between our faces, prying our mouths apart.

Laughing and slightly breathless, Mitch and I reluctantly separate. Our eyes meet over the top of her head.

“Remember where we left off,” he instructs as Bree reaches up to plant a wet kiss on the corner of his mouth.

With the place between my thighs throbbing in protest, how can I forget.

Five hours later

After dinner, I check my phone and see two missed calls and a voicemail from Erin. While everyone adjourns to the family room, I excuse myself and go upstairs to my room to Skype her.

Erin answers on the first ring and skips right over the niceties. “Sooooo, are you prepared for tomorrow? Are you nervous? Excited? How’s the manicure doing? Still holding up?”

I laugh and admire my French manicure. Yesterday had been girl’s day out—something we try to do two or three times a month. We’d had lunch at our favorite restaurant, gone Christmas shopping and then treated ourselves to facials, manicures and pedicures. My skin is super-soft and blemish free, and my feet and hands look great.

“Stop talking about it or you’ll jinx it.”

She chuckles, flicking her dark-auburn hair over her shoulder. Behind her I see the double-ovens, which means she’s on her laptop at the island in her kitchen. “I know he’s going to ask. You know he’s going to ask. *Everyone* knows he’s going to pop the question tomorrow. The only thing you want for Christmas is a ring.”

“I want to marry *him*. The ring is bonus.” Although, wearing *his* ring will be nice.

Okay, a lot more than nice.

“Well, first comes love, then comes a huge diamond ring, and then comes marriage. You guys jumped the gun on the baby carriage part.”

I chuckle. She’s right about the last part. “You’re so silly.”

“No, what I am is your best friend and soon-to-be maid of honor,” she replies with a wide grin.

Tingles run up and down my sides. That’s what talk of my wedding to Mitch does to me. I can’t wait to marry him. It’s the final step in us truly starting a life together. We both agreed we’d have two more children. Okay, he wanted three more but since he’s not the one who has to carry them...I—er, we decided three was plenty.

“*Stop*. I told you, if you keep talking about it, you’re going to jinx it.” Every once in a while, the superstitious streak in me comes out.

Erin’s gorgeous face fills the screen as she leans in closer to the camera. “How am I going to jinx it? It’s Christmas. You guys are done with college. You have a daughter together. You’re living together. You both have great jobs, and you’re absolutely crazy in love with each other. Plus, your birthday is months away. He *has* to propose now.”

I know she’s right. Of course he’s going to propose. There’s absolutely nothing stopping him now.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jean-clad thighs. Not since Bree’s birth have I anticipated a day this much. I force myself to inhale a calming breath in an effort to tamp down my growing excitement.

“You do realize that you’re going to have to make nice with Josh for the wedding. He *is* going to be Mitch’s best man.”

Erin’s smile evaporates as she pulls back from the camera.

Crap, now she’s upset.

We normally don’t talk about Josh. It’s an unspoken rule I’ve learn to accept. Josh is a conversation killer. But it’s getting harder and harder to keep them apart. And I mean

physically. Perfect example is Bree's birthday party, which was two weeks ago. I'd invited *all* our friends. The New York college gang had all flown in from their respective states. The couples had all gotten engaged this year, and Zach and Troy had both been drafted. Zach now plays for the Eagles, and Troy for the Giants. Erin and I had really been looking forward to seeing them again and checking out our friends' engagement rings in person.

We'd been sitting around talking, the guys complaining about how many weddings they'd have to be in next year, us girls excited about it, when Josh had arrived. Late as usual. The second he'd walked in, Erin had made some lame excuse about needing to complete a project for school and left. She'd left her only goddaughter's birthday party. I'd thought it was bad before they'd started sleeping together, the way they'd always sniped at each other. Well since they stopped having sex, it's a hundred times worse. Now the four of us don't hang out anymore. And things truly took a nose dive when Josh started dating Chloe. Mitch and I can't even breathe his name around Erin if we don't want the conversation to go south.

Our wedding should be all kinds of fun.

She lifts a slender shoulder in a shrug. "I'm fine with that."

I've known my best friend for over sixteen years. She is not even close to being "fine what that." But I'm not going to argue with her.

"Did I tell you Trent's bringing a date to the party?" This is a first, so it's huge. And since I'm finally going to meet the woman he's dating, he must be serious about her.

"*Damn.* Does that mean he's off the market?" Erin teases.

I huff a laugh. "For now, I guess." If she was ever truly interested in Trent, she isn't anymore. Their relationship has always been and still is completely platonic. "What about you? Are *you* coming?" Josh has yet to RSVP and she's avoided giving me an answer for that reason.

"Yes I'm coming. And I'm bringing a date."

A date? That's news to me since she isn't dating anyone right now. Hasn't in the last six months. Or so I thought.

"And who would that be?"

"No one you know. Just a guy from work."

Erin is interning at AJC and is hoping to be hired on fulltime when she graduates in May.

"Does this guy have a name?" The only time Erin's ever been cagey about who she's dating is when she'd done the *no-friends just benefits* thing with Josh.

"Ethan."

My brow furrows. "How come you haven't mentioned Ethan before?"

"Because he's new. He only started working at the paper last month, and I've only gone on a few dates with him. Anyway, I don't want to talk about him now," she says. "I want to talk about your engagement, and I need you to promise me that you'll show me your ring the minute you're back in town. That is, of course, after you show it to me when you call tomorrow with the deets."

And like that she has me grinning like a drunk high on helium.

Ethan who?

MITCH 

I'm not sure I'll even be able to kiss Paige goodnight tonight. If I can't have it all—the full monty—why torture myself with only a small taste. Why make my suffering worse? I'm not into masochism in any form. But I'm seriously wondering how I'm going to make it through the night without me sneaking into her room, crawling into her bed, stripping her naked and screwing her mindless.

"Do you want Daddy to read to you tonight?" I ask Bree, who is already rubbing her

eyes as she fights sleep. She's all pooped out from playing with her aunt and uncle, who see nothing wrong with bowing to her every wish.

"Let me read to her, Mitch." Tess thrusts her hand in the air as if she's in class trying to get the teacher's attention. My brother and sister finally dropped the uncle part three months ago, but they'd been working on it for a year. Old habits die hard. And I should know. Diane and Dan insisted I call them whatever I felt most comfortable with, but I know they are thrilled I chose to call them Mom and Dad.

"I want to read too," Doug says because now it has to be a competition. That's how it is with us guys.

"How about Grandma put you to bed tonight?" Diane asks, already reaching down for her hand. Too tired to walk, Bree silently stretches her arms out to her grandmother.

Mom is quick to oblige her, scooping her up into her arms before addressing Doug and Tess. "C'mon kids, you can each read her one book."

"Daddy and I will be up in a bit to kiss you goodnight," Paige calls out after them as they depart the family room. Smiling sleepily around the thumb thrust in her mouth, Bree nods.

Just as I resume my seat on the sofa beside Paige, Dad pushes to his feet. "I have a dollhouse and one more bike to finish putting together, so I'll see you all in the morning."

My grandparents have a guesthouse in the back, which is where my dad and my aunt stay with their families when they visit. I wouldn't mind staying there now. It'd get me off of no-sex row for the next six days. My grandmother wanted us to stay through the New Year. Thank God Paige talked me into holding a party at our place New Year's Eve. Well not exactly a party, more a small get together with friends.

My parents are going to bring Bree back with them, which means I'll have Paige to myself for *two whole days*. That's my Christmas present right there. I can't fuckin' wait. Okay, wrong word. I can't think about fucking if I want to survive the night.

"Need some help, Dad?" I ask. Doing something constructive with my hands will

help to keep my mind off all the others things I'd rather be doing with them. Like removing Paige's bra and sliding her panties over her hips.

God is it hot in here or is it just me? I won't even look at Paige afraid there'll be another ten-degree spike of the temperature in the room if I do.

My dad's brows go up as if surprised by my offer. His gaze shifts to Paige. "As long as you don't mind me stealing him for a while."

She laughs, rubbing then patting my back. "As long as it's for a good cause."

The touching, her hands on me, sends me to my feet in a flash. I definitely need time to cool down.

My dad and I say our goodnights and I follow him out of the room. Just before I'm out of earshot, I hear my grandmother say, "So my dear, when can we expect a wedding? Soon I hope."

Yeah, I'll leave Paige to that.



An hour later, all the assembly-required toys are assembled, the bikes and dollhouse in the basement waiting to be put under the tree after the kids go back to the guest house.

On the way to my room, I stop to say goodnight to my girls. I quietly duck into their bedroom to find Bree is already asleep in her bed and Paige nowhere in sight. I give Bree a kiss on her cheek and then go in search of her mother.

Maybe she's in my bed waiting for me. My dick perks up at the thought. Seconds later, the mystery of Paige's location is solved, my hopes smashed to smithereens when I hear the sound of the shower running.

Damn!

I give the bathroom a wide berth and go straight to my room. There, I change into the flannel Christmas pajamas Paige bought for me and insisted I wear tonight. Don't

worry, she bought a pair for her and Bree too. Mine are dark-green with clusters of red hollies. Yeah, not too emasculating, right?

I spend the next half hour lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying my best to fall asleep. A soft knock and the door opening has me jerking up to a sitting position. Paige steps inside and closes the door.

I swallow hard at the sight of her.

Beautiful.

No one I know can make a pair of shapeless, red, reindeer pajamas look that good. Her dark hair, soft and silky around her shoulders, has my fingers itching to run through its long length and wind it around my hand to pull her close. She looks good enough to eat. And that's something I love doing and that she fully appreciates.

"Bree's asleep," Paige whispers as if Bree were feet away instead of across the hall.

I fight back a smile. She's alone in my room with me. She's playing with fire and she knows it. "I know. I checked in on her when you were in the shower."

She nods and walks slowly to me. "I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Why are you whispering?" I ask in a mock-whisper. My grandfather's company built this house. The workmanship is top-notch. The walls in the bedrooms are practically sound proof.

Stepping in between my legs, she slides her arms around my neck. "I miss you."

I chuckle and pull her close. "We were together all day."

She peers down at me. "You know what I mean."

My hands slides down her back and over her ass. I cup both cheeks and pull her closer. She can't miss how hard I am for her. "Go lock the door."

For a second she looks torn. Looks like she needs a bit of encouragement. Kneading her ass, I grind my dick against her so she can feel every inch of me. She bites her bottom lip and moans.

My breathing shallows and my words take on an urgent tone. "Go. Lock. The door."

Her eyes glaze over with desire. “You’re going to have to let me go,” she murmurs.

I reluctantly do as I’m told, and watch her sweet ass as she hurries to do the same.

The sudden knock on the door—an unwelcome one this time—stops Paige dead in her tracks. My hands still on the hem of my shirt. Eyes wide and her face a guilt-ridden red, Paige turns and looks at me.

“Mitch honey, are you awake?”

My grandmother? *Are you serious?*

My hard-on dies a swift and violent death at the sound of her voice. I motion for Paige to open the door. We’re fully clothed. Nothing to see here. Nothing to feel guilty about.

Visibly panicked, Paige can only stare at me. Sighing heavily, I get up and walk over to her. She’s going to get us busted if she doesn’t get that look off her face. Why are guys so much better at this sneaking around shit?

“You came to say goodnight. Don’t look so damn guilty,” I murmur, stroking her smooth cheek with the pad of my thumb before I open the door.

“Oh good, you’re still up. Your father—” My grandmother breaks off when she spots Paige, who is behind me probably doing her best to melt into the wall. “Oh, I didn’t realize Paige was with you.” There’s no censure in her voice but there is a gleam of suspicion in her brown eyes.

“She was checking to make sure I wore these to bed.” I go full throttle on the self-conscious act by pulling sheepishly on my pant leg.

My grandmother takes in our matching pajamas and smiles indulgently, swallowing my lie hook line and sinker. “Why, how festive.”

I guess that’s another term for it.

Tightening the sash of her light-blue robe around her waist, she continues. “Your father needs your help getting the dollhouse upstairs,”

“Okay, tell him I’ll be down in a minute.”

That should have been the end of it, but she makes no move to leave. And I can almost feel Paige's anxiety rising with every passing second.

I clear my throat and try again since it appears I wasn't clear enough the first time. "Right. Well I'll be down as soon as I say goodnight to Paige."

My grandmother lets out an awkward laugh. "Oh. Yes of course. I'll let him know you're on your way. Goodnight, m'dear," she says, addressing Paige.

"Good night," Paige replies but goes overboard with the whole bright and bubbly act. It's clear she needs to take lessons from the master.

I turn to her after my grandmother leaves. She immediately presses her hot-pink face against my chest, her words muffled by my flannel shirt. "I'll never be able to look her in the eye again."

I chuckle, tipping her chin so I can see her face. "Don't be silly. She didn't suspect a thing."

"How do you know?"

Instead of answering, I kiss her softly on the lips. She feels like heaven. I stay the course, deepening the kiss, my tongue dipping inside for a longer, sweeter taste of her. My dick stirs back to life.

"Mitch we can't," she whispers against my mouth, her hands pressing gently on my shoulders.

I reluctantly lift my head and step back, hands up in surrender, completely breaking off all physical contact.

"Now go and help your father before you get us in trouble."

"I wasn't the one who came into your room looking for—"

"One more word and you'll never see me naked again," she warns, a teasing smile pulling at the corner of her full, pink lips.

"Okay, but be warned. If you're within ten feet of this room when I get back, I *will* fuck you tonight."

BEVERLEY KENDALL

She instantly corrects me, saying, "Make love." But her words are at odds with the breathy quality of her voice.

"Believe me, you're going to want to be fucked tonight," I tell her in a low growl.

With lust and desire blazing in her eyes, she does the smart thing and hightails it out of my room.



PAIGE

“And this is the last one from me.” Mitch drops a lingering kiss on my lips as he hands me a gold-foil wrapped box. Not the size and shape of a ring box, but if he’d done that, it would have been a dead giveaway.

I waste no time ripping away the wrapping and opening my gift.

Nestled inside is probably the most beautiful gold and diamond necklace I’ve ever seen.

A necklace not a ring.

Tears pool in my eyes.

“Do you like it?”

At the expectant look on his face, I’m hit with a rush of guilt because I should be happy. “It’s beautiful,” I somehow manage to choke out while inside my heart endures a sizeable crack.

Grinning happily, he pulls me into his arms and hugs me tight.

“Mommy, Daddy, I want hug.” I feel Bree’s small hands tug on my pant leg.

It's the perfect excuse to extricate myself from Mitch's embrace and pick up our daughter. When she sees the tears that are now rolling down my cheeks, her eyebrows draw together in the most adorable expression. "Don't cry, Mommy."

Mitch laughs. "Mommy isn't crying because she's sad, sweetheart. She's crying because she's happy."

I force the corners of my mouth up in a smile. If he only knew.



"Okay, show me the ring."

Erin is the second in a string of calls I have to make today. Mom and Randy had been first, and my phone had exchanged hands I don't know how many times as they'd wished everyone Merry Christmas.

But talking to Erin required privacy, which is why I'm sitting alone in the living room staring at her pretty makeup-free face.

Her excited demand threatens to bring another wave of tears but I manage to hold them back. If anyone walked in, there's no way I'd be able to play them off as tears of joy this time. I'm just not that good an actress. I shake my head.

Her eyes go wide with surprise and after a pause she asks, "You didn't get a ring?"

Again I shake my head, scared to say anything that will break the dam and release the tears.

Her mouth slowly closes and she pulls back from the screen revealing the headboard of her bed behind her. "You're kidding," she exclaims.

The disbelief in her voice brings out my protective side and the need to defend him. "But he did give me this." I hold the diamond pendant up to the camera. "Isn't it pretty?"

"Hold it back a bit, I can't see it properly."

I do as she says.

“Ooooooh, it *is* pretty. Your man’s got great taste.”

I nod as I try to think of something else to say. Unfortunately, nothing comes to mind.

“He’s going to ask you. You know that, right?” Erin says in a gentle reassuring voice.

“He’s either waiting for New Year’s Day, your birthday or Valentine’s Day.”

I emit a dry laugh. “You said that about Christmas.”

“But now that I think of it, Christmas isn’t really a romantic holiday.”

“It can be if you want it to be.”

She raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Really? With a kid and a house full of in-laws?”

“They’re not my in-laws.”

“Not yet. But they soon will be.”

I know she’s right. I know I’m making more of this than I should. Mitch loves me. We talk about getting married all of the time. He’s going to propose, just not today.

“Okay, enough about me. Get anything good for Christmas?” I ask.

“Just a couple of gift cards, three sweaters, new boots. Oh and a new car.”

I bolt up off the sofa and let out a squeal to rival one of my daughter’s. “You got a new car?”

“Don’t get all excited. It’s a guilt gift.”

That instantly sobers me. “A guilt gift?”

She looks away for a second before her gaze comes back to mine. “You know, because they are the way they are.”

An impossible to please mother and an indulgent but distant father, who’d sooner spoil her than spend time with her. Not that they’re not nice people—they’ve always been nice to me—but watching them in action always make me appreciate my mom more. Makes me appreciate my stepfather too.

“Where are they now?” I ask briskly.

She becomes flushed and mutters, “Th-they went out.”

"What?" My gaze narrows at the way she refuses to look me in the eye. *"Where?"*

"I—I'm not sure."

I don't believe her. *"Erin, go downstairs and show me your tree."*

When she doesn't budge an inch and continues to evade my gaze, I know what she's hiding from me. *"You're alone, aren't you? They left you alone on Christmas."*

She finally looks at me and shrugs. *"It's not a big deal."*

A tightness grips my chest that leaves me winded. *"Where are they?"*

"In Spain."

"What about your sister?"

"At her in-laws."

I collapse back down onto the sofa and let out a long breath in attempt to ease the pain in my heart.

"I'm fine. Perfectly fine. Don't make a big deal out of it."

I simply stare at her in my six-inch screen. While I'm sitting here crying and moaning to her about not getting a ring from the man I know loves me with every breath in his body and whose family couldn't love me more if I'd been born into it, my best friend is spending Christmas alone.

I couldn't sound more self-centered and pathetic if I tried.

"Now, aren't you going to ask me about the car?" A smile returns to her face. It's forced and desperate, begging me to let it go.

I can do one of two things; bemoan her current situation and rail about what horrible people her parents are, and in turn, make her feel worse than I'm sure she already does. Or I can let her change the subject and not make a big deal of it. I choose the latter. But if she honestly thinks this is the end of it, she's seriously fooling herself.

As soon as I get off the phone with Erin, I return to the family room and talk to Mrs. Tolston and Diane. They not only approve my request but Diane motions Mitch from across the room where he's watching Bree and Tess playing with Bree's new tea set in

front of the eight-foot Christmas tree.

He approaches, his questioning gaze going from his mother, to his grandmother before settling on me.

I take his hand in mine. "C'mon, hon, get dressed, we're going to pick up Erin."

Forty minutes later, we're on the highway in Mitch's car heading south.

"What if she refuses to come back with us?" Mitch asks for the second time since I explained what was going on with Erin and our subsequent mission. Apparently my, "She'll come," response the first time he'd asked hadn't been satisfying enough.

"I'm going to tell her if she doesn't come with us on her own, you're going to throw her over your shoulder and we're going to kidnap her."

Mitch snorts a laugh. Without taking his eyes off the road, he places his right hand on the area above my left knee. His touch floods me with warmth.

"Besides Erin, are you having a good time?" he asks, his hand slowly kneading my leg, sending chards of desire to my core.

"If you mean besides Erin's crappy parents *and* us not having sex, then yes I'm having a good time. I love your family."

He growls deep in his throat, his hand drifting higher up on my thigh. "Don't remind me."

I let out a choked laugh as all the blood in my body feels like it's pulsing strongly between my legs. "Then you better move your hand or you'll run this car into a ditch." And I'm not kidding.

"How about I pull off at the next exit and check us into a motel before we pick up Erin?" he asks with a quick glance at me and the suggestive lift of an eyebrow.

Since he can't be serious, I don't bother to answer. But the creep of his hand on my leg is serious, acting like a magical wand on my upper thighs that has them spreading farther and farther apart.

Being turned on and not really being able to do anything about it isn't my idea of fun. And right now, it's driving me crazy. I push his hand off my leg and squeeze them tightly together. "Stop that. This whole thing is hard enough. Don't make it harder."

"Put your hand right here and you'll feel how hard it already is," he says in that low sexy rumble that strums every one of my erogenous zones.

I honestly try to avoid looking down at his crouch but it's like trying not to look at the sun after a month of nothing but gray skies and rain. My sex clenches at his very noticeable bulge. I quickly look away.

"Forget about sex right now. You need to concentrate on the road." I, on the other hand, *will* think about sex. How much I need it. How much I want it. How much I miss making love to him.

I'm so lost in thought that it takes me a minute to realize we've taken the wrong exit if we're going to Erin's house.

I glance over at Mitch. "Why are you getting off here?"

"It's a short cut."

I look around and realize we're not that far from where *we* live. And there are no shortcuts to Erin from here. All that's down this way are new homes and a fairly new elementary school.

My gaze narrows in suspicion when it returns to him. "No it's not." Something is definitely up.

Without looking at me, he says, "Humor me. I want to show you something."

"Mitch Aaron Kingsley, I am not going to have sex with you in this car."

He throws his head and barks out a laugh. And he keeps laughing while I fail to see the humor in it. It's not as if it's a preposterous idea. People *do* have sex in cars.

"Okay, what did I do now?"

"I didn't think it was *that* funny," I mumble, staring out my window.

I can hear the smile in his voice when he says, "We're here. Maybe this will cheer you

up and get your mind off sex for a few minutes.”

I sputter in protest as he pulls the car into a long driveway made of gray pavers in front of a brick-and-stone-faced, two-story house.

“What are we doing here?” I ask as he turns off the engine.

He opens his door. “I want to get your opinion on it.”

I follow him out of the car and up to the front porch. “Is it one of your designs? Is it for sale?” I look around the well-kept, dormant lawn but don’t see a for sale sign.

“Sort of.” He fishes keys from his coat pocket and proceeds to unlock the front door.

He steps aside and motions me in ahead of him. In the front foyer, I’m surrounded by warmth and the clean scent of pine and...newness. The house smells new. As in that never been lived in scent that accompanies new wood floors and carpeting.

Directly ahead, a wood-and-wrought-iron staircase curves to the second floor. I look up at Mitch. It’s exactly the kind of staircase I’d said I’d wanted in our dream house. My breathing quickens.

No, it can’t be. There’s no way. No way, I tell myself as I advance down the hall. The first room to our right is the living room, the chandelier hanging from a tray ceiling. Up a bit farther is the family room, the centerpiece, a gorgeous floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace.

I gaze at it all in silence, my jaw slack, my eyes wide. I turn to him and ask, “Is this *your* design?”

He nods, an enigmatic smile edging his lips. “With some help from my dad.”

“But this is—this looks like *our* house. The one you said you’d build for us one day.” I continue to look around, unable to believe what I’m seeing. Our dream house come to life from architectural drawings Mitch has been toying with the past year. But while we’d dreamed about owning a house like this, we wouldn’t be able to afford it for years.

“What do you think?” he asks, following my gaze as I soak in the sight of dark hardwood floor as far as the eye can see and a kitchen that has me practically salivating.

“I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” I say on one long breath.

Walking up behind me, he places a possessive hand on my waist and pulls me back against him. "It's close to both our jobs and there's enough room in the back for a pool if we decide to put one in one day."

I spin around to face him, my hands resting on his broad shoulders. "You mean it's ours?"

He nods, his grin going from ear to ear. "Merry Christmas, babe." He kisses me on the lips.

Oh my god. *Ohmygodohmygod*. It's hard to breathe, my heart is beating so hard.

I break the kiss and shoot another look around. High-end appliances, cherry kitchen cabinets, granite counter-tops, and ridiculously expansive molding and woodwork throughout.

"But Mitch, we can't afford this."

"Babe, it's a gift. From my grandparents."

I place a hand on my chest to prevent my madly racing heart from escaping. "But—but they can't *give* us a house." Who does that? Nobody I know.

"I tried to talk them out of it but my grandparents insisted. They said why should the government take half of their money when they're gone when their children and grandchildren can make use of it when they're still alive."

He pulls me back into his arms and I melt into him. "Plus, I made a deal with them."

Tears sting my eyes as I peer up at him. "What deal?"

"That I'd let them give us the house as long as we paid for the wedding. My parents would only agree if I agreed to let them pay for half of it."

Then he thrusts his hand in his pocket and I hold my breath as he pulls out a black velvet-covered box. He opens it with the other hand.

The sight of the beautiful princess cut diamond ring flanked by two smaller diamonds on either side elicits a gasp from me, one that echoes in the large empty room. It's the one I'd wanted. The one I'd tried on when Mitch had taken my hand and led me

into the jewelry store when we'd been shopping in the mall during the summer.

"Paige baby, will you marry me?" Not that Mitch's voice wasn't already deep and delicious enough to constantly set my panties ablaze, but those words coming from his lips is a question I'll never forget for as long as I live.

I nod frantically, crazily. "Yes. Yes. *Oh God Yes.*"

He smiles and slides the ring on my finger. The white gold is cool against my flesh and feels so right. It fits perfectly and looks as if it were made for my finger.

Once it's on, I launch myself into his arms and pour all the love and passion I have in me into the kiss. And after too long without, we practically devour each other whole, our breathing ragged and our clothes in disarray when we finally come up for air minutes later.

"We have to stop," Mitch rasps, reluctantly removing his hand from my breast.

My body couldn't disagree with him more. But he's right. Right place, wrong time.

I straighten my bra and sweater. As I watch him wince as he adjusts his junk, all I can think is that I can help him with his problem.

"Keep looking at me like that, and I swear, we'll christen the house right now."

I jerk my gaze up to his face, and the hunger in his eyes tells me he's not joking. "Is there carpeting upstairs?"

He laughs and enfolds my hand in his. "Why don't we take a look."

First he finishes giving me a tour of the first floor before we climb the gorgeous staircase to the second. Upstairs there's a total of four bedrooms and a small playroom that connects two of the smaller rooms. The master suite is twice the size of the one we have now, which puts it in the humongous range.

When Mitch had been coming up with a design, I'd let my imagination run wild. Must-haves and been mixed liberally with would-be-nice-to-haves and in-my-wildest-dreams. This house—our house—has almost all of them: A reading nook with a window seat in the master suite, and an office, a mudroom and a laundry room on the first floor.

Right now, I'm overcome by all of it. Overcome with love for my ridiculously hot fiancé and overwhelmed by how truly blessed I am.

In the middle of our future bedroom, I turn to Mitch and wrap my arms around his waist. "I don't know what to say." Emotion clogs my throat.

"I love you will be more than enough," he teases softly.

Silent tears roll down my cheeks. "Kiss me."

His eyes close on a groan. "Babe, I'm not going to want to stop."

"Then don't," I whisper.

His nostrils flare as he peers down at me from between half-lidded eyes. "You want to christen the house right now?"

I answer by stroking him through his jeans. He's hard and thick, and I'm instantly wet and ready for him again.

That stroke to his cock is like fire to tinder, his control snapping as his mouth comes down on mine. We kiss as if we haven't kissed for days, weeks, months. We kiss with the knowledge that it won't end with both of us aching and hungry.

He pulls his tongue out of my mouth long enough to pant against my mouth, "Panties. Off."

He pushes my coat off my shoulders as I unfasten my jeans and shove them over my hips and down to my knees, taking my panties with them.

Once I'm bared to him, my sex waxed just the way he likes it, Mitch tears his mouth from mine, his gaze glued to the perfect triangular patch of hair between my legs. "Fuck," he breathes. "You're killing me."

He quickly shrugs out of his coat and spreads it on the carpet, his scorching hot gaze never leaving me. Then I'm on my back and he's over me, his jeans and underwear just clearing his narrow hips.

He's hard and I'm so ready to have him inside me, I'm nearly incoherent with need. Clutching his shoulders, I wait for the first delicious probe at my entrance but all I feel is

the tip of his cock running along my seam. Pleasure courses through me. I lift my hips and moan his name.

“What do you want?” he murmurs against my lips. It’s clear what *he* wants is to torture me.

“You know,” I whimper.

“Do you want me to make love to you?” His voice is softly seductive because he knows that’s what I like to hear.

“No, I want you to fuck me. Hard.”

His head rears back in surprise. And then his eyes go wild, his desire, his hunger now a living, breathing thing. He slams into me, going all the way in a single thrust and hitting all the pleasure spots.

God, he feels so good. But as much as I want to savor the fullness of his cock inside me, I can’t. My body won’t let me. It demands satisfaction. And Mitch is as frantic for release as I am, pounding into me hard, just the way I told him I wanted it.

We don’t last another minute, my orgasm hitting first and wringing a helpless cry from me at the blinding intensity of it. Mitch’s takes him seconds later, a hoarse, strangled sound falling from his lips.

Sated, he slowly lowers himself down beside me and tugs me tight to his side. I turn to look at him. He kisses me gently on the mouth and traces my bottom lip with his tongue.

“That was worth the wait.”

I smile, nodding happily as I cup his bristled cheek in my palm.

“I love you, Paige, and I always will.”

I feel an ugly cry coming on. “I love you too. And I always have and always will,” I choke out.

He kisses me again, and there’s nothing I’d rather do than lie here with him in this big empty house for another hour or two.

The ring of his cell phone makes sure that's not happening. While he pulls up his jeans and digs it out of his front pocket, I hurry and put my panties and jeans back on. I'm in the process of zipping up when he says, "She said yes." He smiles at me and mouths, "Mom."

In the minutes that follow, the whole story unfolds. The plan had been for everyone—including my mom and Randy—to come here later this afternoon in the guise of taking the kids to see the biggest Christmas tree in Georgia. There we'd be presented with the house and then Mitch was going to propose to me in front of our families. Erin's predicament had thrown a wrench in those plans.

And things couldn't have worked out more perfectly.

After Mitch gets off the phone, he looks at me, a mischievous light in his eyes.

"What?" I know something's up.

"Mom says my grandmother's moratorium on unmarried people sharing a room in her house doesn't include engaged people, so tonight you're getting a new roommate," he says, waggling his eyebrows.

Giddy with happiness, I pull his head down for a quick kiss. "First the house and now this? This is officially the best Christmas ever."

Mitch stares into my eyes, his expression tender and brimming with love. "Babe, we have a lifetime of more just like it."

I blink back tears. Again. I'm an emotional wreck today.

Smiling, he drops a hard kiss on my lips. "C'mon, let's go pick up Erin."



Picking up Erin is not the same thing as picking up milk or a loaf of bread on your way home from work. No, this task is ten times harder. Milk and bread don't talk back.

"I'm not arguing with you, Erin. You're coming with us." She knows me. I can be just

as stubborn as she is.

She opens her mouth—I assume—to do the thing I just told her not to when Mitch interrupts our back and forth.

“It’s Christmas, Erin. Why don’t you save us all thirty minutes of our lives we’ll never be able to get back. Go change and pack your stuff so we can go.”

“Guys, I know you mean well, but honestly I’m fine right here.”

“Mitch proposed. Do you or do you not want to see the ring and the other huge present we got?” This is what you have to do with stubborn friends, fight dirty.

Her eyes go wide and her lips part as she gapes at me. “Show me,” she demands in a strident voice.

I push my left hand deeper in my pocket and smile smugly. “Not until we’re in the car. And by the way, our other really really awesome gift is a twenty-minute drive from here. So it’s your choice. Do you want to see my ring, be my maid of honor—”

She gasps as if shocked that I’d use that as a bargaining chip to get my way.

“—see our fabulous gift or spend Christmas alone?”

“You’re heartless,” she says, sulking. But I know she’s happy that she has a friend who would do this to her. For her. Care about her this much.

“Which is why you love me so much,” I call after her as she starts up the stairs.

She stops and turns around, looking down at us from halfway. “Did you really propose?” she asks Mitch.

He lets out a short laugh. “I did, cross my heart.”

To prove we’re not lying, I pull my hand out of my pocket and flash my ring, before quickly returning it to its hiding place. “Now hurry, if you want to see it up close.”

With a kind of skip/hop and a squeal, she dashes the rest of the way up.

Once she’s out of view and out of earshot, I peer up at Mitch. “So when do you think we should tell her Josh’ll be over for dinner tomorrow night?”

He grimaces. “I’m thinking maybe never.”

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Yep, that sounds about right.

THE END...FOR NOW

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